

**Behavioral Finance at 40:
Progress, Open Questions, and New Directions**

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Overview

- the modern era in behavioral finance began in the 1980s

In today's talk, 40 years later:

- I review some important frameworks we have developed in behavioral finance
- I identify open questions
- and I discuss a recent shift in the field
 - the “cognitive turn”
 - i.e., the focus on cognitive foundations of beliefs and preferences

Overview

The talk is designed to be:

- accessible to all finance scholars, regardless of area of specialty
 - and even to non-academics
- mostly non-technical, focusing on intuition
- based on the work of many researchers

Overview

- behavioral finance has three main areas of application
 - asset pricing
 - corporate finance
 - household finance
- today, I will focus on asset pricing applications
 - because it is a context that helps to identify the most important investor biases
 - only biases that affect many investors in a correlated way have a chance of influencing asset prices

Overview

Major frameworks in behavioral asset pricing

- limits to arbitrage

Beliefs:

- disagreement in the presence of short-sale constraints
- (irrational, extrapolative) beliefs about returns *
- (irrational) beliefs about cash flows *

Preferences:

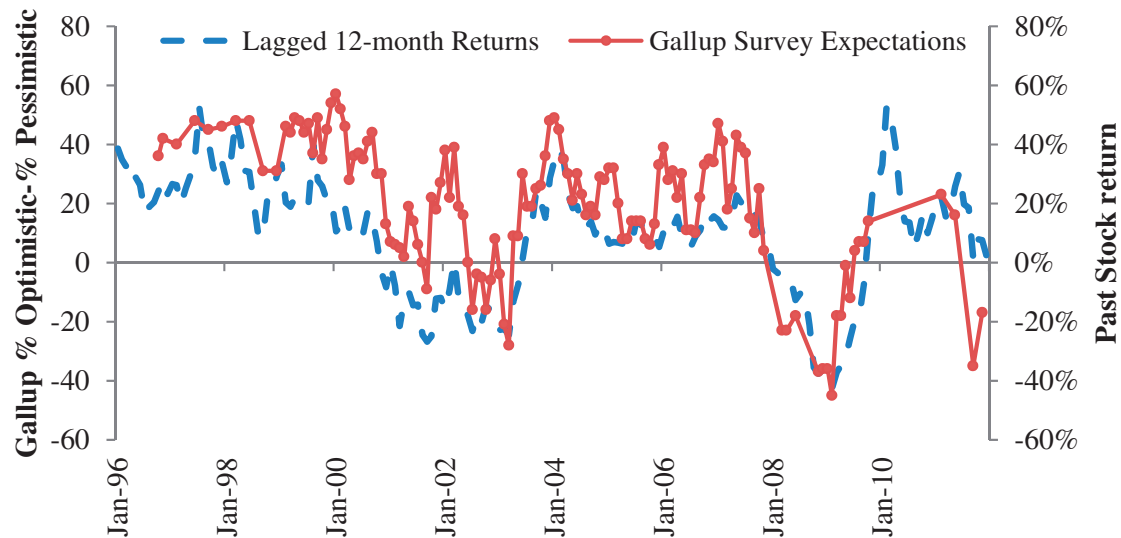
- gain-loss utility and prospect theory *

Roadmap

- beliefs
 - about returns
 - about cash flows
- preferences
 - gain-loss utility and prospect theory
- the cognitive turn in behavioral economics
 - cognitive foundations of beliefs and preferences

Beliefs about returns

- the most prominent idea regarding beliefs about returns is that they are extrapolative
 - beliefs about future returns are a positive function of recent past returns
- this is motivated in part by survey evidence



Source: Greenwood and Shleifer (2014)

Beliefs about returns

- return extrapolation has generated a lot of interest because it offers a simple explanation for several prominent asset pricing puzzles
 - excess volatility and predictability in the aggregate stock market (and other asset classes)
 - momentum and reversals in the cross-section of stocks
 - bubbles

Beliefs about returns

- consider an economy with $T + 1$ periods, $t = 0, 1, \dots, T$
- and two assets
 - a riskless asset, with a constant return of zero
 - a risky asset that is a claim to a single, final cash flow \widetilde{D}_T

$$\begin{aligned}\widetilde{D}_T &= D_0 + \tilde{\varepsilon}_1 + \dots + \tilde{\varepsilon}_T \\ \tilde{\varepsilon}_t &\sim N(0, \sigma_\varepsilon^2) \text{ i.i.d.}\end{aligned}$$

Beliefs about returns

- some investors have extrapolative beliefs about price changes

$$E_t^e(P_{t+1} - P_t) = X_t \equiv (1 - \theta) \sum_{k=1}^{t-1} \theta^{k-1} (P_{t-k} - P_{t-k-1}) + \theta^{t-1} X_1$$

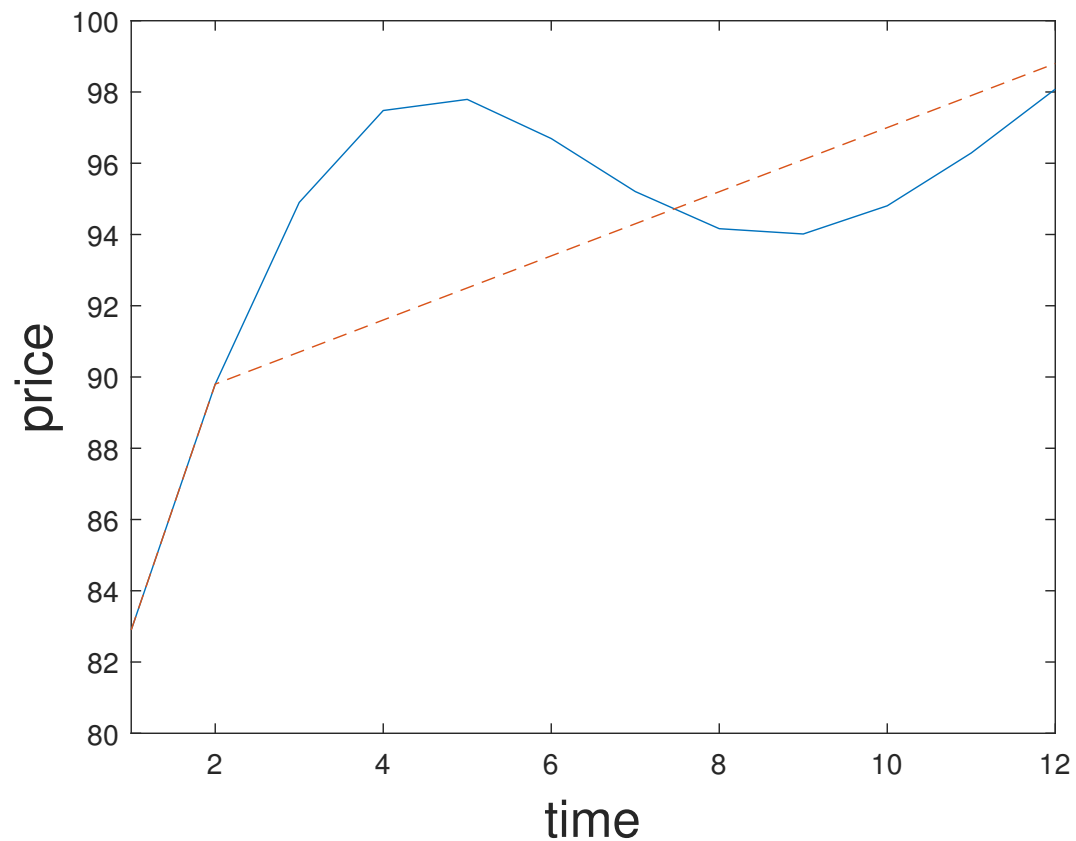
- while other investors, “fundamental traders,” buy when prices are low relative to expected cash flows
 - and sell when prices are high relative to expected cash flows
- equilibrium asset prices are given by

$$P_t = D_t + \frac{\mu^e}{\mu^f} X_t - \gamma \sigma_\varepsilon^2 Q \left(T - t - 1 + \frac{1}{\mu^f} \right), \quad t = 1, \dots, T - 1$$

