

This file contains a version of chapter 4 from the book *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding modern truth in ancient wisdom*,¹ by Jonathan Haidt. This version has been edited slightly to be used as a stand-alone reading as part of the OpenMind Library. If you want to skim the chapter, you can just read the **highlighted sections**

Chapter 1 of the book develops the metaphor that the mind is divided like a small rider (conscious reasoning, or “System 2”) on the back of a large elephant (all the automatic intuitive processes that occur rapidly and often outside of conscious awareness, also known as “System 1”). The rider-and-elephant metaphor is helpful for understanding why it’s almost impossible to win a political argument: each person’s “rider” composes arguments aimed at the other person’s rider, but the elephant is really in charge. Unless you can change the elephant, you can’t persuade the other person.

Chapter 4: The Faults of Others

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye. (Matthew 7:3-5)

It is easy to see the faults of others, but difficult to see one’s own faults. One shows the faults of others like chaff winnowed in the wind, but one conceals one’s own faults as a cunning gambler conceals his dice. (Buddha²)

It’s fun to laugh at a hypocrite, and recent years have given Americans a great deal to laugh at. Take the case of a US Congressman who was an outspoken opponent of gay rights, gay marriage, and of gays serving in the military. Speaking of the horrors of such co-service, he said “I mean, they are in the showers with you, they are in the dining hall with you³.” In August 2004, audio tapes were made public of the messages that the Congressman had left on an interactive

¹ © 2006 by Jonathan Haidt. Published by Basic Books. The text here is the draft submitted for copyediting

² *Dhammapada*, verse 252, in Mascaro, 1973.

³ Reported in *The Washington Post*, 9/2/04, pg. A22

phone sex line. The Congressman described the anatomical features of the kind of man he was seeking, along with the acts he was interested in performing.

There is a special pleasure in the irony of a moralist brought down for the very moral failings he had condemned. It's the pleasure of a well-told joke. Some jokes are funny as one-liners, but most require three verses, three guys, say, who walk into a bar one at a time, or a priest, a minister and a rabbi in a lifeboat. The first two set the pattern, and the third violates it. With hypocrisy, the hypocrite's prior preaching is the setup, the hypocritical action is the punch line. Scandal is great entertainment because it allows people to feel contempt, a moral emotion that gives feelings of moral superiority while asking nothing in return. With contempt you don't need to right the wrong (as with anger) or flee the scene (as with fear or disgust). And best of all, contempt is made to share. Stories about the moral failings of others are among the most common kinds of gossip⁴, they are a staple of talk radio, and they offer a ready way for people to show that they share a common moral orientation. Tell an acquaintance a cynical or critical story that ends with both of you smirking and shaking your heads and voila, you've got a bond.

Well, stop smirking. One of the most universal pieces of advice from across cultures and eras is that we are all hypocrites, and in our condemnation of others' hypocrisy we only compound our own. Social psychologists have recently isolated the mechanisms that make us blind to the logs in our own eyes. The moral implications of these findings are disturbing, challenging our greatest moral certainties. But the implications can be liberating too; freeing you from destructive moralism and divisive self-righteousness.

Keeping up Appearances

Research on the evolution of altruism and cooperation has relied heavily on studies in which multiple people (or people simulated on a computer) play a game in which, on each round of play, they interact with a single other player and can choose to be cooperative (thereby expanding the pie they then share) or greedy (grabbing as much as possible for themselves). After many rounds of play, you count up the number of points each player accumulated and see which strategy was most profitable in the long run. In these games, which are intended to be simple models of the game of life, no strategy ever beats tit-for-tat⁵. In the long run and across a variety of environments, it pays to cooperate while remaining vigilant to the danger of being cheated. But those simple games are in some ways simple minded. Players face a binary choice at each point: cooperate or defect. Each player then reacts to what the other player did in the previous round. In real life, however, you don't react to what someone did; you react only to what you *think* she did, and the gap between action and perception is bridged by the art of

⁴ Hom and Haidt, in preparation.

⁵ For extensive discussions of the prisoner's dilemma game, see Axelrod, 1984; Wright, 1994.

impression management. If life itself is but what you deem it, then why not focus your efforts on getting others to *believe* that you are a virtuous and trustworthy cooperator? Thus Niccolo Machiavelli, whose name has become synonymous with the cunning and amoral use of power, wrote 500 years ago that “*the great majority of mankind are satisfied with appearance, as though they were realities, and are often more influenced by the things that seem than by those that are*”⁶. Natural selection, like politics, works by the principle of survival of the fittest, and several researchers have argued that human beings evolved to play the game of life in a Machiavellian way.⁷ The Machiavellian version of tit-for-tat, for example, is to do all you can to cultivate the *reputation* of a trustworthy yet vigilant partner, whatever your reality may be.

The simplest way to cultivate a reputation for being fair is to really be fair, but life and psychology experiments sometimes force us to choose between appearance and reality. Dan Batson at the University of Kansas devised a clever way to make people choose, and his results are not pretty. He brought students into his lab one at a time to take part in what they thought was a study of how people work in teams, depending on whether they are rewarded or not.⁸ The procedure was explained: one member of each team of two gets rewarded for correct responses to questions with a raffle ticket that could win a valuable prize. The other member gets nothing. Subjects were also told that an additional part of the experiment concerned the effects of control, so you, the subject, get to decide which of you gets rewarded, which of you gets nothing. Your partner is already here, in another room, and you will not meet. Your partner will be told that the decision was made by chance. You can make the decision in any way you like. Oh, and here is a coin. Most people in this study seem to think that flipping the coin is the fairest way to make the decision.

