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# Self-Deception

**T**he red milksnake, utterly harmless, wears stripes to pose as a deadly coral snake. Some orchid species mimic other flowers in order to attract pollinating bees, but without providing any nectar in return.[1] Dozens of species use eye spots to trick other animals into thinking they're being watched. Possums, lizards, birds, and sharks "play dead," hoping to dissuade predators who are interested only in live prey. Even parasitic bacteria try to get in on the act, for example, by "wearing" certain molecules on their cell membranes in order to "look" like a native host cell, thereby fooling the host's immune system—a microscopic wolf in sheep's clothing.[2]

"Deception," says the evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers, "is a very deep feature of life. It occurs at all levels—from gene to cell to individual to group—and it seems, by any and all means, necessary."

And our species, of course, is no exception. Suffice it to say that deception is simply part of human nature—a fact that makes perfect sense in light of the competitive (selfish) logic of evolution. Deception allows us to reap certain benefits without paying the full costs. And yes, all societies have norms against lying, but that just means we have to work a little harder not to get caught. Instead of telling bald-faced lies, maybe we spin or cherry-pick the truth.

So far, so obvious. But here's the puzzle: we don't just deceive *others*; we also deceive *ourselves*. Our minds habitually distort or ignore critical information in ways that seem, on the face of it, counterproductive. Our mental processes act in bad faith, perverting or degrading our picture of the world. In common speech, we might say that someone is engaged in "wishful thinking" or is "burying her head in the sand"—or, to use a more colorful phrase, that she's "drinking her own Kool-Aid."

In his book *The Folly of Fools*, Trivers refers to self-deception as the "striking contradiction" at the heart of our mental lives. Our brains "seek out information," he says, "and then act to destroy it":

> On the one hand, our sense organs have evolved to give us a marvelously detailed and accurate view of the outside world . . . exactly as we would expect if truth about the outside world helps us to navigate it more effectively. But once this information arrives in our brains, it is often distorted and biased to our conscious minds. We deny the truth to ourselves. We project onto others traits that are in fact true of ourselves—and then attack them! We repress painful memories, create completely false ones, rationalize immoral behavior, act repeatedly to boost positive self-opinion, and show a suite of ego-defense mechanisms.[3]

We deceive ourselves in many different areas of life. One domain is sports. Consider how a boxer might purposely ignore an injury during a fight, or how a marathon runner might trick herself into thinking she's less fatigued than she "really" is.[4] A study of competitive swimmers found that those who were more prone to self-deception performed better during an important qualifying race.[5]

Another domain is personal health. You might suppose, given how important health is to our happiness (not to mention our longevity), it would be a domain to which we'd bring our cognitive A-game. Unfortunately, study after study shows that we often distort or ignore critical information about our own health in order to seem healthier than we really are.[6] One study, for example, gave patients a cholesterol test, then followed up to see what they remembered months later. Patients with the worst test results—who were judged the most at-risk of cholesterol-related health problems—were most likely to misremember their test results, and they remembered their results as better (i.e., healthier) than they actually were.[7] Smokers, but not nonsmokers, choose not to hear about the dangerous effects of smoking.[8] People systematically underestimate their risk of contracting HIV (human immunodeficiency virus),[9] and avoid taking HIV tests.[10] We also deceive ourselves about our driving skills, social skills, leadership skills, and athletic ability.[11]

These results are robust. There's a wide base of evidence showing that human brains are poor stewards of the information they receive from the outside world. But this seems entirely self-defeating, like shooting oneself in the foot. If our minds contain maps of our worlds, what good comes from having an inaccurate version of these maps?

## OLD SCHOOL: SELF-DECEPTION AS DEFENSE

Broadly speaking, there are two schools of thought about why we deceive ourselves. The first—what we'll call the

Old School—treats self-deception as a defense mechanism.

Sigmund Freud, along with his daughter Anna Freud, famously championed this school of thought. The Freuds saw self-deception as a (largely unconscious) coping strategy—a way for the ego to protect itself, especially against unwanted impulses.[12] We repress painful thoughts and memories, for example, by pushing them down into the subconscious. Or we deny our worst attributes and project them onto others. Or we rationalize, substituting good motives for ugly ones (more on this in Chapter 6).

According to the Freuds, the mind employs these defense mechanisms to reduce anxiety and other kinds of psychic pain. Later psychologists, following Otto Fenichel in the mid-20th century, reinterpreted the purpose of defense mechanisms as *preserving one's self-esteem*.[13] This has become the polite, common-sense explanation—that we deceive ourselves because we can't handle the truth. Our egos and self-esteem are fragile and need to be shielded from distressing information, like the fact that we probably *won't* win the upcoming competition, or the fact that we may be sick with some lurking cancer.

In a segment for the podcast *Radiolab*, Harold Sackeim—one of the first psychologists to experimentally study self-deception—explained it this way:

**SACKEIM:** [Depressed people] see all the pain in the world, how horrible people are with each other, and they tell you everything about themselves: what their weaknesses are, what terrible things they've done to other people. And the problem is they're *right*. And so maybe the way we help people is to help them be *wrong*.

**ROBERT KRULWICH** [*Radiolab* host]: It might just be that hiding ideas that we know to be true, hiding those ideas from ourselves, is what we need to get by.

**SACKEIM:** We're so vulnerable to being hurt that we're given the capacity to distort *as a gift*.[14]

evolutionary mechanism

Poetic, maybe, but this Old School perspective ignores an important objection: Why would Nature, by way of evolution,[15] design our brains this way? Information is the lifeblood of the human brain; ignoring or distorting it isn't something to be undertaken lightly. If the goal is to preserve self-esteem, a more efficient way to go about it is simply to make the brain's self-esteem mechanism stronger, more robust to threatening information. Similarly, if the goal is to reduce anxiety, the straightforward solution is to design the brain to feel less anxiety for a given amount of stress.

In contrast, using self-deception to preserve self-esteem or reduce anxiety is a sloppy hack and ultimately self-defeating. It would be like trying to warm yourself during winter by aiming a blow-dryer at the thermostat. The temperature reading will rise, but it won't reflect a properly heated house, and it won't stop you from shivering.[16]

Alternatively, imagine you're the general in charge of a large army. You're outnumbered and surrounded by the enemy with no clear line of escape. As you contemplate your next move on a large paper map, you realize how easy it would be to erase the mountain range that's blocking your troops, or to draw a pass through the mountains where none actually exists. Having an escape route would certainly be a relief! But the map isn't the territory; you can't erase the actual mountains. Whatever you do to the map, the enemy will still have you surrounded. And by lying about reality, you're setting yourself up to make bad decisions that will lead to even worse outcomes.

A general who made a habit of indulging in such flights of fancy would quickly lose the war to one who didn't. And the same is true for our minds. We therefore need a better reason for deceiving ourselves than mere psychic comfort.