Source: Barberis (2018)

Beliefs about returns

- the resulting price dynamics, following a positive cash-flow shock at time 2, are:



- the various asset pricing applications of return extrapolation can be seen in this figure

Beliefs about returns

- there are now increasingly sophisticated models of return extrapolation and asset prices

Aggregate stock market

- Barberis, Greenwood, Jin, Shleifer (2015); Adam, Marcet, Beutel (2017); Jin and Sui (2022)

Cross-section of stocks

- Hong and Stein (1999); Barberis and Shleifer (2003); Da, Huang, Jin (2021)

Bubbles

- Barberis, Jin, Greenwood, Shleifer (2018); Bastianello and Fontanier (2024)

Real estate market

- Glaeser and Nathanson (2017)

Beliefs about returns

This is promising, but there are many open questions:

- what is the source of return extrapolation?
 - and can knowledge of the source deepen our understanding of the empirical facts?
- what value of θ is consistent with observed prices, and is this value justified?
- does θ vary over time, and if so, why?
 - Cassella and Gulen (2018)

Beliefs about returns

More open questions:

- are return extrapolation models consistent with the facts about investor portfolios?
 - who are the investors who are actually trading according to extrapolative beliefs?
- Giglio, Maggiori, Stroebe, Utkus (2021) find that investors' holdings are relatively insensitive to their beliefs
 - so can shifts in beliefs affect holdings enough to move prices?
- is this investor behavior really about beliefs?
 - or does it reflect a different, non-belief mechanism?
 - e.g., observational learning?

Beliefs about returns

Sources of return extrapolation

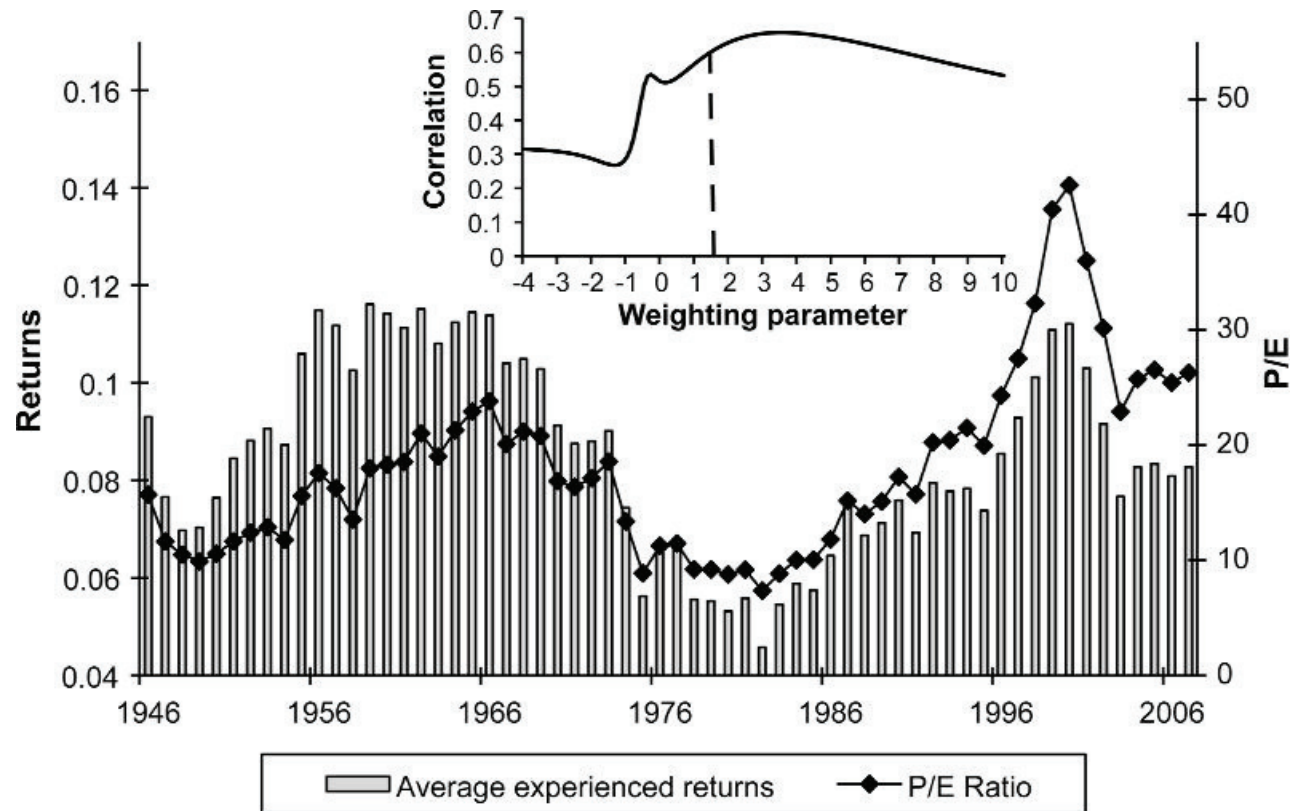
- some are psychological in nature
 - representativeness, base-rate neglect
 - an incorrect belief in a law of small numbers
 - memory
- others focus on boundedly-rational inference about underlying fundamentals
 - Hong and Stein (1999), Andre, Shirmer, Wohlfart (2023), Bastianello and Fontanier (2024)

Beliefs about returns

- the work on return extrapolation intersects in an important way with research on “experience effects”
 - Malmendier and Nagel (2011)
- in this context, the idea is that a person’s demand for a risky asset will depend on a weighted average of the asset’s returns *over that person’s lifetime*
- Malmendier and Nagel (2011) present evidence that such a formulation may bring us closer to understanding both investors’ portfolio holdings and stock market fluctuations

Beliefs about returns

Experience effects and asset prices



Source: Malmendier and Nagel (2011)

Roadmap

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Beliefs about cash flows

- another line of research argues that important pricing puzzles are due to incorrect cash-flow forecasts that overreact to news
 - when prices are low, this is due to excessively pessimistic forecasts
 - when prices are high, this is due to excessively optimistic forecasts
- Barberis, Shleifer, Vishny (1998), Nagel and Xu (2022), Bordalo, Gennaioli, La Porta, Shleifer (2024a,b), De La O and Myers (2021)
- most papers use analyst forecasts to provide evidence for this view
 - specifically, forecasts of long-term earnings growth (LTG)