Subjects are then left alone to choose. About half of them used the coin. Batson knows this because the coin was wrapped in a plastic bag, and half of the bags were ripped open. Of those who did not flip the coin, 90 percent chose the positive task for themselves. For those who did flip the coin, the laws of probability were suspended and 90 percent of them chose the positive task for themselves. Batson had given all of the subjects a variety of questionnaires about morality weeks earlier (the subjects were students in psychology classes), so he was able to check how various measures of moral personality predicted behavior. His finding: people who reported being most concerned about caring for others and about issues of social responsibility were more likely to open the bag, but they were not more likely to give the other person the positive task. In other words, people who think they are particularly moral are in fact more likely

⁶ Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, 1.25.

⁷ Byrne and Whiten, 1988.

⁸ Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf and Wilson, 1997; Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney and Strongman, 1999.

to “do the right thing” and flip the coin, but when the coin flip comes out against them, they find a way to ignore it and follow their self interest. Batson called this tendency to value the appearance of morality over the reality “moral hypocrisy.”

Batson’s subjects who flipped the coin reported (on a questionnaire) that they had made the decision in an ethical way. After his first study, Batson wondered if perhaps people tricked themselves by not stating clearly what heads or tails would mean (“lets see, heads, that means, um, oh yeah, I get the good one.”). But when he labeled the 2 sides of the coin to erase any ambiguity, it made no difference. The only manipulation that had an effect was to place a large mirror in the room, right in front of the subject, and at the same time to stress the importance of fairness in the instructions. In this case, when people were forced to think about fairness and could see themselves cheating, they stopped doing it. As Jesus and Buddha said in the opening epigraphs of this chapter, it is easy to spot a cheater when our eyes are looking outward, but hard when looking inward. Folk wisdom from around the world concurs:

Though you see the seven defects of others, we do not see our own ten defects (Japanese proverb⁹)

A he-goat doesn’t realize that he smells. (Nigerian proverb¹⁰)

Proving that people are selfish, or that they’ll sometimes cheat when they know they can’t get caught, seems like a good way to get an article into the *Journal of Incredibly Obvious Results*. But what’s not so obvious is that, in nearly all of these studies, people don’t think that they are doing anything wrong. It’s the same in real life. From the person who cuts you off on the highway all the way to the Nazis who ran the concentration camps, most people think they are good people with good reasons for their actions. Machiavellian tit-for-tat requires devotion to appearances, including protestations of one’s virtue even when one chooses vice. And such protestations are most effective when the person making them really believes them. As Robert Wright put it in his masterful book *The Moral Animal*, “human beings are a species splendid in their array of moral equipment, tragic in their propensity to misuse it, and pathetic in their constitutional ignorance of the misuse¹¹.”

If Wright is correct about our “constitutional ignorance” of our hypocrisy, then the sages’ admonition to stop smirking may be no more effective than telling a depressed person to snap out of it. As I said in chapter 2, you can’t change your mental filters by will power alone, you have

⁹ Buchanan, 1965, p.53.

¹⁰ Pachocinski, 1996, p.222.

¹¹ Wright, 1994, p.13.

to engage in activities such as meditation or cognitive therapy that train the elephant. But at least a depressed person will usually admit she's depressed. Curing hypocrisy is much harder because part of the problem is that we don't believe there's a problem. We are well-armed for battle in a Machiavellian world of reputation manipulation, and one of our most important weapons is the delusion that we are non-combatants. How do we get away with it?

Find Your Inner Lawyer

In my studies of moral judgment, I have found that people are skilled at finding reasons to support their gut feelings: the rider acts like a lawyer whom the elephant has hired to represent it in the court of public opinion. One of the reasons people are often contemptuous of lawyers is that they fight for a client's interests, not for the truth. To be a good lawyer, it often helps to be a good liar. Although many lawyers won't tell a direct lie, most will do what they can to hide inconvenient facts while weaving a plausible alternative story for the judge and jury, a story that they sometimes know is not true. Our inner lawyer works in the same way, except that, somehow, we actually believe the stories he makes up. To understand his ways we must catch him in action; we must observe him carrying out low pressure as well as high pressure assignments.

People sometimes call their lawyers to check whether a particular course of action is OK. No pressure, just tell me if I can do this. The lawyer looks into the relevant laws and procedures and calls back with a verdict: yes, there is a legal or regulatory precedent for that; or perhaps no, as your lawyer I would advise against such a course. A really good lawyer might look at all sides of a question, think about all possible ramifications, and recommend alternative courses of action, but such thoroughness depends in part on his client -- does she really want advice, or does she just want to be given a red or a green light for her plan?

Studies of everyday reasoning show that the elephant is not a very inquisitive client. When people are given difficult questions to think about – for example, should the minimum wage be raised? – they generally lean one way or the other right away, and then put a call in to reasoning to see if there is support for that position. For example, a person whose first instinct is that the minimum wage should be raised looks around for supporting evidence. If she thinks of her Aunt Flo who is working for the minimum wage and can't support her family on it then yes, that means the minimum wage should be raised. All done. Deanna Kuhn¹², a cognitive psychologist who has studied reasoning carefully, found that most people readily offered "pseudoevidence" like the anecdote about Aunt Flo. Most people gave no real evidence for their positions, and most made no effort to look for evidence opposing their initial positions. David

¹² Kuhn, 1991.

Perkins¹³, a Harvard psychologist who has devoted his career to improving reasoning, found the same thing. He says that thinking generally uses the “makes-sense” stopping rule. We take a position, look for evidence that supports it, and if we find any evidence – enough so that our position “makes sense” -- we stop thinking. But at least in a low pressure situation such as this, if someone *else* brings up reasons and evidence on the other side, people can be induced to change their minds; they just don’t make any effort to do such thinking for themselves.

