

“Entertaining, illuminating, and — when you recognize yourself
in the stories it tells — mortifying.” — *Wall Street Journal*

MISTAKES WERE MADE (but not by *me*)

**WHY WE JUSTIFY FOOLISH BELIEFS,
BAD DECISIONS, AND HURTFUL ACTS**

**UPDATED, WITH A NEW CHAPTER:
“DISSONANCE, DEMOCRACY, AND THE DEMAGOGUE”**

Carol Tavris *and* Elliot Aronson

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*Mistakes Were Made (but Not by Me) 3rd
Ed*

Carol Tavris

MISTAKES
WERE MADE
(BUT NOT BY *ME*)

*Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs,
Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*



Carol Tavris and
Elliot Aronson



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*For Leon Festinger, creator of the theory of cognitive
dissonance, whose ingenuity inspired this book*

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We are all capable of believing things which we know to be untrue, and then, when we are finally proved wrong, impudently twisting the facts so as to show that we were right. Intellectually, it is possible to carry on this process for an indefinite time: the only check on it is that sooner or later a false belief bumps up against solid reality, usually on a battlefield.

—*George Orwell, 1946*

I see no reason why I should be consciously wrong today because I was unconsciously wrong yesterday.

—*Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson, 1948*

PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITIONS

When the first edition of this book was published, in 2007, the country had already become polarized by the war in Iraq. Although Democrats and Republicans were initially equally likely to support George W. Bush's decision to invade, believing that Saddam Hussein was developing weapons of mass destruction, it soon became clear that he wasn't, and none were ever found. WMDs had vanished, but not political polarization, which we saw for ourselves in the reviewers of our book on Amazon.

Many conservatives were (and some still are) deeply annoyed by their perception that we were bashing Bush unfairly. One, who titled his review "Almost Great" and gave *Mistakes Were Made* three stars, said the book would have been truly great if we hadn't spent so much damned time trying to impose our political views on the reader and ignoring the mistakes and bad decisions that Democrats made. Any future edition, he advised, should delete all the "Bush lied" examples so it didn't seem like there was one on every fourth page.

Then we found a rebuttal review headed "Truly Great!" and giving the book five stars. This isn't a book about politics alone, this reviewer said, but about all aspects of human behavior. She found it extremely balanced, noting it discussed the mistakes, self-justifications, and delusions of members of both parties—for example, Lyndon Johnson's inability to get out of Vietnam was compared to Bush's determination to "stay the course" in Iraq.

For reasons that will be clear as you read this book, we enjoyed the second of these two Amazon reviews much more than the first. What a brilliant, astute reader, we thought, obviously so well informed! Whereas the first reviewer was completely muddled. Biased? *Us?* Don't be absurd! Why, we bent over backward to be fair! A Bush-lied example on every fourth page and we didn't have a bad word for Democrats? Didn't this reader see our criticism of LBJ, whom we called a "master of self-justification"? How did he miss the Republicans we praised? And how did he misunderstand our main point, that George Bush was *not* intentionally lying to the American public about Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction but doing something all leaders and the rest of us do: lying to himself to justify a decision he had already made? And besides, we said, warning to our own defense, Bush was president when we began writing this book, and the costly war was dividing the nation. Its consequences are with us today, in the continuing warfare and chaos in the Middle East. What other example could have been as powerful or important an opening story?

Then, after reveling in our spasm of self-justification in response to the first reviewer, we had to face the dreaded question: “Wait a minute—are we right, or are we merely justifying ourselves? What if—horrors!—he has a point?” As human beings, the two of us are not immune to the pitfalls of thinking that we describe in our own book. No human being can live without biases, and we have ours. But we wrote this book with the goal of understanding them and shining a light on their operation in all corners of people’s lives, including our own.

In the years since this book first appeared, readers, reviewers, neighbors, and friends have sent us comments, studies, and personal stories. Professionals in fields as different as dentistry, engineering, education, and nutrition urged us to add chapters on *their* experiences with recalcitrant colleagues who refused to pay attention to the data. Friends in England and Australia formed the Mistakes Were Made Irregulars to let us know who was using this iconic phrase in their countries.