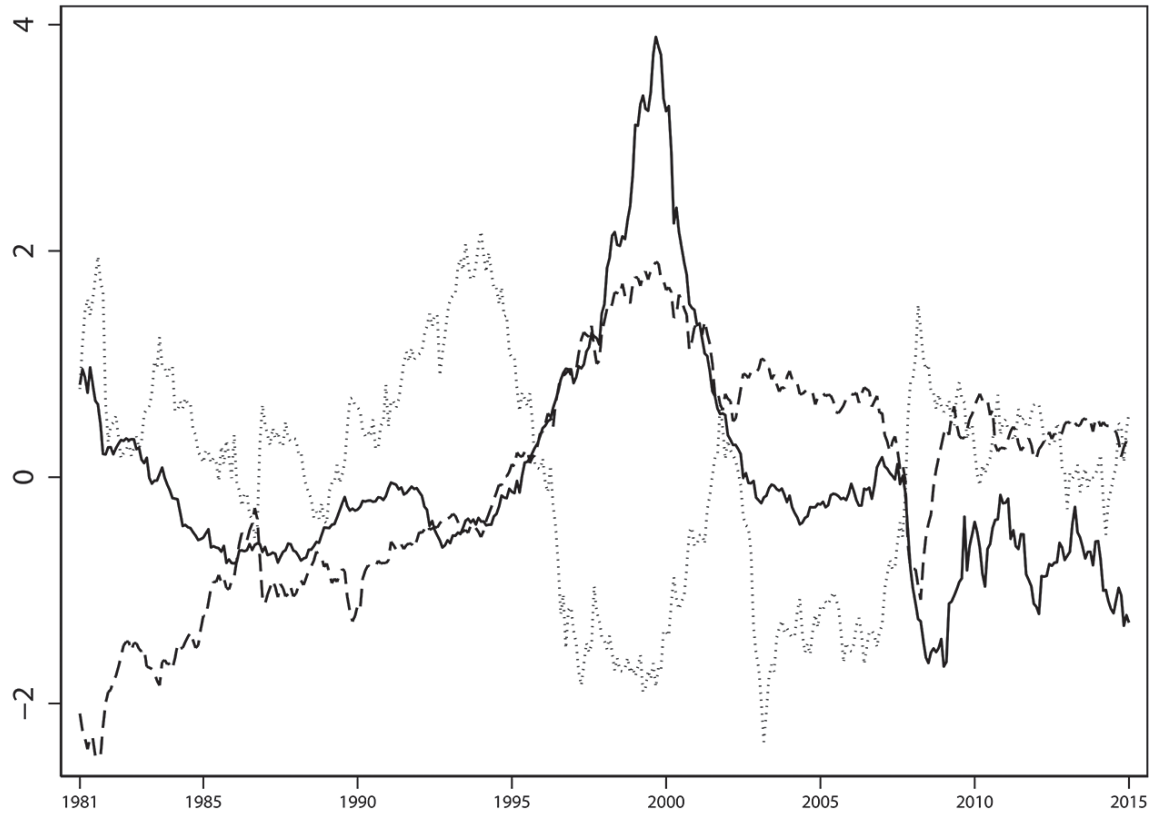
Beliefs about cash flows

Aggregate market

- Bordalo, Gennaioli, La Porta, Shleifer (2024a) present several pieces of evidence consistent with this view
 - the P/E ratio is correlated with analysts' forecasts of aggregate LTG
 - LTG predicts future market returns with a negative sign
 - LTG also predicts forecast errors for subsequent realized earnings growth

Beliefs about cash flows

Aggregate market



Source: Bordalo, Gennaioli, La Porta, Shleifer (2024a)

Beliefs about cash flows

Individual stock level

- we can approximate the return on a stock as:

$$r_{i,t+1} \approx r_i + \left[(g_{i,t+1} - E_t(g_{i,t+1})) + \sum_{s \geq 1} \alpha^s (E_{t+1} - E_t)(g_{i,t+1+s}) \right]$$

- Bordalo, Gennaioli, La Porta, Shleifer (2024b) compute the term in square parentheses using analyst forecasts of future earnings
 - use EPS forecasts up to two years out, and LTG forecasts from two to five years out
 - convert to dividend growth expectations using observed dividend payout ratios

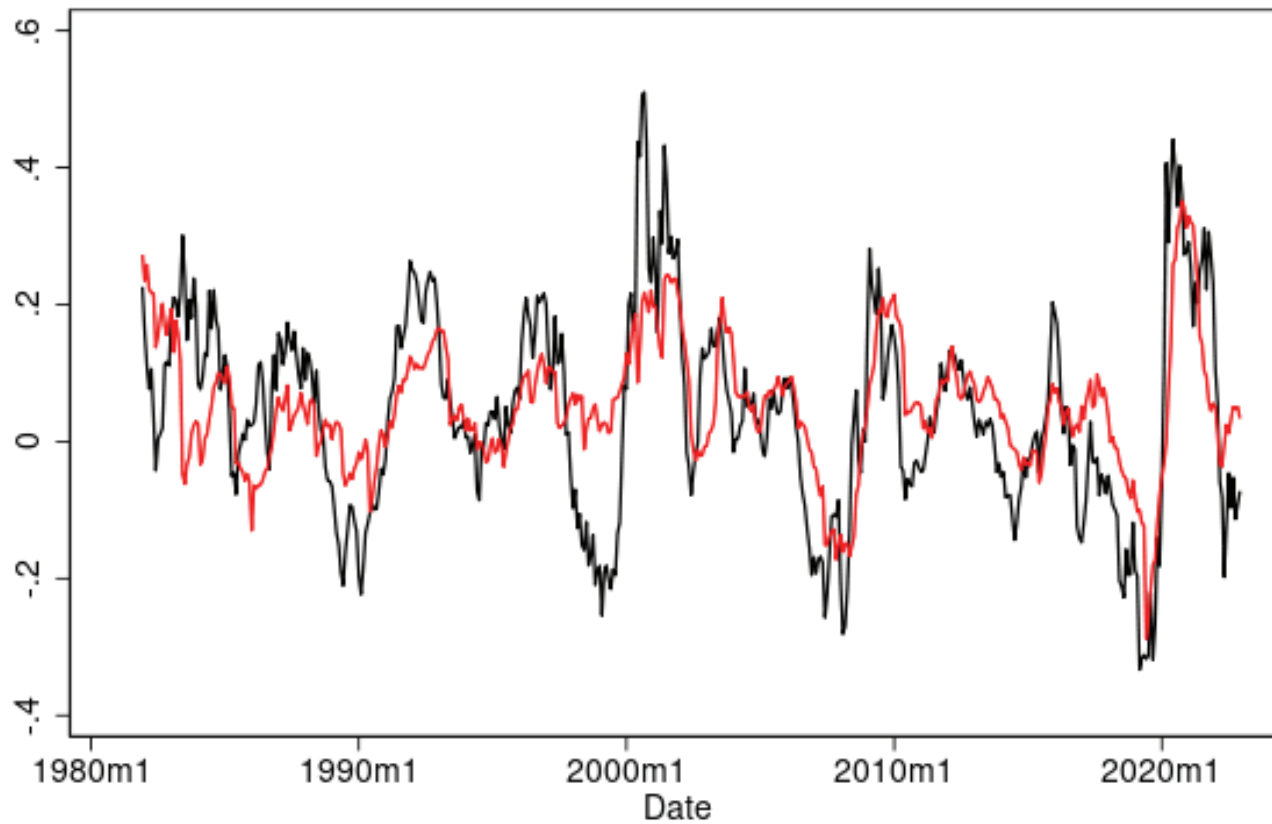
Beliefs about cash flows

- Bordalo, Gennaioli, La Porta, Shleifer (2024b) find that the expectations-based component can explain the entirety of the value and size anomalies
 - and a substantial portion of the investment, profitability, and momentum anomalies
- e.g., the high returns to value are due to investors revising upwards their excessively pessimistic forecasts of future earnings growth

Beliefs about cash flows

Earnings growth expectations and the value premium

Panel A: value



Source: Bordalo, Gennaioli, La Porta, Shleifer (2024b)

Beliefs about cash flows

- LTG forecasts are the expectations that appear particularly helpful for understanding asset prices
- the evidence above strongly suggests that LTG forecasts overreact to information
 - this is directly confirmed by Coibion-Gorodnichenko regressions for both individual and consensus LTG forecasts
- important open question: what is the source of the overreaction?
 - representativeness (e.g., “diagnostic expectations”), base-rate neglect
 - an incorrect belief in a law of small numbers
 - memory

Beliefs about cash flows

Other open questions:

- which specific news are investors overreacting to?
- how does the overreaction in LTG forecasts fit with the observed *under*-reaction in short-term earnings forecasts?
- are cash-flow expectations driving prices, or are prices driving the cash-flow expectations?
 - Chaudhry (2023), but also Bordalo, Gennaioli, La Porta, Shleifer (2024a,b)

Beliefs about cash flows

Which news are investors overreacting to?