Now let’s crank up the pressure. The client has been caught cheating on her taxes. She calls her lawyer. She doesn’t confess and ask “Was that OK?” She says “Do something.” The lawyer bolts into action, assessing the damaging evidence, researching precedents and loopholes, and figuring out how some personal expenses might be plausibly justified as business expenses. In this case the lawyer has been given an order: use all your powers to defend me. Studies of “motivated reasoning¹⁴” show that people who are motivated to reach a particular conclusion are even worse reasoners than those in Kuhn’s and Perkins’ studies, but the mechanism is basically the same: a one-sided search for supporting evidence only. People who are told that they just performed poorly on a test of social intelligence think extra hard to find reasons to discount the test; people who are asked to read a study showing that one of their habits – such as drinking coffee -- is unhealthy think extra hard to find flaws in the study, flaws that non-coffee drinkers don’t notice. Over and over again, studies show that people set out on a cognitive mission to bring back reasons to support their preferred belief or action. And because we are usually successful in this mission, we end up with the illusion of objectivity. We really believe that our position is rationally and objectively justified.

Ben Franklin, as usual, was wise to our tricks. But he showed unusual insight in catching himself in the act. Though he had been a vegetarian on principle, on one long sea crossing the men were grilling fish, and his mouth started watering.

I balanc'd some time between principle and inclination, till I recollectd that, when the fish were opened, I saw smaller fish taken out of their stomachs; then thought I, 'if you eat one another, I don't see why we mayn't eat you.' So I din'd upon cod very heartily, and continued to eat with other people, returning only now and then occasionally to a vegetable diet¹⁵.

Franklin concluded: “So convenient a thing is it to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for every thing one has a mind to do.”

¹³ Perkins, Farady and Bushey, 1991.

¹⁴ Kunda, 1990; Pyszczynski and Greenberg, 1987.

¹⁵ Franklin, 1962, p.43.

The Rose-Colored Mirror

I don't want to blame everything on the lawyer. The lawyer is, after all, the rider – your conscious, reasoning self; and he is taking orders from the elephant – your automatic and unconscious self. The two are in cahoots to win at the game of life by playing Machiavellian tit-for-tat, and both are in denial that they are doing so.

To win at this game you must present your best possible self to others. You must appear virtuous, whether or not you are, and you must gain the benefits of cooperation whether or not you deserve them. But of course everyone else is playing the same game, so you must also play defense – you must be wary of others' self-presentations, and of their efforts to claim more for themselves than they deserve. Social life is therefore always a game of social comparison. We must always compare ourselves and our actions to those of other people, and we must somehow spin those comparisons in our favor. (In depression part of the illness is that spin goes the other way, as described by Aaron Beck's cognitive triad: I'm bad, the world is terrible, and my future is bleak.) You can spin a comparison either by inflating your own claims or by disparaging the claims of others. You might expect, given what I've said so far, that we do both, but the consistent finding of psychological research is that we are fairly accurate in our perceptions of others. It's our self-perceptions that are distorted, because we look at ourselves in a rose colored mirror.

In Garrison Keillor's mythical town of Lake Wobegon, all the women are strong, all the men good-looking, and all the children above average. But if the Wobegonians were real people they would go further: most of them would believe they were stronger, better looking, or smarter than the average Wobegonian. When Americans and Europeans are asked to rate themselves on virtues, skills, or other desirable traits (including intelligence, driving ability, sexual skills, and ethics), a large majority say they are above average.¹⁶ (This effect is weaker in East Asian countries, and may not exist in Japan.¹⁷)

In a brilliant series of experiments¹⁸, Nick Epley and David Dunning figured out how we do it. They asked students at Cornell University to predict how many flowers they would buy in an upcoming charity event, and how many the average Cornell student would buy. Then they looked at actual behavior. People had greatly overestimated their own virtue, but were pretty close on their guesses about others. In a second study, Epley and Dunning asked people to predict what they would do in a game that could be played for money either selfishly or cooperatively. Same findings: 84 percent predicted that they'd cooperate, but the subjects

¹⁶ Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak and Vredenburg, 1995; Hoorens, 1993.

¹⁷ Heine and Lehman, 1999; Markus and Kitayama, 1991.

¹⁸ Epley and Dunning, 2000.

expected that only 64 percent of others would cooperate. When they ran the real game, 61 percent cooperated. In a third study Epley and Dunning paid people \$5 for participating in an experiment and then asked them to predict how much of the money they and others would donate, hypothetically, had they been given a particular charitable appeal after the study. People said (on average) they'd donate \$2.44, while others would donate only \$1.83. But when the study was re-run with a real request to give money, the average gift was \$1.53. In their most clever study, the researchers described the details of the third study to a new group of subjects and asked them to predict how much money they would donate if they had been in the "real" condition, and how much money other Cornell students would donate, on average. Once again, subjects predicted they'd be much more generous than others. But then subjects saw the actual amounts of money donated by real subjects from the third study, revealed to them one at a time (and averaging \$1.53). After getting this new information, subjects were given a chance to revise their estimates, and they did. They lowered their estimates of what others would give, but they did not change their estimates of what they themselves would give. In other words, subjects used baserate information properly to revise their predictions of *others*, but they refused to apply it to their rosy self-assessments. We judge others by their behavior, but we think we have special information about ourselves – we know what we are "really like" inside, so we can easily find ways to explain away our selfish acts and cling to the illusion that we are better than others.