We realized that a revision could easily be twice as long as the original without being twice as informative. For the second edition (2015), we updated the research and offered examples of attempts by organizations to correct mistakes and end harmful practices (for instance, in criminal prosecutions, methods of interrogation, hospital policies, and conflicts of interest in science). Tragically, but not surprisingly for anyone who reads this book, there have not been nearly enough of those systematic corrections, and in some areas, deeply felt but incorrect beliefs, such as those held by people who oppose vaccinating their children, have become even more entrenched. We made a major change in chapter 8 by addressing an issue we had intentionally avoided the first time around: the problems that arise for people who cannot justify their mistakes, harmful actions, or bad decisions and who, as a result, suffer PTSD, guilt, remorse, and sleepless nights for far too long. There we offered research and insights that might help people find a path between mindless self-justification and merciless self-flagellation, a path worth struggling to discover.

And then, not long after the second edition appeared, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, immediately exacerbating the political, ethnic, racial, and demographic tensions that had been growing for decades. Of course, political polarization between left and right, progressive and traditional, urban and rural, has existed throughout history and is still found all over the planet, with each side seeing the world through its preferred lens. But the Trump phenomenon is unique in American history, because Trump intentionally violated the rules, norms, protocols, and procedures of government—actions that his supporters applauded, his adversaries condemned, and many of his former opponents came to endorse. Whether or not Trump is in office as you read this, Americans will long be facing the moral, emotional, and political residue of his presidency.

It seems like eons since Republican nominee Bob Dole described Bill Clinton as “my opponent, not my enemy,” but in fact he made that civilized remark in 1996. How quaint it now seems in contrast to Donald Trump, who regards his opponents (or people who simply disagree with him) as treasonous, disloyal rats and foes. In our new concluding chapter, therefore, we closely examine the process by which Trump, his administration, and his supporters fostered that view, with devastating consequences for our democracy. We wrote this chapter in the hope that once we understand the slow but pernicious shift in thinking from opponent to enemy, we can begin to find our way back.

—*Carol Tavis and Elliot Aronson, 2020*

INTRODUCTION

Knives, Fools, Villains, and Hypocrites: *How Do They Live with Themselves?*

Mistakes were quite possibly made by the administrations in which I served.

—Henry Kissinger, responding to charges that he committed war crimes in his role in the United States' actions in Vietnam, Cambodia, and South America in the 1970s

If, in hindsight, we also discover that mistakes may have been made . . . I am deeply sorry.

—Cardinal Edward Egan of New York (referring to the bishops who failed to deal with child molesters among the Catholic clergy)

We know mistakes were made.

—Jamie Dimon, CEO of JPMorgan Chase (referring to enormous bonuses paid to the company's executives after the government bailout had kept them from bankruptcy)

Mistakes were made in communicating to the public and customers about the ingredients in our French fries and hash browns.

—McDonald's (apologizing to vegetarians for failing to inform them that the "natural flavoring" in its potatoes contained beef byproducts)

As fallible human beings, all of us share the impulse to justify ourselves and avoid taking responsibility for actions that turn out to be harmful, immoral, or stupid. Most of us will never be in a position to make decisions affecting the lives and deaths of millions of people, but whether the consequences of our mistakes are trivial or tragic, on a small scale or a national canvas, most of us find it difficult if not impossible to say "I was wrong; I made a terrible mistake." The higher the stakes—emotional, financial, moral—the greater the difficulty.

It goes further than that. Most people, when directly confronted by evidence that they are wrong, do not change their point of view or plan of action but justify it even more tenaciously. Politicians, of course, offer the most visible and, often, most tragic examples of this practice. We began writing the first edition of this book during the presidency of George W. Bush, a man whose mental armor of self-justification could not be pierced by even the most irrefutable evidence. Bush was wrong in his claim that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction; he was wrong in stating that Saddam was linked with al-Qaeda; he was wrong in his prediction that Iraqis would be dancing joyfully in the streets at the arrival of American soldiers; he was wrong in his assurance that the conflict would be over quickly; he was wrong in his gross underestimate of the human and financial costs of the war; and he was most famously wrong in his speech six weeks after the invasion began when he announced (under a banner reading MISSION ACCOMPLISHED) that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended.”