- one view is that investors are overreacting to past tangible, i.e., accounting, information
 - e.g., overreacting to past earnings growth
- the evidence on this is mixed
 - Nagel and Xu (2022) find that a long-term weighted average of past fundamentals predicts stock market returns with a negative sign
 - Bordalo et al. (2024a) find that past earnings surprises lead to excessive revisions in consensus analyst LTG forecasts
 - but, in the cross-section, Daniel and Titman (2006) find that growth in past fundamentals has no predictive power for returns
- the last finding has led some researchers to argue that investors may be overreacting in part to intangible information

Under- and over-reaction

- thus far, we have focused on *over*-reaction in beliefs about cash flows and returns
- yet, some phenomena strongly suggest *under*-reaction
 - e.g., post-earnings announcement drift (PEAD)
- more generally, all three of experiments, surveys, and markets display instances of both under- and over-reaction
- reconciling this evidence remains an important open challenge
 - recent work has made progress
 - Bordalo, Gennaioli, Ma, Shleifer (2020), Augenblick, Lazarus, Thaler (2024), Ba, Bohren, Imas (2024), Kwon and Tang (2024)

Under- and over-reaction

	Experiments	Surveys	Markets
Underreaction	Conservatism	(IND.) Near-term earnings and interest rates (CNS.) Most economic variables	Price reaction to earnings news
Overreaction	Representativeness; time-series forecasts; overconfidence	(IND.) A majority of variables (CNS.) Long-term earnings growth	Excess volatility; value premium

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Gain-loss utility and prospect theory

- traditional models assume that investors make decisions under risk according to the Expected Utility framework
- however, decades of laboratory research has found that Expected Utility is not a very accurate description of choice under risk
- many “non-EU” models try to capture people’s decisions more accurately
 - prospect theory, due to Kahneman and Tversky (1979, 1992), is by far the most influential

Prospect theory

Four elements:

Reference dependence

- people derive utility from gains and losses

Loss aversion

- they are much more sensitive to potential losses than to potential gains

Diminishing sensitivity

- people are risk averse over moderate-probability gains
 - e.g., prefer \$500 to a 50% chance of \$1000
- but risk-seeking over moderate-probability losses
 - e.g., prefer a 50% chance of losing \$1000 to losing \$500 for sure

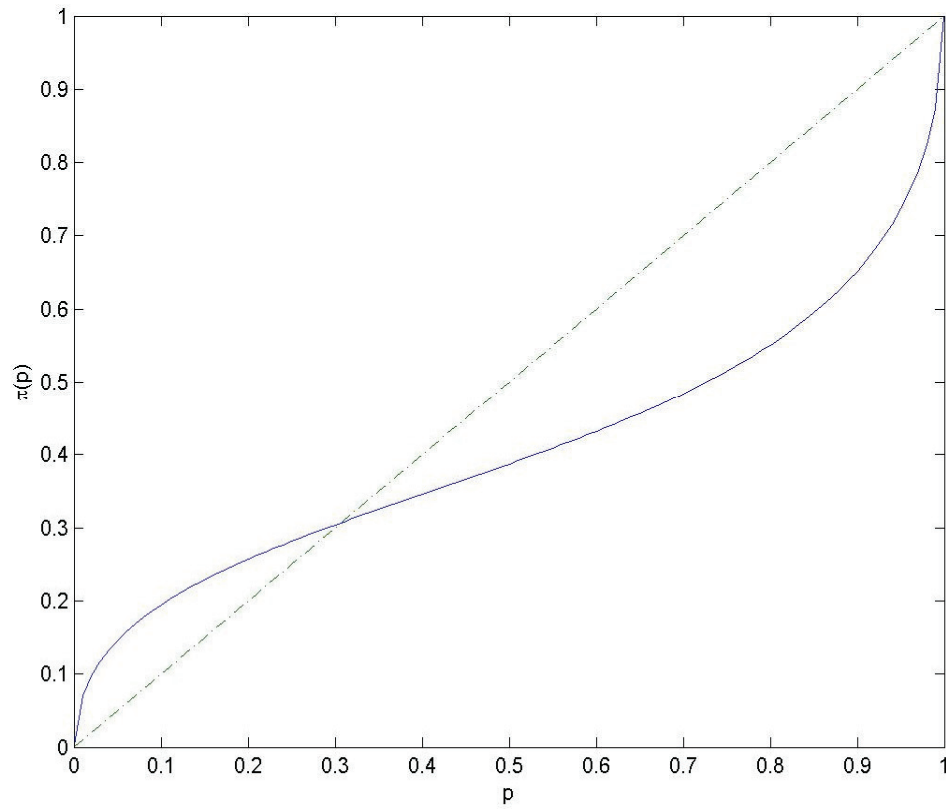
Prospect theory

Probability weighting

- people weight outcomes not with objective probabilities but rather with transformed probabilities that overweight low-probability outcomes
 - e.g., for the gamble “win \$100 with probability 5%,” the typical person states a certainty equivalent higher than \$5

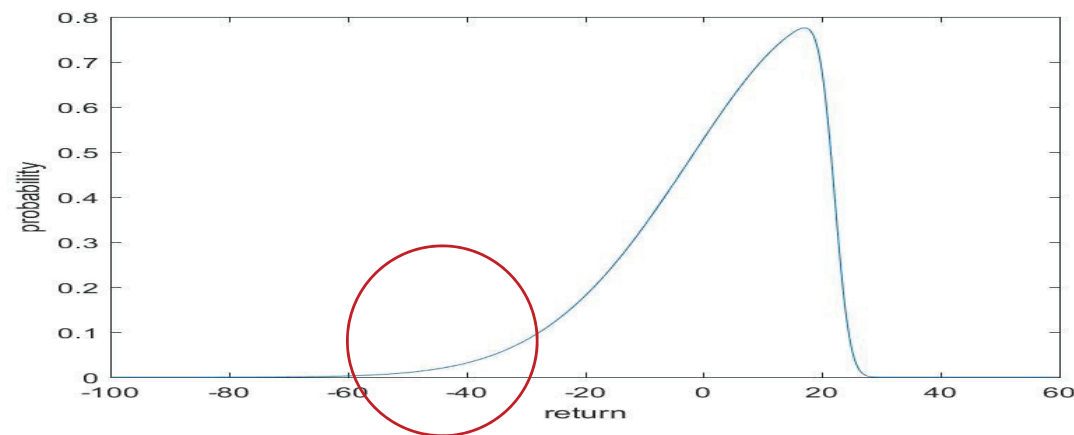
Prospect theory

Probability weighting



Prospect theory: Aggregate stock market

- here, the “gains” and “losses” are typically taken to be annual changes in financial wealth
- prospect theory then predicts a very substantial equity premium
 - due to loss aversion (Benartzi and Thaler, 1995; Barberis, Huang, Santos, 2001)
 - but also due to probability weighting, as the returns of the aggregate stock market are negatively skewed (De Giorgi and Legg, 2012)



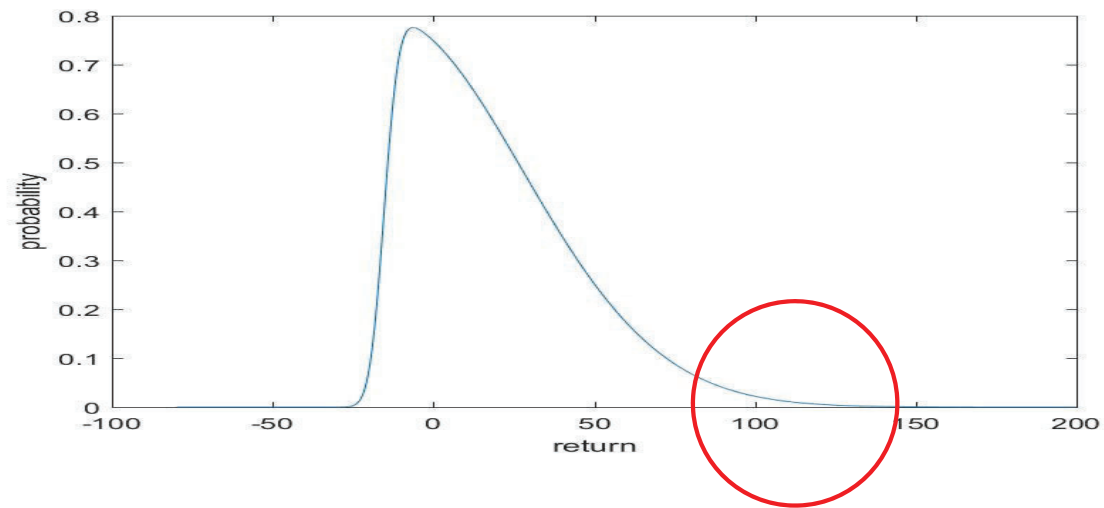
Prospect theory: The cross-section

- here, the “gains” and “losses” are typically taken to be gains and losses in the value of individual stock positions
 - defining them instead as changes in financial wealth leads to qualitatively similar results
- prospect theory then predicts that the average return of a stock will be determined by:
 - its return volatility, including idiosyncratic volatility
 - its return skewness, including idiosyncratic skewness
 - the average capital gain or loss across investors holding the stock (the “capital gain overhang”)

$$\text{average return} = f(\text{volatility}(+), \text{skewness}(-), \text{gain overhang}(+))$$