Ambiguity aids and abets the illusion. On many traits, such as leadership, there are so many ways to define it that one is free to pick the criteria that will most flatter oneself. If I'm confident, then I can define leadership as confidence. If I think I'm high on people skills, I can define leadership as the ability to understand and then influence people. When comparing ourselves to others, the general process is: frame the question (unconsciously, automatically) so that the trait in question is related to a self-perceived strength, then go out and look for evidence that you have the strength in question. Once you find a piece of evidence, once you have a "makes-sense" story, you are done. You can stop thinking, and revel in your self-esteem. It's no wonder, then, that in a study of 1 million American high school students, 70 percent thought they were above average on leadership ability, while only 2 percent thought they were below average. Everyone can find *some* skill that might be construed as related to leadership, and then find *some* piece of evidence that one has that skill¹⁹. (College professors are less wise than high school students in this respect – 94 percent of us think we do above average work.) But when there is little room for ambiguity – how tall are you? how good are you at juggling? – people tend to be much more modest.

If the only effect of these rampant esteem-inflating biases was to make people feel good

¹⁹ This analysis of leadership, and the studies cited in this paragraph come from Dunning, Meyerowitz and Holzberg, 2002.

about themselves, they might not be a problem. In fact, there is abundant evidence that people who hold pervasive positive illusions about themselves, their abilities, and their future prospects, are mentally healthier, happier, and better liked than people who lack such illusions²⁰. But such biases can make people feel that they deserve more than they do, thereby setting the stage for endless disputes with other people who feel equally over-entitled.

I fought endlessly with my first year college roommates. I had provided much of our furniture, including the highly valued refrigerator, and I did most of the work keeping our common space clean. After a while I got tired of doing more than my share, and I stopped, letting the space get messy until someone else picked up the slack. Nobody did. But they did pick up my resentment, and it united them in their hatred of me. The next year, when we no longer lived together, we became close friends.

When my father drove me and my refrigerator up to college that first year, he told me that the most important things I was going to learn I would not learn in the classroom, and he was right. It took many more years of living with roommates, but I finally realized what a fool I had made of myself that first year. Of course I thought I did more than my share. While I was aware of every single thing I did for the group, I was aware of only a portion of everyone else's contributions. And even if I had been correct in my accounting, I was self-righteous in setting up the accounting categories. I picked the things I cared about – such as keeping the refrigerator clean – and then gave myself an A+ in that category. As with other kinds of social comparison, ambiguity allows us to set up the comparison in ways that favor ourselves, and then to seek evidence that we are excellent cooperators. Studies of such “unconscious overclaiming” show that when husbands and wives estimate the percentage of housework each does, their estimates total over 120 percent²¹. When MBA students in a work group make estimates of their contributions to the team, the estimates total 139 percent²². Whenever people form cooperative groups, which are usually of mutual benefit, self-serving biases threaten to fill group members with mutual resentment.

I'm Right; You're Biased

If spouses, colleagues, and roommates so easily descend into resentment, things only get worse when people who lack affection or shared goals have to negotiate. Vast societal resources are expended on litigation, labor strikes, divorce disputes, and violence after failed peace talks because the same self-serving biases are at work fomenting hypocritical indignation. In these high-pressure situations, the lawyers (real and metaphorical) are working round the clock to spin

²⁰ Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage and McDowell, 2003.

²¹ Ross and Sicoly, 1979.

²² Epley and Caruso, 2004.

and distort the case in their clients' favor. George Loewenstein²³ and his colleagues at Carnegie Mellon found a way to study the process by giving pairs of research subjects a real legal case to read (about a motorcycle accident in Texas), assigning one subject to play the defendant and one the plaintiff, and then giving them real money to negotiate with. Each pair was told to reach a fair agreement and warned that, if they failed to agree, a settlement would be imposed and “court costs” deducted from the pool of money, leaving both players worse off. When both players knew what role each was to play from the start, each read the case materials differently, made different guesses about what settlement the judge in the real case imposed, and argued in a biased way. More than a quarter of all pairs failed to reach any agreement. However, when the players didn't know what role they were to play until after reading all the materials, they became much more reasonable, and only 6 percent of pairs failed to settle.

Recognizing that hiding negotiators' identities from them until the last minute is not really an option in the real world, Loewenstein set out to find ways to “de-bias” negotiators who do know their identities from the start. He tried having subjects read a short essay about the kinds of self-serving biases that affect people in their situation, to see if subjects could correct for the biases. No dice. While the subjects used the information to predict their opponent's behavior more accurately, they did not change their own biases at all. As Epley and Dunning had found, people really are open to information that will predict the behavior of others, but they refuse to adjust their self-assessments. In another study, Loewenstein followed the advice often given by marriage therapists to have each subject first write an essay arguing the other person's case as convincingly as possible. Even worse than no dice. The manipulation backfired, perhaps because thinking about your opponent's arguments automatically triggers additional thinking on your own part, gearing up to refute it.

One manipulation did work. When subjects read the essay about self-serving biases and were then asked to write an essay about weaknesses in *their own* case, their previous righteousness was shaken. Subjects in this study were just as fair-minded as those who only learned their identities at the last minute. But before you get too optimistic about this technique for reducing hypocrisy, you should realize that Loewenstein was asking subjects to find weaknesses in their cases – in the positions they were arguing for – not in their characters. When you try to get people to look at their own personal picture of Dorian Gray they put up a much bigger fight. Emily Pronin of Princeton and Lee Ross at Stanford have tried to get people to overcome their self-serving biases by teaching them about biases and then asking “OK, now that you know about these biases, do you want to change what you just said about yourself?” Across many studies, the results were the same²⁴: people were quite happy to learn about the various

²³ Babcock and Loewenstein, 1997.