Commentators from the right and left began calling on Bush to admit he had been mistaken, but Bush merely found new justifications for the war: he was getting rid of a “very bad guy,” fighting terrorists, promoting peace in the Middle East, bringing democracy to Iraq, increasing American security, and finishing “the task [our troops] gave their lives for.” In the midterm elections of 2006, which most political observers regarded as a referendum on the war, the Republican Party lost both houses of Congress; a report issued shortly thereafter by sixteen American intelligence agencies announced that the occupation of Iraq had actually *increased* Islamic radicalism and the risk of terrorism. Yet Bush said to a delegation of conservative columnists, “I’ve never been more convinced that the decisions I made are the right decisions.”¹

George Bush was not the first nor will he be the last politician to justify decisions that were based on incorrect premises or that had disastrous consequences. Lyndon Johnson would not heed the advisers who repeatedly told him the war in Vietnam was unwinnable, and he sacrificed his presidency because of his self-justifying certainty that all of Asia would “go Communist” if America withdrew. When politicians’ backs are against the wall, they may reluctantly acknowledge *error* but not their responsibility for it. The phrase “Mistakes were made” is such a glaring effort to absolve oneself of culpability that it has become a national joke—what the political journalist Bill Schneider called the “past exonerative” tense. “Oh, all right, mistakes were made, but not by me, by someone else, someone who shall remain nameless.”² When Henry Kissinger said that the administration in which he’d served may have made mistakes, he was sidestepping the fact that as national security adviser and secretary of state (simultaneously), he essentially *was* the administration. This self-justification allowed him to accept the Nobel Peace Prize with a straight face and a clear conscience.

We look at the behavior of politicians with amusement or alarm or horror, but what they do is no different in kind, though certainly in consequence, from what most of us have done at one time or another in our private lives. We stay in an unhappy relationship or one that is merely going nowhere because, after all, we invested so much time in making it work. We stay in a deadening job way too long because we look for all the reasons to justify staying and are unable to clearly assess the benefits of leaving. We buy a lemon of a car because it looks gorgeous, spend thousands of dollars to keep the damn thing running, and then spend even more to justify that investment. We self-righteously create a rift with a friend or relative over some real or imagined slight yet see ourselves as the pursuers of peace—if only the other side would apologize and make amends.

Self-justification is not the same thing as lying or making excuses. Obviously, people will lie or invent fanciful stories to duck the fury of a lover, parent, or employer; to keep from being sued or sent to prison; to avoid losing face; to avoid losing a job; to stay in power. But there is a big difference between a guilty man telling the public something he knows is untrue (“I did not have sex with that woman”; “I am not a crook”) and that man persuading himself that he did a good thing. In the former situation, he is lying and knows he is lying to save his own skin. In the latter, he is lying to himself. That is why self-justification is more powerful and more dangerous than the explicit lie. It allows people to convince themselves that what they did was the best thing they could have done. In fact, come to think of it, it was the right thing. “There was nothing else I could have done.” “Actually, it was a brilliant solution to the problem.” “I was doing the best for the nation.” “Those bastards deserved what they got.” “I’m entitled.”

Self-justification minimizes our mistakes and bad decisions; it also explains why everyone can recognize a hypocrite in action except the hypocrite. It allows us to create a distinction between our moral lapses and someone else’s and blur the discrepancy between our actions and our moral convictions. As a character in Aldous Huxley’s novel *Point Counter Point* says, “I don’t believe there’s such a thing as a conscious hypocrite.” It seems unlikely that former Speaker of the House and Republican strategist Newt Gingrich said to himself, “My, what a hypocrite I am. There I was, all riled up about Bill Clinton’s sexual affair, while I was having an extramarital affair of my own right here in town.” Similarly, the prominent evangelist Ted Haggard seemed oblivious to the hypocrisy of publicly fulminating against homosexuality while enjoying his own sexual relationship with a male prostitute.