## NEW SCHOOL: SELF-DECEPTION AS MANIPULATION

In recent years, psychologists—especially those who focus on evolutionary reasoning—have developed a more satisfying explanation for why we deceive ourselves. Where the Old School saw self-deception as primarily inward-facing, defensive, and (like the general editing the map) largely self-defeating, the New School sees it as primarily outward-facing, manipulative, and ultimately self-serving.

Two recent New School books have been Trivers' *The Folly of Fools* (2011) and Robert Kurzban's *Why Everyone (Else) Is a Hypocrite* (2013). But the roots of the New School go back to Thomas Schelling, a Nobel Prize–winning economist[17] best known for his work on the game theory of cooperation and conflict.

In his 1967 book *The Strategy of Conflict*, Schelling studied what he called *mixed-motive games*. These are scenarios involving two or more players whose interests overlap but also partially diverge. Thanks to the overlap, the players have an incentive to cooperate, but thanks to the divergence, they're also somewhat at odds with each other. If this sounds familiar, it's because humans (and our primate ancestors) have been playing mixed-motive games with each other for millions of years. It's what we do every day, what our minds were built for. Nevertheless,

as Schelling demonstrated, mixed-motive games can incentivize strange, counterintuitive behavior.

A classic example is the game of chicken, typically played by two teenagers in their cars. The players race toward each other on a collision course, and the player who swerves first loses the game.[18] Traditionally it's a game of bravado. But if you really want to win, here's what Schelling advises. When you're lined up facing your opponent, revving your engine, *remove the steering wheel from your car and wave it at your opponent*. This way, he'll know that you're locked in, dead set, hell-bent—irrevocably committed to driving straight through, no matter what. And at this point, unless he wants to die, your opponent will *have to* swerve first, and you'll be the winner.

The reason this is counterintuitive is because it's not typically a good idea to limit our own options. But Schelling documented how the perverse incentives of mixed-motive games lead to option-limiting and other actions that seem irrational, but are actually strategic. These include

- *Closing or degrading a channel of communication*. You might purposely turn off your phone, for example, if you're expecting someone to call asking for a favor. Or you might have a hard conversation over email rather than in person.
- *Opening oneself up to future punishment*. "Among the legal privileges of corporations," writes Schelling, "two that are mentioned in textbooks are the right to sue and the 'right' to be sued. Who wants to be sued! But the right to be sued is the power to make a promise: to borrow money, to enter a contract, to do business with someone who might be damaged. If suit does arise, the 'right' seems a liability in retrospect; beforehand it was a prerequisite to doing business."[19]
- *Ignoring information*, also known as *strategic ignorance*. If you're kidnapped, for example, you might prefer not to see your kidnapper's face or learn his name. Why? Because if he knows you can identify him later (to the police), he'll be less likely to let you go. In some cases, knowledge can be a serious liability.
- *Purposely believing something that's false*. If you're a general who firmly believes your army can win, even though the odds are against it, you might nevertheless intimidate your opponent into backing down.

In other words, mixed-motive games contain the kind of incentives that reward self-deception.

There's a tension in all of this. In simple applications of decision theory, it's better to have more options and more knowledge. Yet Schelling has argued that, in a variety of scenarios, limiting or sabotaging yourself is the *winning move*. What gives?

Resolving this tension turns out to be straightforward. Classical decision theory has it right: there's no value in sabotaging yourself per se. The value lies in *convincing other players* that you've sabotaged yourself. In the game of chicken, you don't win because you're unable to steer, but because your opponent *believes* you're unable to steer. Similarly, as a kidnapping victim, you don't suffer because you've seen your kidnapper's face; you suffer when the kidnapper *thinks* you've seen his face. If you could somehow see his face without giving him any idea that you'd done so, you'd probably be better off.

By this line of reasoning, it's never useful to have *secret* gaps in your knowledge, or to adopt false beliefs that you keep entirely to yourself. The entire value of strategic ignorance and related phenomena lies in the way others act when they believe that you're ignorant. As Kurzban says, "Ignorance is at its most useful when it is most public."[20] It needs to be advertised and made conspicuous.

Another way to look at it is that self-deception is useful only when you're playing against an opponent who can take your mental state into account. You can't bluff the blind forces of Nature, for example. When a hurricane is roaring toward you, it's no use trying to ignore it; the hurricane couldn't care less whether or not you know it's coming. Sabotaging yourself works only when you're playing against an opponent with a theory-of-mind. Typically these opponents will be other humans, but it could theoretically extend to some of the smarter animals, as well as hypothetical future robots or aliens. Corporations and nation-states also use some of these self-sabotaging tactics vis-à-vis each other and the public at large. Self-deception, then, is a tactic that's useful only to social creatures in social situations.

It's hard to overstate the impact of what Schelling, Trivers, Kurzban, and others are arguing. Their conclusion is that we, humans, *must* self-deceive. Those who refuse to play such mind games will be at a game-theoretic disadvantage relative to others who play along. Thus we are often wise to ignore seemingly critical information and to believe easily refuted falsehoods—and then to prominently advertise our distorted thinking—because these are *winning moves*.

As Trivers puts it, "We deceive ourselves the better to deceive others."[21]

## WHY DO WE BELIEVE OUR OWN LIES?

Still there's an important lingering question. If the goal of self-deception is to create a certain impression *in others*, why do we distort the truth to *ourselves*? What's the benefit of self-deception over a simple, deliberate lie?

There are many ways to answer this question, but they mostly boil down to the fact that lying is hard to pull off. For one thing, it's cognitively demanding. Huckleberry Finn, for example, struggled to keep his stories straight and was eventually caught in a number of lies. And it's even harder when we're being grilled and expected to produce answers quickly. As Mark Twain may have said elsewhere, "If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything."[22]

Beyond the cognitive demands, lying is also difficult because we have to overcome our fear of getting caught. People get angry when they're lied to—a reaction almost as universal as lying itself. (Even wasps who catch other wasps lying are known to retaliate in response.[23]) Therefore, aside from sociopaths and compulsive liars, most of us are afraid to tell bald-faced lies, and we suffer from a number of fear-based "tells" that can give us away. Our hearts race, our skin heats up, we start sweating and fidgeting. Maybe we have an eye twitch, nervous tic, awkward gulp, or cracking voice.[24]

In light of this, often the best way to get others to believe something is to make it a reality. When you're playing chicken, it won't do much good to yell at your opponent, "Hey, I've torn off my steering wheel!" He won't believe you until he sees that you've actually done it. Similarly, often the best way to convince others that we believe something is to *actually* believe it. Other people aren't stupid. They're aware that we often have an incentive to lie to them, so they're watching us, eagle-eyed, for any signs of deception. They're analyzing our words (often comparing them to things we said days, weeks, or months ago), scrutinizing our facial expressions, and observing our behaviors to make sure they conform to our stated motives.