²⁴ Pronin, Lin and Ross, 2002.

forms of self-serving bias and then apply their newfound knowledge to predict others' responses. But their self ratings were unaffected. Even when you grab people by the lapels, shake them, and say "Listen to me! Most people have an inflated view of themselves. Be realistic!" they refuse, muttering to themselves "Well, other people may be biased, but I *really am* above average on leadership."

Pronin and Ross trace this resistance to a phenomenon they call "naive realism:" each of us thinks we see the world directly, as it really is. We further believe that the facts as we see them are there for all to see, so others should agree with us. If they don't agree, then it follows either that they have not yet been exposed to the relevant facts, or else that they are blinded by their interests and ideologies. People do acknowledge that their own background has shaped their own views, but such experiences are invariably seen as deepening one's insights: for example, being a doctor gives a person special insight into the problems of the health-care industry. But the background of other people is used to explain their biases and covert motivations: for example, doctors think that lawyers disagree with them over tort reform not because they work with the victims of malpractice (and so have their own special insights), but because their self-interest biases their thinking. It just seems plain as day, to the naive realist, that everyone is influenced by their ideology and their self-interest. Except for me. I see things as they are.

If I had to nominate one candidate for "biggest obstacle to world peace and social harmony" it would be naive realism, because it is so easily ratcheted up from the individual to the group level: My group is right, because we see things as they are. Those who disagree are obviously biased by their religion, their ideology, or their self-interest. Naive realism gives us a world full of good and evil, and this brings us to the most disturbing implication of the sages' advice about hypocrisy: good and evil do not exist, outside of our beliefs about them.

Satan Satisfies

One day in 1998 I received a handwritten letter from a woman in my town whom I did not know. The woman wrote about how crime, drugs, and teen pregnancy were all spiraling out of control. Society was going downhill as Satan spread his wings. The woman invited me to come to her church and find spiritual shelter. As I read her letter, I had to agree with her that Satan had spread his wings, but only to fly away and leave us in peace. The late 1990s was a golden age. The cold war was over, democracy and human rights were spreading, South Africa had vanquished apartheid, Israelis and Palestinians were reaping the fruits of the Oslo accords, and there were encouraging signs from North Korea. Here in the United States, crime and unemployment had both plummeted while the stock market climbed ever higher, and the ensuing prosperity was promising to erase the national debt. Even cockroaches were disappearing from our cities, because of widespread use of the roach poison Combat. So what on earth was she

talking about?

When the moral history of the 1990s is written, it might be entitled “Desperately Seeking Satan.” With peace and harmony ascendant, Americans seemed to be searching for substitute villains. We tried drug dealers (but then the crack epidemic waned) and child abductors (who are usually one of the parents). The cultural right vilified homosexuals; the left vilified racists and homophobes. As I thought about these various villains, including the older villains of communism and Satan himself, I realized that most of them share three properties: they are invisible (you can’t identify the evil one from appearance alone); their evil spreads by contagion, making it vital to protect impressionable young people from infection (for example from communist ideas, homosexual teachers, or stereotypes on TV); and the villains can only be defeated if we all pull together as a team. It became clear to me that people want to believe they are on a mission from God, or that they are fighting for some more secular good (animals, fetuses, women’s rights), and you can’t have much of a mission without good allies and a good enemy.

The problem of evil has bedeviled many religions since their birth. If God is all good and all powerful, then either he allows evil to flourish (in which case he is not all good), or else he struggles against evil (in which case he is not all powerful). Religions have generally chosen one of three resolutions of this paradox²⁵: One solution is straight dualism: there is a good force and an evil force, they are equal and opposite, and they fight eternally. Human beings are part of the battleground. We were created part good, part evil, and we must choose which side we will be on. This view is most clear in religions emanating from Persia and Babylonia such as Zoroastrianism, and the view influenced Christianity as a long-lived doctrine called Manichaeism. A second resolution is straight monism: there is one God, who created the world as it needs to be, and evil is an illusion. This view dominated religions that developed in India, which hold that the entire world -- or, at least, its emotional grip upon us -- is an illusion, and that enlightenment consists of breaking out of the illusion. The third approach, taken by Christianity, blends monism and dualism in a way that ultimately reconciles the goodness and power of God with the existence of Satan. This argument is so complicated that I cannot understand it. Nor, apparently, can many Christians who, judging by what I hear on gospel radio stations in Virginia, seem to hold a straight Manichaean world view, according to which God and Satan are fighting an eternal war. In fact, despite the diversity of theological arguments made in different religions, concrete representations of Satan, demons, and other evil entities end up being surprisingly similar across continents and eras²⁶.

From a psychological perspective, Manichaeism makes perfect sense. “Our life is the

²⁵ Hick, 1967.

²⁶ Russell, 1988; Boyer, 2001.

creation of our mind,” as Buddha said, and our minds evolved to play Machiavellian tit-for-tat. We all commit selfish and shortsighted acts, but our inner lawyer ensures that we do not blame ourselves or our allies for them. We are thus convinced of our own virtue, but quick to see bias, greed, and duplicity in others. We are often correct about others’ motives, but as any conflict escalates we begin to grossly exaggerate, to weave a story in which pure virtue (our side) is in a battle with pure vice (theirs).