In the same way, we each draw our own moral lines and justify them. For example, have you ever done a little finessing of expenses on income taxes? That probably compensates for the legitimate expenses you forgot about, and besides, you’d be a fool not to, considering that everybody else does it. Did you

fail to report some extra cash income? You're entitled, given all the money that the government wastes on pork-barrel projects and programs you detest. Have you been texting, writing personal e-mails, and shopping online at your office when you should have been tending to business? Those are perks of the job, and besides, it's your own form of protest against those stupid company rules, plus your boss doesn't appreciate all the extra work you do.

Gordon Marino, a professor of philosophy and ethics, was staying in a hotel when his pen slipped out of his jacket and left an ink spot on the silk bedspread. He decided he would tell the manager, but he was tired and did not want to pay for the damage. That evening he went out with some friends and asked their advice. "One of them told me to stop with the moral fanaticism," Marino said. "He argued, 'The management expects such accidents and builds their cost into the price of the rooms.' It did not take long to persuade me that there was no need to trouble the manager. I reasoned that if I had spilled this ink in a family-owned bed-and-breakfast, then I would have immediately reported the accident, but that this was a chain hotel, and yadda yadda yadda went the hoodwinking process. I did leave a note at the front desk about the spot when I checked out."³

But, you say, all those justifications are true! Hotel-room charges do include the costs of repairs caused by clumsy guests! The government does waste money! My company probably wouldn't mind if I spend a little time texting and I do get my work done (eventually)! Whether those claims are true or false is irrelevant. When we cross these lines, we are justifying behavior that we know is wrong precisely so that we can continue to see ourselves as honest people and not criminals or thieves. Whether the behavior in question is a small thing like spilling ink on a hotel bedspread or a big thing like embezzlement, the mechanism of self-justification is the same.

Now, between the conscious lie to fool others and unconscious self-justification to fool ourselves, there's a fascinating gray area patrolled by an unreliable, self-serving historian—memory. Memories are often pruned and shaped with an ego-enhancing bias that blurs the edges of past events, softens culpability, and distorts what really happened. When researchers ask wives what percentage of the housework they do, they say, "Are you kidding? I do almost everything, at least 90 percent." And when they ask husbands the same question, the men say, "I do a lot, actually, about 40 percent." Although the specific numbers differ from couple to couple, the total always exceeds 100 percent by a large margin.⁴ It's tempting to conclude that one spouse is lying, but it is more likely that each is remembering in a way that enhances his or her contribution.

Over time, as the self-serving distortions of memory kick in and we forget or misremember past events, we may come to believe our own lies, little by little.

We know we did something wrong, but gradually we begin to think it wasn't all our fault, and after all, the situation was complex. We start underestimating our own responsibility, whittling away at it until it is a mere shadow of its former hulking self. Before long, we have persuaded ourselves to believe privately what we said publicly. John Dean, Richard Nixon's White House counsel, the man who blew the whistle on the conspiracy to cover up the illegal activities of the Watergate scandal, explained how this process works:

INTERVIEWER: You mean those who made up the stories were believing their own lies?

DEAN: That's right. If you said it often enough, it would become true. When the press learned of the wire taps on newsmen and White House staffers, for example, and flat denials failed, it was claimed that this was a national-security matter. I'm sure many people believed that the taps *were* for national security; they weren't. That was concocted as a justification after the fact. But when they said it, you understand, they really *believed* it.⁵

Like Nixon, Lyndon Johnson was a master of self-justification. According to his biographer Robert Caro, when Johnson came to believe in something, he would believe in it "totally, with absolute conviction, regardless of previous beliefs, or of the facts in the matter." George Reedy, one of Johnson's aides, said that LBJ "had a remarkable capacity to convince himself that he held the principles he should hold at any given time, and there was something charming about the air of injured innocence with which he would treat anyone who brought forth evidence that he had held other views in the past. It was not an act . . . He had a fantastic capacity to persuade himself that the 'truth' which was convenient for the present was *the truth* and anything that conflicted with it was the prevarication of enemies. He literally willed what was in his mind to become reality."⁶ Although Johnson's supporters found this to be a rather charming aspect of the man's character, it might well have been one of the major reasons that Johnson could not extricate the country from the quagmire of Vietnam. A president who justifies his actions to the public might be induced to change them. A president who justifies his actions to himself, believing that he has *the truth*, is impervious to self-correction.