The point is, our minds aren't as private as we like to imagine. Other people have partial visibility into what we're thinking. Faced with the translucency of our own minds, then, self-deception is often the most robust way to mislead others. It's not technically a lie (because it's not conscious or deliberate), but it has a similar effect. "We hide reality from our conscious minds," says Trivers, "the better to hide it from onlookers."[25]

Modeling the world accurately isn't the be-all and end-all of the human brain. Brains evolved to help our bodies, and ultimately our genes, get along and get ahead in the world—a world that includes not just rocks and squirrels and hurricanes, but also other human beings. And if we spend a significant fraction of our lives interacting with others (which we do), trying to convince them of certain things (which we do), why *shouldn't* our brains adopt socially useful beliefs as first-class citizens, alongside world-modeling beliefs?

Wear a mask long enough and it becomes your face.[26] Play a role long enough and it becomes who you are. Spend enough time pretending something is true and you might as well believe it.[27]

Incidentally, this is why politicians make a great case study for self-deception. The social pressure on their beliefs is enormous. Psychologically, then, politicians don't so much "lie" as regurgitate their own self-deceptions.[28] Both are ways of misleading others, but self-deceptions are a lot harder to catch and prosecute.

## SELF-DECEPTION IN PRACTICE

There are at least four ways that self-deception helps us come out ahead in mixed-motive scenarios. We'll personify them in four different archetypes: the Madman, the Loyalist, the Cheerleader, and the Cheater.

### The Madman

"I'm doing this *no matter what*," says the Madman, "so stay outta my way!"

When we commit ourselves to a particular course of action, it often changes the incentives for other players. This is how removing the steering wheel helps us win the game of chicken, but it's also why businesspeople, gang leaders, athletes, and other competitors try to psych out their opponents.

Rick Lahaye explains how athletes suffer when they don't play the Madman:

> Athletes use small cues of tiredness from close competitors to give themselves a boost and keep pushing forward during a race (e.g., a marathon runner thinking, "Do you see him breathe? He's almost done. Just keep pushing for one more bit and you will beat him."). Because of this, athletes conceal (negative) information about [themselves] to competitors. If you show any "signs of weakness," the opponent will see a chance for success and will be more willing to keep spending energy.[29]

It was also one of Richard Nixon's strategies for the war in Vietnam. As he explained to his chief of staff Bob Haldeman:

> I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that, "for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about communism. We can't restrain him when he's angry — and he has his hand on the nuclear button" and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace.[30]

Of course, Nixon's plan didn't work out as well as he hoped, but his reasoning was valid. People often defer to the crazy ones, and our minds respond to that incentive to being a little bit crazy ourselves.

## The Loyalist

"Sure, I'll go along with your beliefs," says the Loyalist, thereby demonstrating commitment and hoping to earn trust in return.

In many ways, belief is a political act. This is why we're typically keen to believe a friend's version of a story—about a breakup, say, or a dispute at work—even when we know there's another side of the story that may be equally compelling. It's also why blind faith is an important virtue for religious groups, and to a lesser extent social, professional, and political groups. When a group's fundamental tenets are at stake, those who demonstrate the most steadfast commitment—who continue to chant the loudest or clench their eyes the tightest in the face of conflicting evidence—earn the most trust from their fellow group members. The employee who drinks the company Kool-Aid, however epistemically noxious, will tend to win favor from colleagues, especially in management, and move faster up the chain.

In fact, we often measure loyalty in our relationships by the degree to which a belief is irrational or unwarranted by the evidence. For example, we don't consider it "loyal" for an employee to stay at a company when it's paying her twice the salary she could make elsewhere; that's just calculated self-interest. Likewise, it's not "loyal" for a man to stay with his girlfriend if he has no other prospects. These attachments take on the color of loyalty only when someone remains committed despite a strong temptation to defect. Similarly, it doesn't demonstrate loyalty to believe the truth, which we have every incentive to believe anyway. It only demonstrates loyalty to believe something that we *wouldn't* have reason to believe *unless* we were loyal.

There's a famous Chinese parable illustrating the Loyalist function of our beliefs:

> Zhao Gao was a powerful man hungry for more power. One day he brought a deer to a meeting with the emperor and many top officials, calling the deer a "great horse." The emperor, who regarded Zhao Gao as a teacher and therefore trusted him completely, agreed that it was a horse—and many officials agreed as well. Others, however, remained silent or objected. This was how Zhao Gao flushed out his enemies. Soon after, he murdered all the officials who refused to call the deer a horse.[31]

Zhao Gao's ploy wouldn't have worked if he had called the deer a deer. The truth is a poor litmus test of loyalty.

## The Cheerleader

"I know this is true," the Cheerleader says. "Come on, believe it with me!"

This kind of self-deception is a form of propaganda. As Kurzban writes, "Sometimes it is beneficial to be . . . wrong in such a way that, if everyone else believed the incorrect thing one believes, one would be strategically better off."[32]

The goal of cheerleading, then, is to change other people's beliefs. And the more fervently we believe something, the easier it is to convince others that it's true. The politician who's confident she's going to win *no matter what* will have an easier time rallying supporters than one who projects a more honest assessment of her chances. The startup founder who's brimming with confidence, though it may be entirely unearned, will often attract more investors and recruit more employees than someone with an accurate assessment of his own abilities.

When we deceive ourselves about personal health, whether by avoiding information entirely or by distorting information we've already received, it *feels* like we're trying to protect ourselves from distressing information. But the reason our egos need to be shielded—the reason we evolved to feel pain when our egos are threatened—is to help us maintain a positive social impression. We don't personally benefit from misunderstanding our current state of health, but we benefit when *others* mistakenly believe we're healthy. And the first step to convincing others is often to convince ourselves. As Bill Atkinson, a colleague of Steve Jobs, once said of Jobs's self-deception, "It allowed him to con people into believing his vision, because he has personally embraced and internalized it."[33]

## The Cheater

"I have no idea what you're talking about," the Cheater says in response to an accusation. "My motives were pure."

As we discussed in Chapter 3, many norms hinge on the actor's intentions. Being nice, for example, is generally applauded—but being nice *with the intention to curry favor* is the sin of flattery. Similarly, being friendly is generally considered to be a good thing, but being friendly *with romantic intentions* is flirting, which is often inappropriate. Other minor sins that hinge on intent include bragging, showing off, sucking up, lying, and playing politics, as well as selfish behavior in general. When we deceive ourselves about our own motives, however, it becomes much harder for others to prosecute these minor transgressions. We'll see much more of this in the next chapter.