The Myth of Pure Evil

In the days after receiving that letter, I thought a lot about the need for evil. I decided to write an article on this need, using the tools of modern psychology to understand evil in a new way. But as soon as I started doing research I found out I was too late. By one year. A three thousand year old question had been given a complete and compelling psychological explanation the previous year by Roy Baumeister, one of today’s most creative and versatile social psychologists. In *Evil: Inside Human Cruelty and Aggression*²⁷, Baumeister examined evil from the perspective of both victim and perpetrator. When taking the perpetrator’s perspective, he found that people who do things we see as evil, from spousal abuse all the way to genocide, rarely think they are doing anything wrong. They almost always see themselves as responding to attacks and provocations in ways that are justified. They often think that they themselves were victims. But of course you can see right through this tactic; you are very good at understanding the biases that others use to protect their self-esteem. The disturbing part is that Baumeister shows us our own distortions as victims, and as righteous advocates of victims. Almost everywhere Baumeister looked in the research literature, he found that victims often shared some of the blame. Most murders result from an escalating cycle of provocation and retaliation; in many cases, the corpse could just as easily have been the murderer. In half of all domestic disputes, both sides used violence²⁸. Baumeister points out that, even in cases of obvious police brutality, such as the infamous videotaped beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1991, there is usually much more to the story than is shown on the news. (News programs gain viewers by satisfying people’s need to believe that evil stalks the land.)

Baumeister is an extraordinary social psychologist in part because, in his search for truth, he is unconcerned about political correctness. There are cases where evil falls out of a clear blue sky onto the head of an innocent victim, but most cases are much more complicated, and Baumeister is willing to violate the sacred taboo against “blaming the victim” in order to understand what really happened. People usually have reasons for committing violence, and those reasons usually involve retaliation for a perceived injustice, or self-defense. This does not

²⁷ Baumeister, 1997.

²⁸ See review in Baumeister, 1997, chapter 2.

mean that both sides are equally to blame: perpetrators often grossly over-react and misinterpret (using self-serving biases). But Baumeister's point is that we have a deep need to understand violence and cruelty through what he calls "the myth of pure evil." Of this myth's many parts, the most important are that evildoers are pure in their evil motives (they have no motives for their actions beyond sadism and greed), victims are pure in their victimhood (they did nothing to bring about their victimization), and evil comes from outside and is associated with a group or force that attacks our group. Furthermore, anyone who questions the application of the myth, who dares muddy the waters of moral certainty, is in league with evil.

The myth of pure evil is the ultimate self-serving bias, the ultimate form of naive realism. And it is the ultimate cause of most long-running cycles of violence, because both sides use it to lock themselves into a Manichaean struggle. When George W. Bush said that the 9/11 terrorists did what they did because they "hate our freedom," he showed a lack of psychological insight. Neither the 9/11 hijackers nor Bin Laden were particularly upset that American women can drive, vote, and wear bikinis. Rather, many Islamic extremists want to kill Americans because they are using the Myth of Pure Evil to interpret Arab history and current events. They see America as the Great Satan, the current villain in a long pageant of Western humiliation of Arab nations and peoples. They did what they did as a reaction to America's actions and impact in the Middle East, as they see it through the distortions of the Myth of Pure Evil. However horrifying it is for terrorists to lump all civilians into the category of "enemy" and then kill them indiscriminately, such actions at least make psychological sense, while killing because of a hatred for freedom does not.

In another unsettling conclusion, Baumeister found that there are four main causes of violence and cruelty. The first two are obvious attributes of evil: greed/ambition (violence for direct personal gain, as in robbery), and sadism (pleasure in hurting people). But greed/ambition explains only a small portion of violence, and sadism explains almost none. Outside of children's cartoons and horror films, people almost never hurt others for the sheer joy of hurting someone. The two biggest causes of evil are two that we think are good, and that we try to encourage in our children: high self esteem, and moral idealism. Having high self-esteem doesn't directly cause violence, but when someone's high esteem is unrealistic or narcissistic it is then easily threatened by reality, and in reaction to those threats, people – particularly young men – often lash out violently.²⁹ Baumeister questions the usefulness of programs that try raise children's self-esteem directly, rather than by teaching them skills they can be proud of. Such direct enhancement can potentially foster unstable narcissism.

Threatened self-esteem accounts for a large portion of violence at the individual level, but to really get a mass atrocity going you need idealism – the belief that your violence is a means to

a moral end. The major atrocities of the twentieth century were carried out largely by men who thought they were creating a utopia or else by men who believed they were defending their homeland or tribe from attack.³⁰ Idealism easily becomes dangerous because it brings with it, almost inevitably, the belief that the ends justify the means. If you are fighting for good or for God, what matters is the outcome, not the path. People have little respect for rules per se; we respect the moral principles that underlie most rules. But when a moral mission and legal rules are incompatible, we usually care more about the mission. Psychologist Linda Skitka³¹ finds that when people have strong moral feelings about a controversial issue – when they have a “moral mandate” – they care much less about procedural fairness in court cases. They want the “good guys” freed, by any means, and the “bad guys” convicted, by any means.

The sages have written a great deal about good and evil, and much of it is wrong. For example, the ancient Greek playwright Aristophanes expressed people’s naive common sense: “*Evil events from evil causes spring.*”³² But the French philosopher Blaise Pascal understood that the opposite is often true: “*Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.*”³³

Finding the Great Way

In philosophy classes, I often came across the idea that the world is an illusion. I never really knew what that meant, although it sounded deep. But after two decades studying moral psychology, I think I finally get it. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote that “*Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun.*”³⁴ That is, the world we live in is not really one made of rocks, trees and physical objects; it is a world of insults, opportunities, status symbols, betrayals, saints and sinners. All of these are human creations which, though real in their own way, are not real in the way that rocks and trees are real. These human creations are like fairies in Peter Pan: they exist only if you believe in them. They are the Matrix (from the movie of that name): they are a consensual hallucination.

The inner lawyer, the rose colored mirror, naive realism, and the myth of pure evil – all of these mechanisms conspire to weave for us a web of significance upon which angels and demons fight it out, and our ever-judging mind gives us constant flashes of approval and disapproval, along with the certainty that we are on the side of the angels. From this vantage point it all seems so silly, all this moralism, righteousness and hypocrisy. It’s beyond silly; it is

²⁹ Baumeister, Smart and Boden, 1996; Bushman and Baumeister, 1998.