• • •

The Dinka and Nuer tribes of the Sudan have a curious tradition. They extract the permanent front teeth of their children — as many as six bottom teeth and

two top teeth—which produces a sunken chin, a collapsed lower lip, and speech impediments. This practice apparently began during a period when tetanus (lockjaw, which causes the jaws to clench together) was widespread. Villagers began pulling out their front teeth and those of their children to make it possible to drink liquids through the gap. The lockjaw epidemic is long past, yet the Dinka and Nuer are still pulling out their children’s front teeth.⁷ How come?

In the 1840s, a hospital in Vienna was facing a mysterious, terrifying problem: an epidemic of childbed fever was causing the deaths of about 15 percent of the women who delivered babies in one of the hospital’s two maternity wards. At the epidemic’s peak month, *one-third* of the women who delivered there died, three times the mortality rate of the other maternity ward, which was attended by midwives. Then a Hungarian physician named Ignaz Semmelweis came up with a hypothesis to explain why so many women in his hospital were dying of childbed fever in that one ward: The doctors and medical students who delivered the babies there were going straight from the autopsy rooms to the delivery rooms, and even though no one at the time knew about germs, Semmelweis thought they might be carrying a “morbid poison” on their hands. He instructed his medical students to wash their hands in a chlorine antiseptic solution before going to the maternity ward—and the women stopped dying. These were astonishing, lifesaving results, and yet his colleagues refused to accept the evidence: the lower death rate among Semmelweis’s patients.⁸ Why didn’t they embrace Semmelweis’s discovery immediately and thank him effusively for finding the reason for so many unnecessary deaths?

After World War II, Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham published the bestseller *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, in which they claimed that a woman who achieved in “male spheres of action” might seem to be successful in the “big league,” but she paid a big price: “Sacrifice of her most fundamental instinctual strivings. She is not, in sober reality, temperamentally suited to this sort of rough and tumble competition, and it damages her, particularly in her own feelings.” And it even makes her frigid: “Challenging men on every hand, refusing any longer to play even a relatively submissive role, multitudes of women found their capacity for sexual gratification dwindling.”⁹ In the ensuing decade, Dr. Farnham, who earned her MD from the University of Minnesota and did postgraduate work at Harvard Medical School, made a career out of telling women not to have careers. Wasn’t she worried about becoming frigid and damaging her own fundamental instinctual strivings?

The sheriff’s department in Kern County, California, arrested a retired high-school principal, Patrick Dunn, on suspicion of murdering his wife. The

officers had interviewed two people who gave conflicting information. One was a woman who had no criminal record and no personal incentive to lie about the suspect and who had calendars and her boss to back up her account of events; her story supported Dunn's innocence. The other was a career criminal facing six years in prison who had agreed to testify against Dunn as part of a deal with prosecutors and who offered nothing beyond his own word to support his statement; his story suggested Dunn's guilt. The detectives had a choice: believe in the woman (and therefore Dunn's innocence) or the criminal (and therefore Dunn's guilt). They chose the criminal.¹⁰ Why?

By understanding the inner workings of self-justification, we can answer these questions and make sense of dozens of other things people do that otherwise seem unfathomable or crazy. We can answer the question so many people ask when they look at ruthless dictators, greedy corporate CEOs, religious zealots who murder in the name of God, priests who molest children, or family members who cheat their relatives out of inheritances: How in the world can they *live* with themselves? The answer is: exactly the way the rest of us do.