In other cases, it's not our *intentions* that determine whether a norm was violated, but our *knowledge*. Learning about a transgression sometimes invokes a moral or legal duty to do something about it.[34] If we see a friend shoplift, we become complicit in the crime. This is why we might turn a blind eye or strive to retain plausible deniability—so that, when questioned later, we'll have nothing to hide.

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Again, in all of these cases, self-deception works because other people are attempting to read our minds and react based on what they find (or what they think they find). In deceiving ourselves, then, we're often acting to deceive and manipulate others. We might be hoping to intimidate them (like the Madman), earn their trust (like the Loyalist), change their beliefs (like the Cheerleader), or throw them off our trail (like the Cheater).

Of course, these aren't mutually exclusive. Any particular act of self-deception might serve multiple purposes at once. When the mother of an alleged murderer is convinced that her son is innocent, she's playing Loyalist to her son and Cheerleader to the jury. The prizefighter who is grossly overconfident about his odds of winning is playing both Cheerleader (to his fans, teammates, and other supporters) and Madman (to his opponent).

## MODULARITY

The benefit of self-deception is that it can, in some scenarios, help us mislead others. But what about its costs?

As we've mentioned, the main cost is that it leads to suboptimal decision-making. Like the general who erases the mountain range on the map, then leads the army to a dead end, self-deceivers similarly run the risk of acting on false or missing information.

Luckily, however, we don't have to bear the full brunt of our own deceptions. Typically, at least part of our brain continues to know the truth. In other words, our saving grace is inconsistency.

"To understand most important ideas in psychology," says social psychologist Jonathan Haidt in *The Happiness Hypothesis*, "you need to understand how the mind is divided into parts that sometimes conflict." He goes on:

> We assume that there is one person in each body, but in some ways we are each more like a committee whose members have been thrown together working at cross purposes.[35]

There are dozens of schemes for how to divide up the mind. The Bible identifies the head and the heart. Freud gives us the id, ego, and superego. Iain McGilchrist differentiates the analytical left brain from the holistic right brain,[36] while Douglas Kenrick gives us seven "subselves": Night Watchman, Compulsive Hypochondriac, Team Player, Go-Getter, Swinging Single, Good Spouse, and Nurturing Parent.[37] Meanwhile, the next generation is growing up on Pixar's *Inside Out*, which portrays the mind as a committee of five different emotional personalities.

None of these schemes is unequivocally better or more accurate than the others. They're just different ways of slicing up the same complex system—the reality of which is even more fragmented than the "committee" metaphor suggests. Psychologists call this *modularity*. Instead of a single monolithic process or small committee, modern psychologists see the brain as a patchwork of hundreds or thousands of different parts or "modules," each responsible for a slightly different information-processing task. Some modules take care of low-level tasks like detecting edges in the visual field or flexing a muscle. Others are responsible for medium-sized operations like walking and conjugating verbs. Still higher-level modules (which are themselves composed of many lower-level modules) are responsible for things like detecting cheaters[38] and managing our social impressions.

The point is that there are many different systems in the brain, each connected to other systems but also partially isolated from each other. The artificial intelligence researcher Marvin Minsky famously described this arrangement as the "society of mind."[39] And like a society, there are different ways to carve it up for different purposes. Just as America can be broken down in terms of political factions (liberals vs. conservatives), geography (urban vs. rural, coastal vs. heartland), or generations (Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, Millennials), the mind can also be carved up in many different ways.

And crucially, as Haidt stressed, the different parts don't always agree. A fact might be known to one system and yet be completely concealed or cut off from other systems. Or different systems might contain mutually inconsistent models of the world.

This is illustrated rather dramatically by the rare but well-documented condition known as ***blindsight***, which typically follows from some kind of brain damage, like a stroke to the visual cortex. Just like people who are conventionally blind, blindsighted patients swear they can't see. But when presented with flashcards and forced to guess what's on the card, they do better than chance. Clearly some parts of their brains are registering visual information, even if the parts responsible for conscious awareness are kept in the dark.[40]

What this means for self-deception is that it's possible for our brains to maintain a relatively accurate set of beliefs in systems tasked with *evaluating potential actions*, while keeping those accurate beliefs hidden from the systems (like consciousness) involved in *managing social impressions*. In other words, we can act on information that isn't available to our verbal, conscious egos. And conversely, we can believe something with our conscious egos without necessarily making that information available to the systems charged with coordinating our behavior.

No matter how fervently a person believes in Heaven, for example, she's still going to be afraid of death. This is because the deepest, oldest parts of her brain—those charged with self-preservation—haven't the slightest idea about the afterlife. Nor should they. Self-preservation systems have no business dealing with abstract concepts. They should run on autopilot and be extremely difficult to override (as the difficulty of committing suicide attests[41]). This sort of division of mental labor is simply good mind design. As psychologists Douglas Kenrick and Vladas Griskevicius put it, "Although we're aware of some of the surface motives for our actions, the deep-seated evolutionary motives often remain inaccessible, buried behind the scenes in the subconscious workings of our brains' ancient mechanisms."[42]

Thus the very architecture of our brains makes it possible for us to behave hypocritically—to believe one set of things while acting on another. We can know *and* remain ignorant, as long as it's in separate parts of the brain.[43]

## SELF-DISCRETION

Self-*discretion* is perhaps the most important and subtle mind game that we play with ourselves in the service of manipulating others. This is our mental habit of giving less psychological prominence to potentially damaging information. It differs from the most blatant forms of self-deception, in which we actively lie to ourselves (and believe our own lies). It also differs from strategic ignorance, in which we try our best not to learn potentially dangerous information.

Picture the mind as a society of little modules, systems, and subselves chattering away among themselves. This chatter is largely what constitutes our inner mental life, both conscious and unconscious. Self-discretion, then, consists of *discretion among different brain parts*. When part of the brain has to process a sensitive piece of information—wanting to get the upper hand in a particular interaction, for example—it doesn't necessarily make a big conscious fuss about it. Instead, we might just feel vaguely uneasy until we've gained the upper hand, whereupon we'll feel comfortable ending the conversation. At no point does the motive "Get the upper hand" rise to full conscious attention, but the same result is accomplished discreetly.

Information is sensitive in part because it can threaten our self-image and therefore our social image. So the rest of the brain conspires—whispers—to keep such information from becoming too prominent, especially in consciousness. In this sense, the Freuds were right: the conscious ego needs to be protected. But not because we are fragile, but rather to keep damaging information from leaking out of our brain and into the minds of our associates.

Self-discretion can be very subtle. When we push a thought "deep down" or to the "back of our minds," it's a way of being discreet with potentially damaging information. When we spend more time and attention dwelling on positive, self-flattering information, and less time and attention dwelling on shameful information, that's self-discretion.