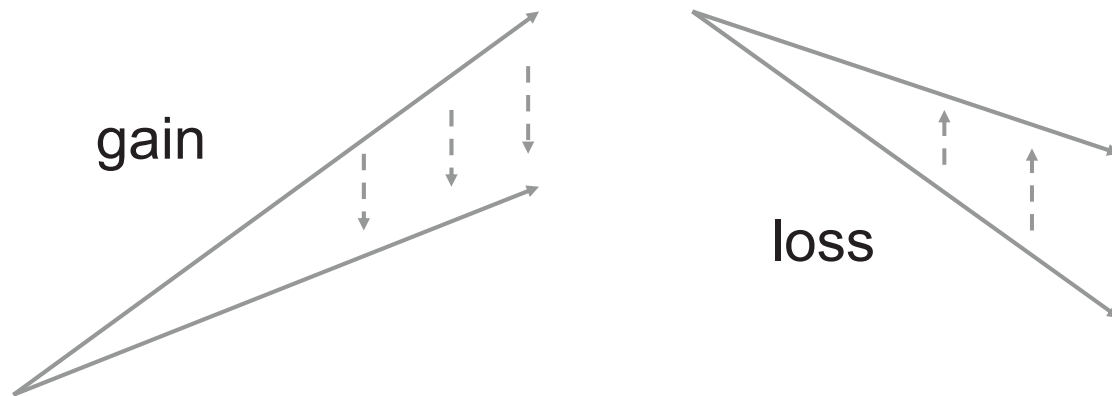
Prospect theory: The cross-section

- volatility matters due to loss aversion
- skewness matters due to probability weighting



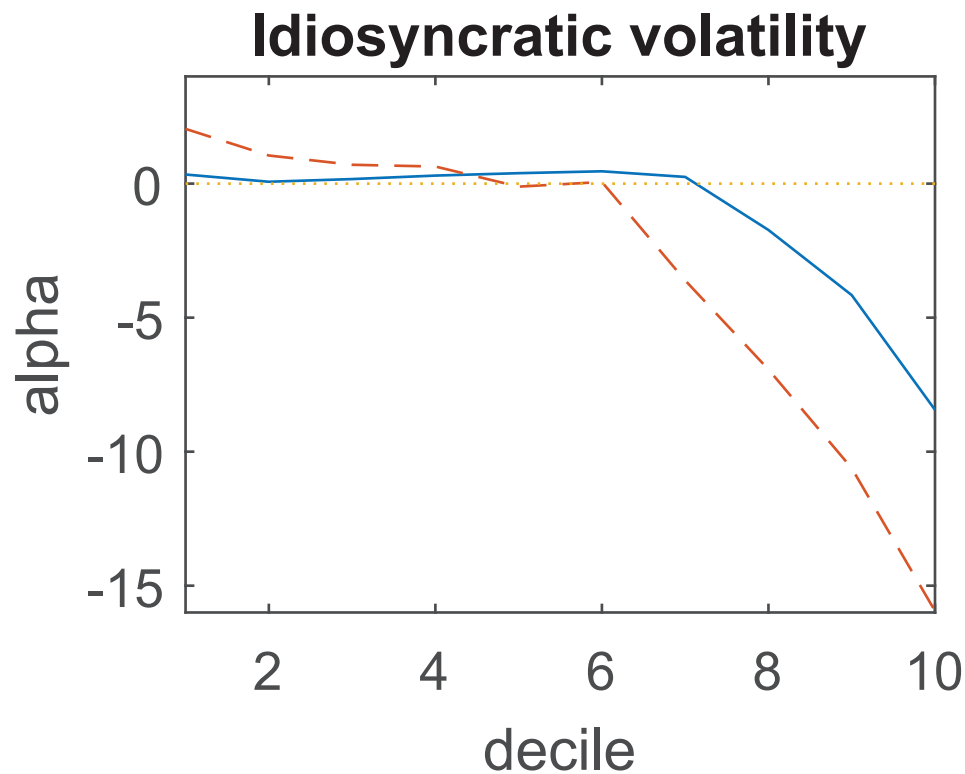
Prospect theory: The cross-section

- capital gain overhang matters due to diminishing sensitivity
 - Grinblatt and Han (2005)



Prospect theory: The cross-section

- Barberis, Jin, Wang (2021) show that this framework can help explain 14 of 23 prominent anomalies
- e.g., the volatility, distress, momentum, profitability, and issuance anomalies



Prospect theory: Open question

- the elements of prospect theory are increasingly being seen as reduced-form ways of capturing risk attitudes that are actually driven by deeper psychological forces
 - e.g., loss aversion
 - e.g., probability weighting
- how does this change our interpretation of the various applications above, and the way we model them?

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Preferences:

- gain-loss utility and prospect theory *

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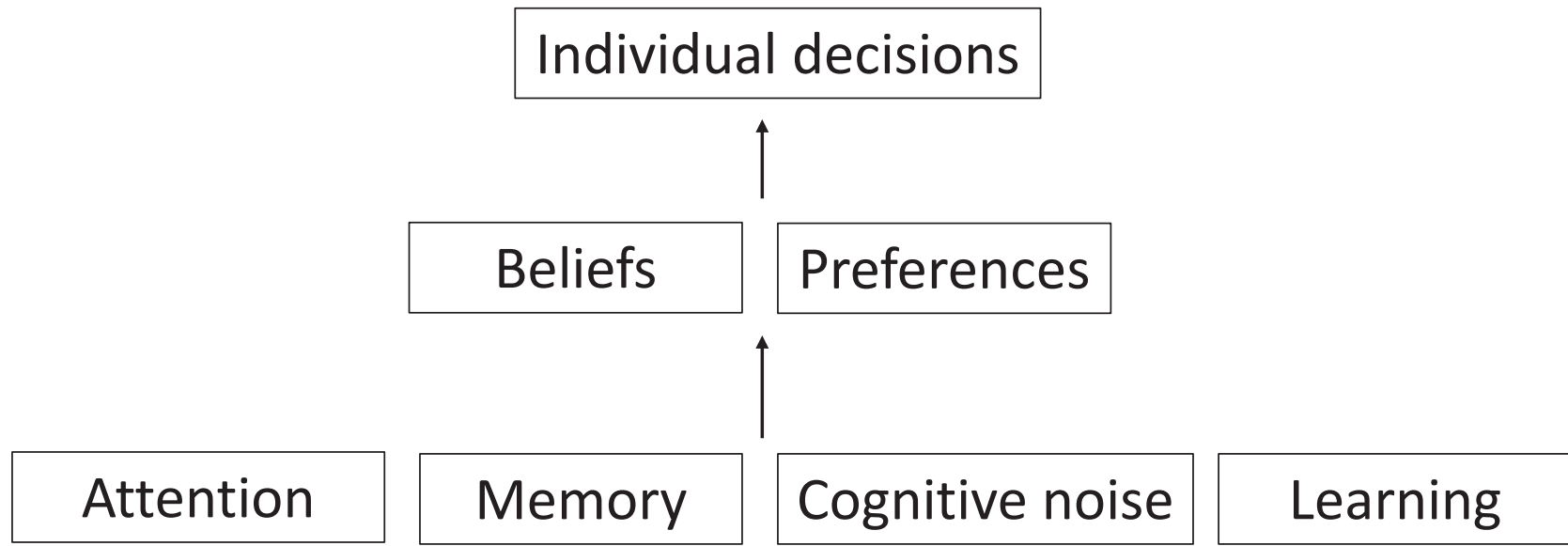
The cognitive turn in Behavioral Economics