Self-justification has costs and benefits. By itself, it's not necessarily a bad thing. It lets us sleep at night. Without it, we would prolong the awful pangs of embarrassment. We would torture ourselves with regret over the road not taken or over how badly we navigated the road we did take. We would agonize in the aftermath of almost every decision: Did we do the right thing, marry the right person, buy the right house, choose the best car, enter the right career? Yet mindless self-justification, like quicksand, can draw us deeper into disaster. It blocks our ability to even see our errors, let alone correct them. It distorts reality, keeping us from getting all the information we need and assessing issues clearly. It prolongs and widens rifts between lovers, friends, and nations. It keeps us from letting go of unhealthy habits. It permits the guilty to avoid taking responsibility for their deeds. And it keeps many professionals from changing outdated attitudes and procedures that can harm the public.

None of us can avoid making blunders. But we do have the ability to say, "This is not working out here. This is not making sense." To err is human, but humans then have a choice between covering up and fessing up. The choice we make is crucial to what we do next. We are forever being told that we should learn from our mistakes, but how can we learn unless we first admit that we made those mistakes? To do that, we have to recognize the siren song of self-justification. In the next chapter, we will discuss cognitive dissonance, the hardwired psychological mechanism that creates self-justification and protects our certainties, self-esteem, and tribal affiliations. In the chapters that follow, we will elaborate on the most harmful consequences of self-

justification: how it exacerbates prejudice and corruption, distorts memory, turns professional confidence into arrogance, creates and perpetuates injustice, warps love, and generates feuds and rifts.

The good news is that by understanding how this mechanism works, we can defeat the wiring. Accordingly, in chapter 8, we will step back and see what solutions emerge for individuals and for relationships. And in chapter 9, we will broaden our perspective to consider the great political issue of our time: the dissonance created when loyalty to the party means supporting a dangerous party leader. The way that citizens resolve that dissonance—by choosing party above nation or by making the difficult but courageous and ethical decision to resist that easy path—has immense consequences for their lives and their country. Understanding is the first step toward finding solutions that will lead to change and redemption. That is why we wrote this book.

1

Cognitive Dissonance: *The Engine of Self-Justification*

PRESS RELEASE DATE: NOVEMBER 1, 1993

We didn't make a mistake when we wrote in our previous releases that New York would be destroyed on September 4 and October 14, 1993. We didn't make a mistake, not even a teeny eeny one!

PRESS RELEASE DATE: APRIL 4, 1994

All the dates we have given in our past releases are correct dates given by God as contained in Holy Scriptures. Not one of these dates was wrong . . . Ezekiel gives a total of 430 days for the siege of the city . . . [which] brings us exactly to May 2, 1994. By now, all the people have been forewarned. We have done our job . . .

We are the only ones in the entire world guiding the people to their safety, security, and salvation!

We have a 100 percent track record!¹

It's fascinating, and sometimes funny, to read doomsday predictions, but it's even more fascinating to watch what happens to the reasoning of true believers when the prediction flops and the world keeps muddling along. Notice that hardly anyone ever says, "I blew it! I can't believe how stupid I was to believe that nonsense"? On the contrary, most of the time the doomsayers become even more deeply convinced of their powers of prediction. The people who believe that the Bible's book of Revelation or the writings of the sixteenth-century self-proclaimed prophet Nostradamus have predicted every disaster from the bubonic plague to 9/11 cling to their convictions, unfazed by the small problem that these vague and murky predictions were intelligible only after the events occurred.

More than half a century ago, a young social psychologist named Leon Festinger and two associates infiltrated a group of people who believed the world would end on December 21, 1954.² They wanted to know what would happen to the group when (they hoped!) the prophecy failed. The group's leader, whom the researchers called Marian Keech, promised that the faithful would be picked up by a flying saucer and elevated to safety at midnight on December 20. Many of her followers quit their jobs, gave away their houses, and disbursed their savings in anticipation of the end. Who needs money in

outer space? Others waited in fear or resignation in their homes. (Mrs. Keech's husband, a nonbeliever, went to bed early and slept soundly through the night while his wife and her followers prayed in the living room.) Festinger made his own prediction: The believers who had not made a strong commitment to the prophecy—who awaited the end of the world by themselves at home, hoping they weren't going to die at midnight—would quietly lose their faith in Mrs. Keech. But those who had given away their possessions and waited with other believers for the spaceship, he said, would increase their belief in her mystical abilities. In fact, they would now do whatever they could to get others to join them.

