

Why we lie to ourselves

And why this is a good thing

Context

- I am not a psychologist, neurobiologist or sociologist
- Urge to give this presentation came after discussions in this group about „truth“ and the litany of gendlin
- Based fully on the ideas described in „The Elephant in the Brain“ by Kevin Simmler and Robin Hanson
 - They wrote the book to enable better policies, I am looking at it from an individual point of view
- Examples are US based and may not fully apply to the rest of the world

Structure

- Making the problem visible
 - What are the real human motives and how did they evolve?
 - Why do we lie to ourselves?
 - What to do with this insight...
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- Why truth still matters (by Omar)

Making the Problem Visible

Human individuals and human societies often act in a seemingly irrational way.

Why?

Would it not be beneficial from an evolutionary point of view to make better decisions?

Is it possible that we are not irrational after all?

Example 1: Medicine

- When you ask humans why they go to the doctor they say:
„To get healthy“

When you observe their behaviour though

Example 1: Medicine

- Humans are and were always eager for medical treatment even when the treatment might be harmful
 - Like boring holes into the skull to release evil spirits
- Spending for medicine in the US varies regionally (up to 5x difference) but health does not
- RAND Health Insurance Experiment in the 1980s showed that the amount of spending on medicine has no effect on health

-> We spend too much on medicine
if It were only about health, we would get away with way less

Why?

Example 2: Politics

- When you ask people why they vote they say:
 - It's what good citizens do
 - *I care about the economy/health-care/immigration...*
 - *“Democracy itself is on the line.”*

Example 2: Politics

- Turnout in swingstates is roughly equal to non-swing states
 - Even though their vote has 1000x more impact
- Two political parties in the US with an agenda on >50 topics
 - People who are openly for one party argue on their side for all topics
- Voters are usually uninformed about specific policies
 - Estimates for foreign aid come in at 25% but in reality are 0.6% of federal budget

Example 2: Politics

- Again, we have a mismatch between communicated motives and behaviour

Example 3: Art

- When you ask people why they value or buy art they say:
 - *“Beauty enriches life and lifts the soul.”*
 - *“I want to support artists and culture.”*
 - *“Art sparks emotion and conversation.”*
 - *“It’s a timeless investment in humanity.”*

Example 3: Art – What the data shows

- Auction prices track artist fame far more than aesthetic ratings.
- Originals command 10–100 × the price of visually identical prints.
- Blockbuster museum shows (Picasso, Van Gogh) draw record crowds; quieter exhibits of equal craft go half-empty.
- Surveys find buyers recall the work's price and provenance better than its subject matter or technique.

Example 3: Art

- Again, a mismatch between self-reported motives and behavioral data

Example 4: Charity

- Why do you donate?

Example 4: Charity – What the data shows

- Giving spikes with public visibility—e.g. the Ice-Bucket Challenge raised \$115 M largely through social-media shares.
- $\approx 70\%$ of donors never compare cost-effectiveness across charities; feel-good stories beat measurable impact.
- Blood-donation drives see dramatic upticks when participants get a sticker or T-shirt—small public signals of virtue.
- Donors pick local or identity-linked charities over those that could save the most lives per dollar (e.g., global health).

=> What is happening here?

- Either humans are „stupid“ (ineffective in reaching their goals) or
- Our real motives are not the ones we communicate



What are the true human motives?



Animal behavior: Baboons

- Certain primates groom each other
 - On face value as an act of hygiene
 - But: some species spent way too much time on grooming (17% for baboons)
 - They spend more time grooming each other than grooming themselves
 - There is no correlation between body size and grooming time
- Purpose of grooming is not only hygiene but also social and political
 - Building and communicating relationships of trust

Animal Behaviour: Birds – Arabian Babbler

- Live in small groups, have strict dominance hierarchies
- A lot of seemingly selfless behaviour:
 - Guard duty, sharing food, attacking predators
- But: they compete for that
 - Higher ranked babblers
 - force food down throat of lower ranked babblers
 - sometimes force lower ranked babblers away from guard duty
 - Try to prevent lower ranked babblers to feed others
- They have a social credit system. High social credit gives them
 - Mates
 - Security of not being kicked out of the group