Think about that time you wrote an amazing article for the school paper, or gave that killer wedding speech. Did you feel a flush of pride? That's your brain telling you, "This information is good for us! Let's keep it prominent, front and center." Dwell on it, bask in its warm glow. Reward those neural pathways in the hope of resurfacing those proud memories whenever they're relevant.

Now think about the time you mistreated your significant other, or when you were caught stealing as a child, or when you botched a big presentation at work. Feel the pang of shame? That's your brain telling you not to dwell on that particular information. Flinch away, hide from it, pretend it's not there. Punish those neural pathways, so the information stays as discreet as possible.[44]

## GETTING OUR BEARINGS

In summary, our minds are built to sabotage information in order to come out ahead in social games. When big parts of our minds are unaware of how we try to violate social norms, it's more difficult for others to detect and prosecute those violations. This also makes it harder for us to calculate optimal behaviors, but overall, the trade-off is worth it.

Of all the things we might be self-deceived about, the most important are *our own motives*. It's this special form of self-deception that we turn to in the next chapter.

# 6

# Counterfeit Reasons

"Reason is . . . the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."—David Hume[1]

"A man always has two reasons for doing anything: a good reason and the real reason."—J. P. Morgan[2]

**L**et's briefly take stock of the argument we've been making so far. In Chapter 2, we saw how humans (and all other species for that matter) are locked in the game of natural selection, which often rewards selfish, competitive behavior. In Chapter 3, we looked at social norms and saw how they constrain our selfish impulses, but also how norms can be fragile and hard to enforce. In Chapter 4, we looked at the many and subtle ways that humans try to cheat by exploiting the fragility of norm enforcement, largely by being discreet about bad behavior. In Chapter 5, we took a closer look at the most subtle and intriguing of all these norm-evasion techniques: self-deception. "We deceive ourselves," as Robert Trivers says, "the better to deceive others"—in particular, to make it harder for others to catch and prosecute us for behaving badly.

Together, these instincts and predispositions make up the elephant in the brain. They're the facts about ourselves, our behaviors, and our minds that we're uncomfortable acknowledging and confronting directly. It's not that we're entirely or irredeemably selfish and self-deceived—just that we're often rewarded for acting on selfish impulses, but less so for acknowledging them, and that our brains respond predictably to those incentives.

In this chapter, we turn our attention to one particular type of self-deception: the fact that we're strategically ignorant about our own *motives*. In other words, we don't always know the "whys" behind our own behavior. But as we'll see, we certainly pretend to know.

## "I WANTED TO GO GET A COKE"

In the 1960s and early 1970s, neuroscientists Roger Sperry and Michael Gazzaniga conducted some of the most profound research in the history of psychology—a series of experiments that would launch Gazzaniga into an illustrious career as the "grandfather" of cognitive neuroscience,[3] and for which Sperry would eventually win the Nobel Prize in 1981.

In terms of method, the experiments were fairly conventional: an image was flashed, some questions were asked, that sort of thing. What distinguished these experiments were their subjects. These were patients who had previously, for medical reasons, undergone a *corpus callosotomy*—a surgical severing of the nerves that connect the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Hence the nickname for these subjects: *split-brain patients*.

Until Sperry and Gazzaniga's experiments, no one had noticed anything particularly strange about split-brain patients. They were able to walk around leading seemingly normal lives. Neither their doctors nor their loved ones—nor the patients themselves—had noticed that much was amiss.

But things *were* amiss, in a rather peculiar way, as Sperry and Gazzaniga were about to find out.

In order to understand their research, it helps to be familiar with two basic facts about the brain. The first is that each hemisphere processes signals from the *opposite* side of the body. So the left hemisphere controls the right side of the body (the right arm, leg, hand, and everything else), while the right hemisphere controls the left side of the body. This is also true for signals from the ears—the left hemisphere processes sound from the right ear, and vice versa. With the eyes it's a bit more complicated, but the upshot is that when a patient is looking straight ahead, everything to the right—in the right half of the visual field—is processed by the left hemisphere, and everything to the left is processed by the right hemisphere.[4]

The second key fact is that, after a brain is split by a callosotomy, the two hemispheres can no longer share information with each other. In a normal (whole) brain, information flows smoothly back and forth between the hemispheres, but in a split-brain, each hemisphere becomes an island unto itself—almost like two separate people within a single skull.[5]

Now, what Sperry and Gazzaniga did, in a variety of different experimental setups, was ask the *right hemisphere* to do something, but then ask the *left hemisphere* to explain it.

In one setup, they flashed a split-brain patient two different pictures at the same time, one to each hemisphere.

The left hemisphere, for example, saw a picture of a chicken while the right hemisphere saw a picture of a snowy field. The researchers then asked the patient to reach out *with his left hand* and point to a word that best matched the picture he had seen. Since the right hemisphere had seen the picture of the snowy field, the left hand pointed to a shovel—because a shovel goes nicely with snow.

No surprises here. But then the researchers asked the patient to *explain* why he had chosen the shovel. Explanations, and speech generally, are functions of the left hemisphere, and thus the researchers were putting the left hemisphere in an awkward position. The *right hemisphere* alone had seen the snowy field, and it was the right hemisphere's unilateral decision to point to the shovel. The *left hemisphere*, meanwhile, had been left completely out of the loop, but was being asked to justify a decision it took no part in and wasn't privy to.

From the point of view of the left hemisphere, the only legitimate answer would have been, "I don't know." But that's not the answer it gave. Instead, the left hemisphere said it had chosen the shovel because shovels are used for "cleaning out the chicken coop." In other words, the left hemisphere, lacking a real reason to give, *made up a reason on the spot*. It pretended that it had acted on its own—that it had chosen the shovel because of the chicken picture. And it delivered this answer casually and matter-of-factly, fully expecting to be believed, because it had no idea it was making up a story. The left hemisphere, says Gazzaniga, "did not offer its suggestion in a guessing vein but rather as a statement of fact."[6]

In another setup, Sperry and Gazzaniga asked a patient—by way of his right hemisphere (left ear)—to stand up and walk toward the door. Once the patient was out of his chair, they then asked him, out loud, what he was doing, which required a response from his left hemisphere. Again this put the left hemisphere in an awkward position.

Now, *we* know why the patient got out of his chair—because the researchers asked him to, via his right hemisphere. The patient's left hemisphere, however, had no way of knowing this. But instead of saying, "I don't know why I stood up," which would have been the only honest answer, it made up a reason and fobbed it off as the truth:

"I wanted to go get a Coke."

## RATIONALIZATION

What these studies demonstrate is just how effortlessly the brain can rationalize its behavior. Rationalization, sometimes known to neuroscientists as *confabulation*, is the production of fabricated stories made up without any conscious intention to deceive. They're not *lies*, exactly, but neither are they the honest truth.