At midnight, with no sign of a spaceship in the yard, the group felt a little nervous. By 2:00 a.m., they were getting seriously worried. At 4:45 a.m., Mrs. Keech had a new vision: The world had been spared, she said, because of the impressive faith of her little band. "And mighty is the word of God," she told her followers, "and by his word have ye been saved—for from the mouth of death have ye been delivered and at no time has there been such a force loosed upon the Earth. Not since the beginning of time upon this Earth has there been such a force of Good and light as now floods this room."

The group's mood shifted from despair to exhilaration. Many of the group members who had not felt the need to proselytize before December 21 began calling the press to report the miracle. Soon they were out on the streets, buttonholing passersby, trying to convert them. Mrs. Keech's prediction had failed, but not Leon Festinger's.

• • •

The engine that drives self-justification, the energy that produces the need to justify our actions and decisions—especially the wrong ones—is the unpleasant feeling that Festinger called "cognitive dissonance." Cognitive dissonance is a state of tension that occurs when a person holds two cognitions (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions) that are psychologically inconsistent with each other, such as "Smoking is a dumb thing to do because it could kill me" and "I smoke two packs a day." Dissonance produces mental discomfort that ranges from minor pangs to deep anguish; people don't rest easy until they find a way to reduce it. In this example, the most direct way for a smoker to reduce dissonance is by quitting. But if she has tried to quit and failed, now she must reduce dissonance by convincing herself that smoking isn't really so harmful, that smoking is worth the risk because it helps her relax or prevents her from gaining weight (after all, obesity is a health risk too), and so on. Most smokers manage to reduce dissonance in many such ingenious, if self-deluding, ways.

Dissonance is disquieting because to hold two ideas that contradict each other is to flirt with absurdity, and, as Albert Camus observed, we are creatures who spend our lives trying to convince ourselves that our existence is not absurd. At the heart of it, Festinger's theory is about how people strive to make sense out of contradictory ideas and lead lives that are, at least in their own minds, consistent and meaningful. The theory inspired more than three thousand experiments that, taken together, have transformed psychologists' understanding of how the human mind works. Cognitive dissonance even escaped academia and entered popular culture. The term is everywhere. The two of us have encountered it in political columns, health news stories, magazine articles, a *Non Sequitur* cartoon by Wiley Miller ("Showdown at the Cognitive Dissonance Bridge"), bumper stickers, a TV soap opera, *Jeopardy!*, and a humor column in the *New Yorker* ("Cognitive Dissonances I'm Comfortable With"). Although the expression has been thrown around a lot, few people fully understand its meaning or appreciate its enormous motivational power.

In 1956, one of us (Elliot) arrived at Stanford University as a graduate student in psychology. Festinger had started there that same year as a young professor, and they immediately began working together, designing experiments to test and expand dissonance theory.⁴ Their thinking challenged many notions that had been gospel in psychology and among the general public, such as the behaviorist's view that people do things primarily for the rewards they bring, the economist's view that, as a rule, human beings make rational decisions, and the psychoanalyst's view that acting aggressively gets rid of aggressive impulses.

Consider how dissonance theory challenged behaviorism. At the time, most scientific psychologists were convinced that people's actions were governed by reward and punishment. It is certainly true that if you feed a rat at the end of a maze, he will learn the maze faster than if you don't feed him, and if you give your dog a biscuit when she gives you her paw, she will learn that trick faster than if you sit around hoping she will do it on her own. Conversely, if you punish your pup when you catch her peeing on the carpet, she will soon stop doing it. Behaviorists further argued that anything that was associated with reward would become more attractive—your puppy will like you because you give her biscuits—and anything associated with pain would become noxious and undesirable.

Behavioral laws apply to human beings too, of course; no one would stay in a boring job without pay, and if you give your toddler a cookie to stop him from having a tantrum, you have taught him to have another tantrum when he wants a cookie. But, for better or worse, the human mind is more complex than the brain of a rat or a puppy. A dog may appear contrite for having been

caught peeing on the carpet, but she will not try to think up justifications for her misbehavior. Humans think—and because we think, dissonance theory demonstrates, our behavior transcends the effects of rewards and punishments and often contradicts them.