- for the past 30 years, we have tried to make sense of financial phenomena by applying the psychology of *beliefs* and *preferences*
 - “high-level” psychology studied by Kahneman, Tversky, and others
- in the past five years, a new line of research has sought to understand the cognitive foundations of these beliefs and preferences
- in the remainder of the talk, I review some of this research, and comment on its potential

The cognitive turn in Behavioral Economics

- there are several strands to the work on cognitive foundations
 - cognitive uncertainty
 - memory
 - attention
 - complexity
 - reinforcement learning

The cognitive turn in Behavioral Economics



Cognitive uncertainty

- cognitive uncertainty is a person's subjective uncertainty as to what decision is the right one, or what belief is the correct one
 - e.g., they don't know their true preferences, struggle to combine utils and probabilities, or imperfectly perceive the problem
 - e.g., they don't know Bayes' rule, or have trouble implementing it
- in this situation, Enke and Graeber (2023) propose that we can model a person's behavior as follows
 - they have a *prior* about the right action to take – a “default action” they would take in the absence of any deliberation
 - they receive a noisy *signal* of the right action
 - and then combine the two in a Bayesian fashion

Cognitive uncertainty

More formally:

- suppose that
 - the optimal action is $a^*(\theta)$, where θ is a payoff-relevant parameter
 - the prior about the right action is drawn from $N(a_d, \sigma_0^2)$
 - the noisy signal of the optimal action, $s(\theta)$, is drawn from $N(a^*(\theta), \sigma^2)$
- then, the action chosen is given by:

$$\begin{aligned}a(\theta) &= \lambda s(\theta) + (1 - \lambda)a_d \\E(a(\theta)) &= \lambda a^*(\theta) + (1 - \lambda)a_d \\ \lambda &= \frac{\sigma_0^2}{\sigma^2 + \sigma_0^2}\end{aligned}$$

Cognitive uncertainty

- this can provide a foundation for multiple aspects of beliefs and preferences
 - e.g., for evidence on belief updating
 - e.g., for probability weighting

Cognitive uncertainty

Belief updating

- in the 1960s, psychologists began to do lab studies to see how people update their beliefs

Imagine two urns. Urn A has 700 blue chips and 300 green chips in it. Urn B has 300 blue chips and 700 green chips in it.

One of the urns is chosen at random and 12 chips are drawn from it; eight are blue and four are green.

What is the probability that the 12 chips were drawn from Urn A?

Cognitive uncertainty

Belief updating

- people commonly give an answer in the range from 0.7 to 0.8
 - but the correct answer is 0.97!
- in this example, there is strong *under*-reaction to the signal
 - a finding known as “conservatism”
- but what is driving this phenomenon?

Cognitive uncertainty

Belief updating

- under the cognitive uncertainty view, people are unsure what the right answer is and therefore cling to their prior – the default probability estimate of 0.5
- Enke and Graeber (2023) run the updating experiment and record each participant's cognitive uncertainty
- they find that conservatism is present primarily when people report significant cognitive uncertainty

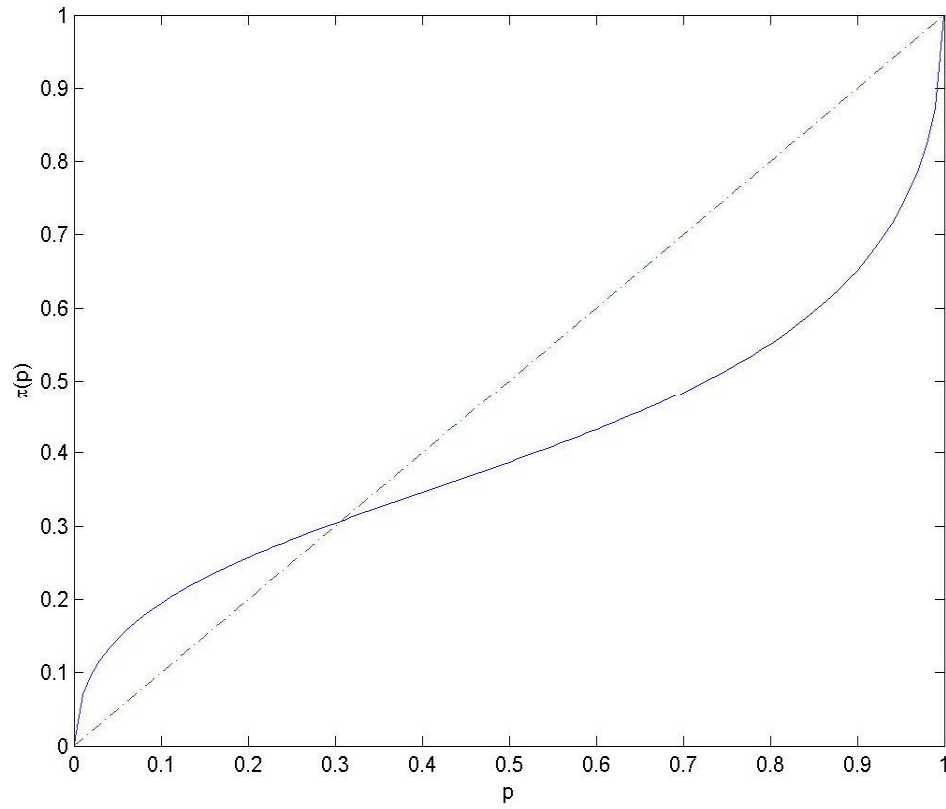
Cognitive uncertainty

Probability weighting

- people weight outcomes not with objective probabilities, but rather with transformed probabilities that overweight low-probability outcomes
- the cognitive uncertainty view: people are unsure about their certainty equivalent for any gamble, and therefore shrink their stated equivalent toward a default value
- in an experiment, Enke and Graeber (2023) ask participants for their certainty equivalents for gambles, but also solicit levels of cognitive uncertainty
 - they find that probability weighting is much stronger when cognitive uncertainty is high