Humans rationalize about all sorts of things: beliefs, memories, statements of "fact" about the outside world. But few things seem as easy for us to rationalize as our own motives. When we make up stories about things *outside* our minds, we open ourselves up to fact-checking. People can argue with us: "Actually, that's not what happened." But when we make up stories about our own motives, it's much harder for others to question us—outside of a psychology lab, at least. And as we saw in Chapter 3, we have strong incentives to portray our motives in a flattering light, especially when they're the subject of norm enforcement.

Rationalization is a kind of epistemic forgery, if you will. When others ask us to give reasons for our behavior, they're asking about our true, underlying motives. So when we rationalize or confabulate, we're handing out *counterfeit reasons* (see Box 5). We're presenting them as an honest account of our mental machinations, when in fact they're made up from scratch.

> Box 5: "Motives" and "Reasons"
>
> When we use the term "motives," we're referring to the underlying causes of our behavior, whether we're conscious of them or not. "Reasons" are the *verbal explanations* we give to account for our behavior. Reasons can be true, false, or somewhere in between (e.g., cherry-picked).

Even more dramatic examples of rationalization can be elicited from patients suffering from *disability denial*,[7] a rare disorder that occasionally results from a right-hemisphere stroke. In a typical case, the stroke will leave the patient's left arm paralyzed, but—here's the weird part—the patient will completely deny that anything is wrong with his arm, and will manufacture all sorts of strange (counterfeit) excuses for why it's just sitting there, limp and lifeless. The neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran recalls some of the conceptual gymnastics his patients have undertaken in this situation:

> "Oh, doctor, I didn't want to move my arm because I have arthritis in my shoulder and it hurts." Or this is from another patient: "Oh, the medical

students have been prodding me all day and I don't really feel like moving my arm just now."

When asked to raise both hands, one man raised his right hand high into the air and said, when he detected my gaze locked onto his motionless left hand, "Um, as you can see, I'm steadying myself with my left hand in order to raise my right."[8]

Apart from their bizarre denials, these patients are otherwise mentally healthy and intelligent human beings. But no amount of cross-examination can persuade them of what's plainly true—that their left arms are paralyzed. They will confabulate and rationalize and forge counterfeit reasons until they're blue in the face.

Meanwhile, the rest of us—healthy, whole-brained people—are confronted every day with questions that ask us to explain our behavior. *Why did you storm out of the meeting? Why did you break up with your boyfriend? Why haven't you done the dishes? Why did you vote for Barack Obama? Why are you a Christian?* Each of these questions demands a reason, and in most cases we dutifully oblige. But how many of our explanations are legitimate, and how many are counterfeit? Just how pervasive is our tendency to rationalize?

## INTRODUCING THE PRESS SECRETARY

We need to be careful about drawing abrupt conclusions from research on brain-damaged subjects. The fact that stroke victims and split-brain patients confabulate doesn't necessarily imply that healthy, whole-brained humans do the same. The brain is an intricate organ, and it's no surprise that destroying some of its parts, whether by stroke or by surgery, can cause it to behave strangely—to do things it was never designed to do.

So what *is* the brain designed to do?

Well, what Gazzaniga concludes from his years of research, including later work on healthy patients, is that all human brains contain a system he calls the "interpreter module."[9] The job of this module is to interpret or make sense of our experiences by constructing explanations: stories that integrate information about the past and present, and about oneself and the outside world. This interpreter works to the best of its abilities given the information available to it. So in whole-brained patients, when information is flowing freely between the two hemispheres, the explanations produced by the interpreter typically make a lot of sense. But when the information flow breaks down, whether because of brain damage or any other reason, the interpreter is forced to weave more tenuous, inventive explanations, or even whole-cloth fabrications.

The key question regarding the interpreter is this: For whom does it interpret? Is it for an *internal* audience, that is, the rest of the brain, or for an *external* audience, that is, other people? The answer is both, but the outward-facing function is surprisingly important and often underemphasized. This has led many thinkers, including Dan Dennett, Jonathan Haidt, and Robert Kurzban, to give the interpreter module a more memorable name: the Press Secretary (see Box 6).

> Box 6: "Press Secretary"
>
> When we capitalize "Press Secretary," we're referring to the *brain module* responsible for explaining our actions, typically to third parties. The lowercase version of "press secretary" refers to the job held by someone in relation to a president or prime minister.

The idea here is that there's a structural similarity between what the interpreter module does for the brain and what a traditional press secretary does for a president or prime minister. Here's Haidt from *The Righteous Mind*:

> If you want to see post hoc reasoning [i.e., rationalization] in action, just watch the press secretary of a president or prime minister take questions from reporters. No matter how bad the policy, the secretary will find some way to praise or defend it. Reporters then challenge assertions and bring up contradictory quotes from the politician, or even quotes straight from the press secretary on previous days. Sometimes you'll hear an awkward pause as the secretary searches for the right words, but what you'll never hear is: "Hey, that's a great point! Maybe we should rethink this policy."

Press secretaries can't say that because they have no power to make or revise policy. They're simply told what the policy is, and their job is to find evidence and arguments that will justify the policy to the public.[10]

Press secretaries—along with their corporate cousins, public relations teams—fill an interesting niche at the boundary between organizations and the outside world. They're close enough to the actual decision-makers to be privy to *some* important details, but not close enough to get the full scoop. In fact, many press secretaries excel at their jobs with remarkably little contact with the president.[11] Crucially, however, when talking to the press, they don't differentiate between answers based on privileged information and answers that are mere educated guesses. They don't say, "I *think* this is what the administration is doing." They speak authoritatively—like the left hemisphere of the split-brain patient who declared, "I wanted to go get a Coke." In fact, press secretaries actively

exploit this ambiguity, hoping their educated guesses will be taken for matters of fact. Their job is to give explanations that are sometimes genuine and sometimes counterfeit, and to make it all but impossible for their audiences to tell the difference.

Press secretaries also provide a buffer between the president and reporters probing for sensitive, potentially damaging information. Remember how knowledge can sometimes be dangerous? Press secretaries can use strategic ignorance to their advantage in ways that a president, who must typically remain informed, can't. In particular, what press secretaries don't know, they can't accidentally betray to the press. "I do my best work," says William Bailey, the fictional press secretary on TV's *The West Wing*, "when I'm the least-informed person in the room."

This is what makes the role of press secretary so hazardous—epistemically if not also morally. It's structured to deliver counterfeit explanations, but also to make those explanations hard to detect, which is as close as you can get without actually lying.

Press secretaries and public relations teams exist in the world because they're incredibly useful to the organizations that employ them. They're a natural response to the mixed-motive incentives that organizations face within their broader ecosystems. And the argument that Kurzban, Dennett, and others have made is that our brains respond to the same incentives by developing a module analogous to a president's press secretary.