³⁰ Glover, 2000.

³¹ Skitka, 2002.

³² Aristophanes, source xxa to be found

³³ Pascal, 1941/1660., p. 314.

³⁴ Geertz, 1973., p.5, paraphrasing the sociologist Max Weber.

tragic, for it suggests that human beings will never achieve a state of lasting peace and harmony. So what can you do about it?

The first step is to see it as a game and stop taking it so seriously. The great lesson that comes out of ancient India is that life as we experience it is a game called *samsara*. It is a game in which each person plays out his *dharma*, his role or part in a giant play. In the game of *samsara*, good things happen to you, and you are happy. Then bad things happen, and you are sad or angry. And so it goes, until you die. Then you are reborn back into it, and it repeats. The central message of the Bhagavad Gita (a central text of Hinduism) is that you can't quit the game entirely; you have a role to play in the functioning of the universe, and you must play that role. But you should do it in the right way, without being attached to the "fruits" or outcomes of your action. The god Krishna says:

I love the man who hates not nor exults, who mourns not nor desires... who is the same to friend and foe, [the same] whether he be respected or despised, the same in heat and cold, in pleasure and in pain, who has put away attachment and remains unmoved by praise or blame... contented with whatever comes his way³⁵.

Buddha went a step further. He too counseled indifference to the ups and downs of life, but he urged that we quit the game entirely. Buddhism is a set of practices for escaping *samsara* and the endless cycle of rebirth. Though divided on whether to retreat from the world or engage with it, Buddhists all agree on the importance of training the mind to stop its incessant judging. Sent-ts'an, an early Chinese Zen master, urged non-judgmentalism as a prerequisite to following "the perfect way" in this poem written around 700 CE:

*The Perfect Way is only difficult for those who pick and choose;
Do not like, do not dislike; all will then be clear.
Make a hairbreadth difference, and Heaven and Earth are set apart;
If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against.
The struggle between "for" and "against" is the mind's worst disease.³⁶*

Judgmentalism is indeed a disease of the mind: it leads to anger, torment, and conflict. But as we saw in chapter 2, it is also the mind's normal condition – the elephant is always evaluating, always saying "like it" or "don't like it". So how can you change your automatic reactions? You know by now that you can't simply resolve to stop judging others, or to stop

³⁵ *Bhagavad Gita*, XII.18-19. In Zaehner, 1969.

³⁶ Sent-ts'an, *Hsin hsin ming*. (A. Waley, Trans.). In Conze, 1954.

being a hypocrite. But, as Buddha taught, the rider can gradually learn to tame the elephant, and meditation is one way to do so. Meditation has been shown to make people calmer, less reactive to the ups and downs and petty provocations of life³⁷. Meditation is the Eastern way of training yourself to take things philosophically.

Cognitive therapy works too. In *Feeling Good*,³⁸ a popular guide to cognitive therapy, David Burns has a whole chapter on cognitive therapy for anger, in which he advises using many of the same techniques that Aaron Beck used for depression: write down your thoughts, learn to recognize the distortions in your thoughts, and then think of a more appropriate thought. Burns focuses on the *should* statements we carry around – ideas about how the world *should* work, and about how people *should* treat us. Violations of these *should* statements are the major causes of anger and resentment. Burns also advises empathy: in any conflict, look at the world from your opponent's point of view, and you'll see that she is not entirely crazy.

While I agree with Burns' general approach, the material I have reviewed in this chapter suggests that, once anger comes into play, people find it extremely difficult to empathize and understand another perspective. A better place to start is, as Jesus advised, with yourself and the log in your own eye. (Batson and Loewenstein both found that debiasing only occurred when subjects were forced to look at themselves.) And you will see the log only if you set out on a deliberate and effortful quest to look for it. Try this now: think of a recent interpersonal conflict with someone you care about, and then find one way in which your behavior was not exemplary. Maybe you did something insensitive (even if you had a right to do it), or hurtful (even if you meant well), or inconsistent with your principles (even though you can readily justify it). When you first catch sight of a fault in yourself you'll likely hear frantic arguments from your inner lawyer excusing you and blaming others, but try not to listen. You are on a mission to find at least one thing that maybe – just maybe – you did wrong. When you extract a splinter it hurts, briefly, but then you feel relief, even pleasure. When you find a fault in yourself it will hurt, briefly, but if you keep going and acknowledge the fault, you are likely to be rewarded with a flash of pleasure that is mixed, oddly, with a hint of pride. It is the pleasure of taking responsibility for your own behavior. It is the feeling of honor.

Finding fault with yourself is also the key to overcoming the hypocrisy and judgmentalism that damage so many valuable relationships. First, the instant you see some contribution you made to a conflict, your anger softens – maybe just a bit, but enough that you might be able to acknowledge some merit on the other side. You can still believe you are right and the other person is wrong, but if you can move to believing that you are *mostly* right, and your opponent is *mostly* wrong, then you have the basis for an effective and non-humiliating

³⁷ Shapiro, Schwartz and Santerre, 2002.

³⁸ Burns, 1999.

apology. Just take a small piece of the disagreement and say, “I should not have done X, and I can see why you felt Y.” Then, by the power of reciprocity, the other person will likely feel a strong urge to say something like “Yes, I was really upset by X. But I guess I shouldn’t have done P, so I can see why you felt Q.” Reciprocity amplified by self-serving biases drove you apart back when you were matching insults or hostile gestures, but you can turn the process around and use reciprocity to end a conflict and save a relationship.