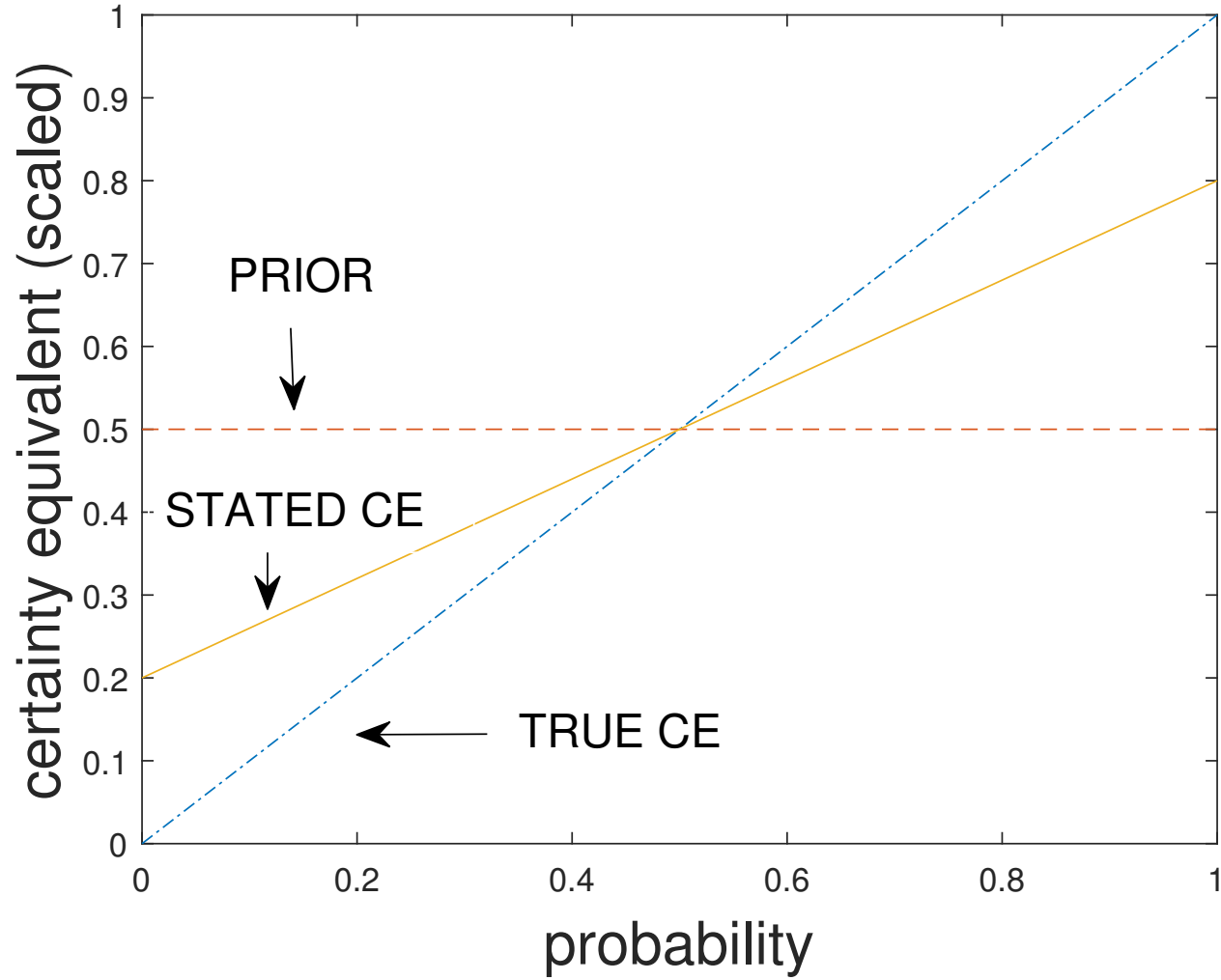
Cognitive uncertainty

Probability weighting



Cognitive uncertainty

Probability weighting



Cognitive uncertainty

This framework has important implications:

(1)

- the financial applications of probability weighting can be thought of, at a deeper level, as being driven in part by cognitive uncertainty
 - the overpricing of positively-skewed assets such as volatile stocks, distressed stocks, IPOs, and out-of-the-money options
- under cognitive uncertainty, probability weighting, and the preference for positive skewness it embodies, is not a *true* preference
 - but rather, a reflection of the brain's cognitive limits
- as a consequence, the buying of lottery-type assets is more of a mistake than previously thought

Cognitive uncertainty

(2)

- cognitive uncertainty offers a deeper understanding of underreaction
- for years, we associated the apparent underreaction seen in post-earnings announcement drift with the evidence on conservatism in belief updating
 - but without knowing what drives conservatism, this does not give us a real understanding of PEAD
- if cognitive uncertainty is the root of conservatism, this immediately offers a concrete explanation for PEAD

Cognitive uncertainty

(2), ctd.

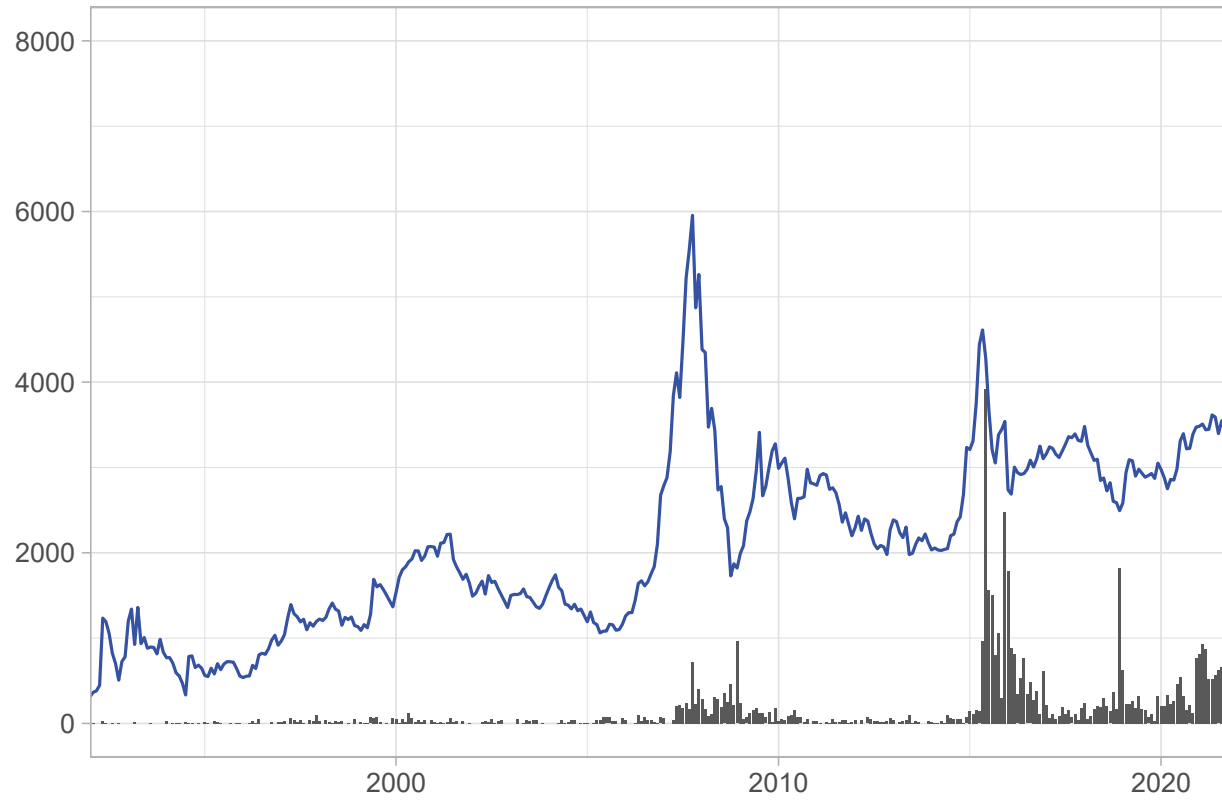
- Barberis, Shleifer, Vishny (1998) present a model of under- and over-reaction in financial markets based on “conservatism” and “representativeness”
- a more modern treatment would replace “conservatism” with “cognitive uncertainty”
 - Ba, Bohren, Imas (2024)

Memory

- a deeper study of human memory may help us better understand investor beliefs, e.g., about returns
- broad idea:
 - people recall past returns
 - and then simulate from the recalled returns to form expectations of future returns
 - Bordalo, Burro, Coffman, Gennaioli, Shleifer (2022); Jiang, Liu, Peng, Yan (2024)
- but which past returns do investors recall?
 - Jiang, Liu, Peng, Yan (2024) do a large-scale survey in China to find out
 - they find that investors recall *recent* episodes and *salient* episodes

Memory

Recalled episodes



Source: Jiang, Liu, Peng, Yan (2024)

Memory

This has two immediate implications:

- it offers a foundation for extrapolative beliefs about returns
- it suggests that our existing extrapolation and experience effect-based models of beliefs about returns are incomplete
 - they also need to account for a higher weight on *salient* past episodes