Above all, it's the job of our brain's Press Secretary to avoid acknowledging our darker motives—to tiptoe around the elephant in the brain. Just as a president's press secretary should never acknowledge that the president is pursuing a policy in order to get reelected or to appease his financial backers, our brain's Press Secretary will be reluctant to admit that we're doing things for purely personal gain, especially when that gain may come at the expense of others. To the extent that we have such motives, the Press Secretary would be wise to remain strategically ignorant of them.

What's more—and this is where things might start to get uncomfortable—there's a very real sense in which *we* are the Press Secretaries within our minds. In other words, the parts of the mind that we identify with, the parts we think of as our conscious selves ("I," "myself," "my conscious ego"), are the ones responsible for strategically spinning the truth for an external audience.

This realization flies in the face of common sense. In everyday life, there's a strong bias toward treating the self as the mind's ultimate decision-maker—the iron-fisted monarch, or what Dennett calls the mind's Boss or Central Executive.[12] As Harry Truman said about his presidency, "The buck stops here"—and we often imagine the same is true of the self. But the conclusion from the past 40 years of social psychology is that the self acts less like an autocrat and more like a press secretary. In many ways, its job—*our* job—isn't to make decisions, but simply to defend them. "You are not the king of your brain," says Steven Kaas. "You are the creepy guy standing next to the king going, 'A most judicious choice, sire.' "

In other words, even *we* don't have particularly privileged access to the information and decision-making that goes on inside our minds. We think we're pretty good at introspection, but that's largely an illusion. In a way we're almost like outsiders within our own minds.

Perhaps no one understands this conclusion better than Timothy Wilson, a social psychologist who's made a long career studying the perils of introspection. Starting with an influential paper published in 1977[13] and culminating in his book *Strangers to Ourselves*, published in 2002, Wilson has meticulously documented how shockingly little we understand about our own minds.

Wilson writes about the "adaptive unconscious," the parts of the mind which lie outside the scope of conscious awareness, but which nevertheless give rise to many of our judgments, emotions, thoughts, and even behaviors. "To the extent that people's responses are caused by the adaptive unconscious," writes Wilson, "they do not have privileged access to the causes and must infer them." He goes on:

> Despite the vast amount of information people have, their explanations about the causes of their responses are no more accurate than the explanations of a complete stranger who lives in the same culture.[14]

This, then, is the key sleight-of-hand at the heart of our psychosocial problems: We pretend we're in charge, both to others and even to ourselves, but we're less in charge than we think. We pose as privileged insiders, when in fact we're often making the same kind of educated guesses that any informed outsider could make. We claim to know our own minds, when, as Wilson says, we're more like "strangers to ourselves."

The upshot is that every time we give a reason, there's a risk we're just making things up. Every "because" clause, every answer to a "Why?" question, every justification or explanation of a motive—*every one of these is suspect*. Not all will turn out to be rationalizations, but any of them could be, and a great many are.

## SNEAKING PAST THE GATEKEEPER

For those of us who want to understand what's really going on in our minds, the Press Secretary module poses a problem. It acts as a gatekeeper, an information broker, helping the rest of the brain (the "administration") conceal its secrets by presenting the most positive, defensible face to the outside world. We'd like to peer inside the mind—to understand what the administration is up to—but the Press Secretary controls so much of the information flow, and it's a notorious spin doctor.

Our challenge in this chapter, then, as well the rest of the book, is to sneak past the gatekeeper,[15] to catch a glimpse of what's really going on in the mind, behind the Press Secretary's smoke screen. We've already seen one fruitful approach: studying split-brain patients and stroke victims. In such patients, the Press Secretary is partially incapacitated, cut off from vital sources of information that would normally be available to it. But there's another time-honored approach to sneaking past the gatekeeper—misdirecting it.

One of the striking facts about social psychology is how many experiments rely on an element of misdirection. It's almost as if the entire field is based on the art of distracting the Press Secretary in order to expose its rationalizations.

In one classic study, researchers sent subjects home with boxes of three "different" laundry detergents, and asked them to evaluate which worked best on delicate clothes.[16] All three detergents were identical, though the subjects had no idea. Crucially, however, the three *boxes* were different. One was a plain yellow, another blue, and the third was blue with "splashes of yellow."

In their evaluations, subjects expressed concerns about the first two detergents and showed a distinct preference for the third. They said that the detergent in the yellow box was "too strong" and that it ruined their clothes. The detergent in the blue box, meanwhile, left their clothes looking dirty. The detergent in the third box (blue with yellow splashes), however, had a "fine" and "wonderful" effect on their delicate clothes.

Here again, as in the split-brain experiments, *we* (third parties with privileged information) know what's really going on. The subjects simply preferred the blue-and-yellow *box*. But because they were asked to evaluate the *detergents*, and because they thought the detergents were actually different, their Press Secretaries were tricked into making up counterfeit explanations.

Analogous studies involving other products, like wine and pantyhose, have found similar results.[17] The experimental deception in all these studies is the same: An identical product is presented as many "different" products in order to measure how suggestible people are to packaging, presentation, brand, and other framing effects. In each case, the Press Secretary makes up reasons it thinks are legitimate: "Oh, *this* wine is a lot sweeter," or "*These* pantyhose are so smooth." But since the products are identical, we know the reasons must be rationalizations.[18]

In an even more deceptive experiment, researchers showed male subjects pairs of photos of female faces. For each pair, the subjects were asked to point to the face they found more attractive. What the subjects didn't realize is that, after they pointed to their chosen photograph, the researcher used sleight of hand to slip them the *other* photograph, the one they *didn't* choose. The subjects were then asked to explain their "choice." Not only did a clear majority of participants fail to notice the switch, but after being given the wrong photograph, they often proceeded to give concrete and specific reasons for their "choice." "She looks like an aunt of mine I think, and she seems nicer than the other one." Or "She's radiant. I would rather have approached her at a bar than the other one. I like earrings!" (The other woman, the subject's actual choice, was not wearing earrings.) Even under the best conditions—unlimited time to make the choice, pairs of women with different hair colors or styles—the subjects realized they had been deceived only about a third of the time. In most trials, the subject's Press Secretary was perfectly happy to rationalize a decision the subject didn't actually make.[19]

Another technique involves detecting counterfeit reasons *statistically*. Here the idea is to split people into two groups, vary a parameter or two between the groups, then notice how the groups give conflicting reasons for their behavior. Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson gave a great demonstration of this technique in the 1977 study we mentioned earlier ("Telling More Than We Can Know"). Subjects were split into two groups. Each group watched a short video of a teacher with a foreign accent, then rated the teacher's overall likability as well as his appearance, mannerisms, and accent. The only difference between the two groups was the way the teacher related to his students. In one group, he was warm and friendly; in the other group, cold and hostile. Otherwise his appearance, mannerisms, and accent were the same.

