



Lies We Tell Ourselves

How deception leads to self-deception

In Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1970 rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, a skeptical Judas Iscariot questions with faux innocence ("Don't you get me wrong/I only want to know") the messiah's deific nature: "Jesus Christ Superstar/Do you think you're what they say you are?"

Although I am skeptical of Jesus' divine parentage, I believe he would have answered Judas's query in the affirmative. Why? Because of what the legendary evolutionary theorist Robert Trivers calls "the logic of deceit and self-deception" in his new book *The Folly of Fools* (Basic Books, 2011). Here's how it works: A selfish-gene model of evolution dictates that we should maximize our reproductive success through cunning and deceit. Yet the dynamics of game theory shows that if you are aware that other contestants in the game will also be employing similar strategies, it behooves you to feign transparency and honesty and lure them into complacency before you defect and grab the spoils. But if they are like you in anticipating such a shift in strategy, they might pull the same trick, which means you must be keenly sensitive to their deceptions and they of yours. Thus, we evolved the capacity for deception detection, which led to an arms race between deception and deception detection.

Deception gains a slight edge over deception detection when the interactions are few in number and among strangers. But if you spend enough time with your interlocutors, they may leak their true intent through behavioral tells. As Trivers notes, "When interactions are anonymous or infrequent, behavioral cues cannot be read against a background of known behavior, so more general attributes of lying must be used." He identifies three: *Nervousness*. "Because of the negative consequences of being detected, including being aggressed against ... people are expected to be more nervous when lying." *Control*. "In response to concern over appearing nervous ... people may exert control, trying to suppress behavior, with possible detectable side effects such as ... a planned and rehearsed impression." *Cognitive load*. "Lying can be cognitively demanding. You must suppress the truth and construct a falsehood that is plausible on its face and ... you must tell it in a convincing way and you must remember the story."

Cognitive load appears to play the biggest role. "Absent well-rehearsed lies, people who are lying have to think too hard, and this causes several effects," including overcontrol that leads to



blinking and fidgeting less and using fewer hand gestures, longer pauses and higher-pitched voices. As Abraham Lincoln well advised, "You can fool some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time." Unless self-deception is involved. If you believe the lie, you are less likely to give off the normal cues of lying that others might perceive: deception and deception detection create self-deception.

Trivers's theory adds an evolutionary explanation to my own operant conditioning model to explain why psychics, mediums, cult leaders, and the like probably start off aware that a modicum of deception is involved in their craft (justified in the name of a higher cause). But as their followers positively reinforce their message, they come to believe their shtick ("maybe I really can read minds, tell the future, save humanity"). Trivers misses an opportunity to put a more positive spin on self-deception when it comes to the evolution of morality, however. As I argued in my 2004 book *The Science of Good and Evil* (Times Books), true morality evolved as a function of the fact that it is not enough to fake being a good person, because in our ancestral environments of small bands of hunter-gatherers in which everyone was either related to one another or knew one another intimately, faux morality would be unmasked. You actually have to be a good person by believing it yourself and acting accordingly.

By employing the logic of deception and self-deception, we can build a bottom-up theory for the evolution of emotions that control behavior judged good or evil by our fellow primates. In this understanding lies the foundation of a secular civil society. ■

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