Memory

- to make additional progress, we can exploit the large scientific literature on memory
 - the book *Foundations of Human Memory* (Kahana, 2012) is a useful gateway to this research for economists
- Kahana, Diamond, Aka (2022) propose that there are five “laws” of human memory
 - law of recency
 - law of contiguity
 - law of similarity
 - law of primacy
 - law of repetition

Memory

- the law of similarity is particularly promising
- there is direct evidence for it in financial contexts
 - Jiang, Liu, Peng, Yan (2024) find that, following a good (bad) return, people are more likely to recall past episodes with good (bad) returns

Two implications:

(1)

- this further strengthens the memory-based foundation for extrapolative beliefs about returns
 - good recent returns will trigger recall of other episodes with good returns

Memory

(2)

- it also suggests that dramatic past episodes are more likely to be recalled when currently experiencing a dramatic event
- this points to a mechanism of overreaction to dramatic news
- Enke, Schwerter, Zimmermann (2024) provide experimental evidence for such a mechanism

Reinforcement learning

- thought to be one of the brain's fundamental learning mechanisms
 - take actions that have been rewarded in the past
 - don't take actions that have not been rewarded in the past
- three developments have made the framework ripe for use by economists
 - strong neural support for this learning mechanism
 - the emergence of computational models of reinforcement learning
 - the formulation of frameworks that combine reinforcement learning with economists' more traditional belief-based models

Reinforcement learning

- the reinforcement learning system computes $Q_t(s, a)$
 - the value of taking action a in state s and then continuing optimally from the next period on
- this quantity is updated through experience
 - take the action a in state s and observe what happens
 - if the reward is higher than expected, increase the estimate of $Q(s, a)$
 - if the reward is lower than expected, decrease the estimate of $Q(s, a)$

$$Q_{t+1}(s, a) = Q_t(s, a) + \alpha[r_{t+1} + \gamma \max_{a'} Q_t(s_{t+1}, a') - Q_t(s, a)]$$

Reinforcement learning

- Barberis and Jin (2023) implement this framework in the context of a simple portfolio allocation problem
- show that it can shed light on a range of observed investment behaviors
 - e.g., experience effects
 - e.g., the insensitivity of allocations to beliefs

The cognitive turn: Benefits

(1)

- it offers a deeper understanding of several financial applications
 - e.g., of financial phenomena previously associated with “conservatism” in belief updating
 - e.g., of phenomena associated with probability weighting

(2)

- the work on cognitive foundations offers a way of unifying an otherwise scattered set of assumptions about beliefs and preferences
 - seemingly different phenomena like conservatism and probability weighting can be traced to the same cognitive root

The cognitive turn: Challenges

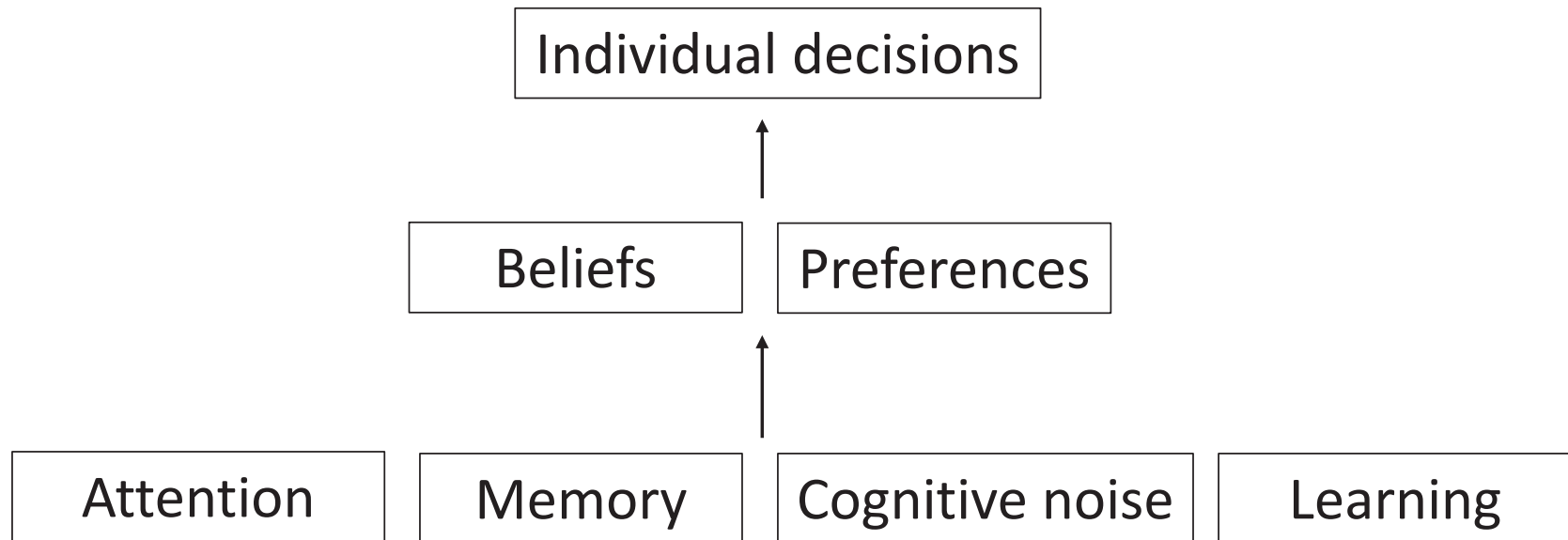
- work on cognitive foundations in behavioral economics has focused primarily on explaining beliefs and preferences
 - and less on applications
- an exciting agenda is to try to link the cognitive foundations to financial applications

But this agenda also faces some headwinds:

(1)

- by nature, the foundations involve low-level psychology that is further removed from applications in finance
- by contrast, the psychology of beliefs and preferences is easier to link to applications

The cognitive turn: Challenges



The cognitive turn: Challenges

(2)

- the lower-level psychology provides compelling foundations for beliefs and preferences
 - but the applications of these belief and preference assumptions are typically already known
 - as such, the low-level psychology can immediately offer a *re-interpretation* of these applications
 - but it would be more exciting to come up with new applications or new predictions

The cognitive turn: Challenges

(3)

- as we work on cognitive foundations, we need to remain disciplined in our assumptions
- until five years ago, behavioral finance *was* quite disciplined
 - the center of gravity in the field was in a small number of concepts
 - over-extrapolation, overconfidence, prospect theory
- we need to make sure that the influx of many lower-level cognitive concepts into the field doesn't erode this discipline

The cognitive turn: A question

- does the cognitive turn in behavioral economics mean that we need to replace our models of investor behavior?
- in some cases, the answer is probably “yes”
- but even as we better understand cognitive foundations, we may sometimes still want to work with reduced-form models of beliefs and preferences
 - they are often easier to work with
 - they avoid taking a stand on which cognitive foundation is the right one
- examples:
 - return extrapolation
 - prospect theory

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Conclusion

- today, behavioral finance is a vibrant field
 - there is mounting evidence that behavioral finance mechanisms are central to many important financial phenomena
 - and more high-quality research in the area than ever before
- the outlook is promising for research in all three areas of application
 - asset prices
 - corporate finance
 - household finance
- and for research on both beliefs and preferences
 - with cognitive foundations playing an additional helpful role
- despite the progress, we have a long way to go
 - there are many important open questions

Resources

Readings

- Handbook of Behavioral Economics, 2018
 - “Psychology-based Models of Asset Prices and Trading Volume,” (Barberis)
 - “Behavioral Corporate Finance” (Malmendier)
 - “Behavioral Household Finance” (Beshears, Choi, Laibson, Madrian)

Online videos

- American Economics Association Continuing Education, 2017, Lectures on Behavioral Finance (Malmendier, Barberis)

Resources

Summer schools

- Yale Summer School in Behavioral Finance

Conferences

- NBER Behavioral Finance Meeting (Fall and Spring)
 - live-streamed on Youtube