Subjects in the warm condition obviously liked the teacher more—and, because of the halo effect, they also rated his other attributes higher. But when subjects were asked whether the teacher's overall likability had influenced their judgments about his other attributes, they strongly denied it. In fact, many of them said it was the other way around—that it was the teacher's appearance, mannerisms, and accent that determined whether they liked him. In other

words, subjects couldn't "see" that it was actually the teacher's behavior that had influenced their judgments, and so instead many of them made up bogus explanations for how they had formed their opinions.[20]

## RATIONALIZATION IN REAL LIFE

We've seen how to catch rationalizations in the lab. Now our task is to spot this kind of behavior in the wild.

Let's start with a simple case involving Kevin's nephew Landon. Here's the scene: It's 8 p.m. and time for Landon to go to bed. He's three years old and in the midst of potty training. His mom asks if he needs to use the toilet before tucking him in for the night. Landon says no, so she gives him a kiss, turns out the light, and shuts the door. Five minutes later he calls out, "Mommy, I need to go potty!" She takes him to the bathroom and then back to bed. But five minutes later he's calling again, "Mommy, I need to go potty!"

At this point, we can roll our eyes. Clearly Landon doesn't need to use the bathroom. And he's far from alone in this behavior. On parenting forums, some moms even describe perfectly potty-trained children who, after being denied their third or fourth consecutive bathroom request, will wet themselves (just a bit) to prove how serious they are. But they aren't fooling anyone; no one with a healthy bladder needs to pee that frequently. Instead these toddlers simply don't want to go to sleep—that's their true motive—and they're using "potty" as a bedtime stalling tactic. It's an excuse, a pretext, a counterfeit reason.

Adults, of course, are more cunning about their counterfeit reasons, and it's commensurately harder to catch them in the act. Adult Press Secretaries are highly trained professionals, their skills honed through years of hard experience; above all, they know how to give rationalizations that are *plausible*. And thus when we (outsiders) are faced with a suspicious reason, it's almost impossible to prove that it's counterfeit. Remember people are often convinced they're telling the truth, and they'll sometimes go to great lengths to prove it—not unlike a toddler wetting herself to "prove" that her bathroom need was legitimate.

We, your two coauthors, can also give examples from our own lives. Robin, for example, has often said his main goal in academic life is to get his ideas "out there" in the name of intellectual progress. But then he began to realize that whenever he spotted his ideas "out there" without proper attribution, he had mixed feelings. In part, he felt annoyed and cheated. If his main goal was actually to advance the world's knowledge, he should have been celebrating the wider circulation of his ideas, whether or not he got credit for them. But the more honest conclusion is that he wants individual prestige just as much as, if not more than, impersonal intellectual progress.

Shortly after his 23rd birthday, Kevin was diagnosed with Crohn's disease. For a while he was extremely reluctant to talk about it (except among family and close friends), a reluctance he rationalized by telling himself that he's simply a "private person" who doesn't like sharing private medical details with the world. Later he started following a very strict diet to treat his disease—a diet that eliminates processed foods and refined carbohydrates. Eating so healthy quickly became a point of pride, and suddenly Kevin found himself perfectly happy to share his diagnosis, since it also gave him an opportunity to brag about his diet. Being a "private person" about medical details went right out the window—and now, look, here he is sharing his diagnosis (and diet!) with perfect strangers in this book.

These two examples illustrate one of the most effective ways to rationalize, which is telling half-truths. In other words, we cherry-pick our most acceptable, prosocial reasons while concealing the uglier ones. Robin really *does* want to get his ideas out there, and Kevin really *is* a private person. But these two explanations aren't the full story.

To identify other examples, we'll have to relax our standards of proof. It's hard to accuse a particular reason of being counterfeit—that's the whole point; we can never be perfectly certain—but here we appeal to our readers' common sense and lived experience. We all know that this happens. And even if some of these examples aren't airtight, we hope they'll give the general flavor of how people use and abuse reasons:

- Parents will often enforce kids' bedtimes "for their own good," when a self-serving motive seems just as likely—that parents simply want an hour or two of peace and quiet without the kids. Of course, many parents genuinely believe that bedtimes are good for their children, but that belief is self-serving enough that we should be skeptical that it's the full story.
- Minor impediments are often exaggerated to avoid unwanted social encounters: "I'm not feeling well today" as an excuse not to go work, for example, or "I'm too busy" to decline a meeting. Typically there's a grain of truth to these reasons, but it's often exaggerated, and meanwhile other reasons (e.g., "I simply don't want to") are conveniently omitted.
- People who download copyrighted material—songs, movies, books—often rationalize their actions by saying, "Faceless corporations take most of the profits from artists anyway." The fact that most of these people wouldn't

dream of stealing CDs or DVDs from Best Buy (an equally faceless corporate entity) attests to a different explanation for their behavior, which is that online, they feel anonymous and are less afraid of getting caught.

The point is, we have many reasons for our behaviors, but we habitually accentuate and exaggerate our pretty, prosocial motives and downplay our ugly, selfish ones.[21]

## GETTING OUR BEARINGS

So far in this book, our focus has been mostly theoretical. We've tried to explain *why* we often hide our motives, even from ourselves. But merely knowing that hidden motives exist doesn't tell us how widespread they are, nor how big are their effects. For that, we have to turn outward to our behavior and institutions.

In the chapters that follow, we'll examine many different areas of life. For each area, we'll suggest that our visible motives—the usual motives we claim to have—don't seem adequate to explain our behaviors, and that other quite different motives often explain our behaviors better.

As you read the chapters that make up Part II of this book, feel free to jump around. Each chapter stands more or less on its own, so you can read what interests you and skip what doesn't. To recap the relevant section from the table of contents:



(And don't forget the conclusion in Chapter 17 at the very end.)

For better or worse, this book is extremely wide-ranging. In most of the fields we discuss, we—your two coauthors—are relative amateurs. We've tried our best to learn the relevant literature, but we could only read so much; no doubt we're missing a lot of important information. Most of our claims, therefore, and especially the controversial ones, are taken from experts in each field. Of course, we realize that a few expert opinions don't necessarily reflect a consensus among all experts—nor, it should be noted, is consensus opinion necessarily the truth. If we seem to have selectively chosen our sources and evidence, then it's probably because we have. So we are no doubt wrong in many places, not just in the details, but also in some larger conclusions.

Our main goal is to demonstrate that hidden motives are common and important—that they're more than a minor correction to the alternate theory that people mostly do things for the reasons that they give. For this purpose, we don't need to be right about everything. In fact, we expect most readers to buy only about 70 percent of what we're selling—and we're OK with that. Where we're lacking in perspective, we expect that others will widen our view and point out our mistakes. But we hope our overall thesis can withstand these individual corrections.

That said, let's now set out to investigate specific behaviors and institutions, starting with body language.