Animal Behaviour: Competition

- Many species compete for food, territory, mates.
- On the surface it's about practical pay-offs: calories, shelter, reproduction.
 - But: contests often burn more energy than the prize is worth.
 - Male elk carry antlers of 20 kg - costly to grow and a handicap in winter.
 - Satin bowerbirds spend weeks building nests they never live in.
- Winners gain signals: “I’m healthy, resourceful, dominant.”
- These signals attract mates & allies, and deter rivals and are worth more than the topic of competition

Human Competitions

- Naively: we mostly *cooperate* within the tribe and compete only with outside threats
- But: In our group we compete for
 - Sex: displays of health, resources and creativity
 - Status: generosity, humor and expertise signal
 - Politics: public loyalty tests, group slogans, virtue-signalling
- These competitions are not won by being fit or skilled, but by being able to communicate these qualities to others

Norms

- Luckily humans developed ways to reduce wasteful competition
- norms are “moral guidelines” that keep everyone safe and fair
- Human super-power:
 - humans can invent abstract rules and enforce them collectively
 - Weapons and coalitions can defeat even the strongest individuals
 - physical strength no longer guarantees dominance
 - Gossip & reputation acted as a 24/7 surveillance camera
 - exile or shaming could hit even the strongest

Key Taboos

- Bragging about your skills and resources
 - Sucking up with gifts
 - Forming sub-groups within groups – clique politics
 - Any open display of raw selfish motive
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- norms don't erase competition
 - they force status and power struggles into subtler forms

Cheating

- Ideally: rules and norms are followed and cheater are rare
- But in reality most people bend rules just enough to dodge punishment
 - Office supplies go missing
 - Subtle inflation in CVs
 - Lab studies: participants over-report dice rolls when anonymity is given, but not to the maximum
- Fig leaf strategy: gesture of conformity while breaking the rule
- Cheating thrives where monitoring is weak and benefits are diffused; evolution favors brains that can exploit that margin without feeling guilty.

Self Deception

- What we claim: “I’m fair, caring, and perfectly rational.”
- What labs find: a gap between what we do/know and what we say
 - Split-brain patients invent reasons for movements their speaking half never initiated
 - Patients with disability denial can come up with various reasons why they cannot move their arm
 - Studies show that you are about as accurate in describing the reasons for your behavior as a complete stranger in the same culture
- -> We do not know why we do the things we do!

Why?

- We are competing for shared resources by signaling our qualities
- We have to comply to norms to do that
- Norms tell us that we are not allowed to be honest about our real motives (sex, status, coalitions)
- Humans evolved empathy and an ability to understand whats going on in anothers brain
- Lying about your motives brings evolutionary benefit

The most effective lie is the one you tell yourself

- When asked for motives
 - Why did you storm out of the meeting?
 - Why did you break up with your partner?
 - Why did you not do the dishes?
 - Why did you vote for Friedrich Merz?
- You will believe your answer but actually, you cannot know if it is true
- It is more important that your answer is socially acceptable than true



YOU

(your conscious self)

REAL YOU

(subconscious)





How it looks and feels like to you.

- Not only do we not make our own decisions
- We are also kept in the dark about the real motives of them

Another Image: White House Press Secretary

- Steps to the podium *after* the President makes a decision
- Receives a short “talking-points” brief, not the full classified file
- Fields tough questions, spins answers to protect administration image
- Goal: maintain public trust, calm markets, rally allies

Your conscious mind:

- Becomes aware of an action after non-conscious parts decide
 - Gets a thin, cleaned-up data stream, but not the true motivation calculation
 - Handles friends and self-queries, spins motives to protect social image
 - Goal: maintain reputation, avoid punishment, recruit allies
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- Your conscious self is the press secretary, not the president
 - (because it is better for you)

How does this relate to „truth“?

- our conscious thoughts are often lies
- The only thing we perceive is in that space of lies
- This is beneficial for us
 - Human societies of our size would otherwise be impossible
- The truth is inherently hard to grasp
- The truth can be harmful
- That's why I feel uncomfortable with the litany of Gendlin
 - It seems wrong

Group discussions

- Sit together in groups and discuss the real motives behind
 - Medicine
 - Politics
 - Art
 - Charity

If not seeking truth, what else should I do?

- Lean back and relax, you are not in control anyway
- What others say or do might seem impossibly stupid to you
 - but they probably have their reasons
 - (even if they themselves are not aware of them)



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