The human mind may have been shaped by evolutionary processes to play Machiavellian tit-for-tat, and it seems to come equipped with cognitive processes that predispose us to hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and moralistic conflict. But sometimes, by knowing the mind’s structure and strategies, we can step out of the ancient game of social manipulation, and enter into a game of our choosing. By seeing the log in your own eye you can become less biased, less moralistic, and therefore less prone to argument and conflict. You can begin to follow the perfect way.

References

- Alicke, M. D., Klotz, M. L., Breitenbecher, D. L., Yurak, T. J., & Vredenburg, D. S. (1995). Personal contact, individuation, and the better-than-average effect. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 68, 804-825.
- Axelrod, R. (1984). *The evolution of cooperation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Babcock, L., & Loewenstein, G. (1997). Explaining bargaining impasse: The role of self-serving biases. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 11, 109-126.
- Batson, C. D., Kobryniewicz, D., Dinnerstein, J. L., Kampf, H. C., & Wilson, A. D. (1997). In a very different voice: Unmasking moral hypocrisy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72, 1335-1348.
- Batson, C. D., Thompson, E. R., Seufferling, G., Whitney, H., & Strongman, J. A. (1999). Moral hypocrisy: Appearing moral to oneself without being so. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77, 525-537.
- Baumeister, R. F. (1997). *Evil: Inside human cruelty and violence*. New York: W. H. Freeman.
- Baumeister, R. F., Smart, L., & Boden, J. M. (1996). Relation of threatened egotism to violence and aggression: The dark side of high self-esteem. *Psychological Review*, 103, 5-33.
- Boyer, P. (2001). *Religion explained: The evolutionary origins of religious thought*. New York: Basic.
- Buchanan, D. C. (1965). *Japanese proverbs and sayings*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Burns, D. D. (1999). *Feeling Good (2nd Ed.)*. New York: Avon.
- Bushman, B. J., & Baumeister, R. F. (1998). Threatened egotism, narcissism, self-esteem, and direct and displaced aggression: Does self-love or self-hate lead to violence? *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 75, 219-229.
- Byrne, R., & Whiten, A. (Eds.). (1988). *Machiavellian intelligence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Conze, E. (1954). *Buddhist texts through the ages*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Dunning, D., Meyerowitz, J. A., & Holzberg, A. D. (2002). Ambiguity and self-evaluation: The role of idiosyncratic trait definitions in self-serving assessments of ability. In T. Gilovich, D. Griffin & D. Kahneman (Eds.), *Heuristics and biases: The psychology of intuitive judgment* (Vol. 324-333). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Epley, N., & Caruso, E. M. (2004). Egocentric ethics. *Social Justice Research*, 17, 171-187.

- Epley, N., & Dunning, D. (2000). Feeling "holier than thou": Are self-serving assessments produced by errors in self- or social prediction. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 79, 861-875.
- Franklin, B. (1962). *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: MacMillan.
- Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In C. Geertz (Ed.), *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Glover, J. (2000). *Humanity: A moral history of the twentieth century*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Heine, S. J., & Lehman, D. R. (1999). Culture, self-discrepancies, and self-satisfaction. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25, 915-925.
- Hick, J. (1967). The problem of evil. In P. Edwards (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 3 & 4 (pp. 136-141). New York: Macmillan.
- Hom, H., & Haidt, J. (in preparation). The bonding and norming functions of gossip. *Unpublished manuscript, University of Virginia*.
- Hoorens, V. (1993). Self-enhancement and superiority biases in social comparisons. In W. Strobe & M. Hewstone (Eds.), *European Review of Social Psychology*, Vol. 4 (pp. 113-139). Chichester, UK: John Wiley.
- Kuhn, D. (1991). *The skills of argument*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kunda, Z. (1990). The case for motivated reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108, 480-498.
- Machiavelli, N. (1940/1517). *The Prince and the Discourses*. (L. Ricci & C. E. Detmold, Trans.). New York: Modern Library.
- Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98, 224-253.
- Mascaro, J. (Ed.). (1973). *The Dhammapada*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- Pachocinski, R. (1996). *Proverbs of Africa: Human nature in the Nigerian oral tradition*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Professors World Peace Academy.
- Pascal, B. (1941/1660). *Pensees and the Provincial letters*. New York: Modern Library.
- Perkins, D. N., Farady, M., & Bushey, B. (1991). Everyday reasoning and the roots of intelligence. In J. F. Voss, D. N. Perkins & J. W. Segal (Eds.), *Informal reasoning and education* (pp. 83-105). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Pronin, E., Lin, D. Y., & Ross, L. (2002). The bias blind spot: Perceptions of bias in self versus others. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 369-381.
- Pyszczynski, T., & Greenberg, J. (1987). Toward an integration of cognitive and motivational perspectives on social inference: A biased hypothesis-testing model. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 20, 297-340.
- Ross, M., & Sicoly, F. (1979). Egocentric biases in availability and attribution. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 37, 322-336.
- Russell, J. B. (1988). *The prince of darkness: Radical evil and the power of good in history*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Shapiro, S., Schwartz, G. E. R., & Santerre, C. (2002). Meditation and positive psychology. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 632-645). New York: Oxford.
- Skitka, L. J. (2002). Do the means always justify the ends, or do the ends sometimes justify the means? A value protection model of justice reasoning. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 588-597.
- Taylor, S. E., Lerner, J. S., Sherman, D. K., Sage, R. M., & McDowell, N. K. (2003). Portrait of the self-enhancer: Well adjusted and well liked or maladjusted and friendless. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 84, 165-176.
- Wright, R. (1994). *The moral animal*: Pantheon.
- Zaehner, R. C. (Ed.). (1969). *The Bhagavad-Gita*. London: Oxford.