To test this observation, Elliot predicted that if people go through a great deal of pain, discomfort, effort, or embarrassment to get something, they will be happier with that “something” than if it came to them easily. For behaviorists, this was a preposterous prediction. Why would people like anything associated with pain? But for Elliot, the answer was obvious: self-justification. The cognition “I am a sensible, competent person” is dissonant with the cognition “I went through a painful procedure to achieve something”—say, join a group—“that turned out to be boring and worthless.” Therefore, a person would distort his or her perceptions of the group in a positive direction, trying to find good things about it and ignoring the downside.

It might seem that the easiest way to test this hypothesis would be to rate a number of college fraternities on the basis of how severe their initiations are, then interview members and ask them how much they like their fraternity brothers. If the members of severe-initiation fraternities like their frat brothers more than do members of mild-initiation fraternities, does this prove that severity produces the liking? It does not. It may be just the reverse. If the members of a fraternity regard themselves as being a highly desirable, elite group, they may require a severe initiation to prevent the riffraff from joining. Only those who are highly attracted to the severe-initiation group to begin with would be willing to go through the initiation to get into it. Those who are not excited by a particular fraternity and just want to be in one, any one, will choose fraternities that require mild initiations.

That was why it was essential to conduct a controlled experiment. The beauty of an experiment is the random assignment of people to conditions. Regardless of a person’s degree of interest in joining the group, each participant would be randomly assigned to either the severe-initiation or the mild-initiation condition. If people who went through a tough time to get into a group later find that group to be more attractive than those who got in with no effort, then we would know that it was the effort that caused liking, not the differences in initial levels of interest.

And so Elliot and his colleague Judson Mills conducted just such an experiment.⁵ Stanford students were invited to join a group that would be discussing the psychology of sex, but to qualify for admission, they first had to fulfill an entrance requirement. Some of the students were randomly assigned to a severely embarrassing initiation procedure: they had to recite, out loud to the experimenter, lurid, sexually explicit passages from *Lady Chatterley’s*

Lover and other racy novels. (For conventional 1950s students, this was a painfully embarrassing thing to do.) Others were randomly assigned to a mildly embarrassing initiation procedure: reading aloud sexual words from the dictionary.

After the initiation, each of the students listened to an identical tape recording of a discussion allegedly being held by the group of people they had just joined. Actually, the audiotape was prepared in advance so that the discussion was as boring and worthless as it could be. The discussants talked haltingly, with long pauses, about the secondary sex characteristics of birds—changes in plumage during courtship, that sort of thing. The taped discussants hemmed and hawed, frequently interrupted one another, and left sentences unfinished.

Finally, the students rated the discussion on a number of dimensions. Those who had undergone only a mild initiation saw the discussion for what it was, worthless and dull, and they correctly rated the group members as being unappealing and boring. One guy on the tape, stammering and muttering, admitted that he hadn't done the required reading on the courtship practices of some rare bird, and the mild-initiation listeners were annoyed by him. What an irresponsible idiot! He didn't even do the basic reading! He let the group down! Who'd want to be in a group with him? But those who had gone through a severe initiation rated the discussion as interesting and exciting and the group members as attractive and sharp. They forgave the irresponsible idiot. His candor was refreshing! Who wouldn't want to be in a group with such an honest guy? It was hard to believe that they were listening to the same tape recording. Such is the power of dissonance.

This experiment has been replicated several times by other scientists with a variety of initiation techniques, from electric shock to excessive physical exertion.⁶ The results are always the same: severe initiations increase a member's liking for the group. A stunning example of the justification of effort in real life came from an observational study done in the multicultural nation of Mauritius.⁷ The annual Hindu festival of Thaipusam includes two rituals: a low-ordeal ritual involving singing and collective prayer, and a severe-ordeal ritual called *kavadi*. "Severe" is something of an understatement. Participants are pierced with needles and skewers, carry heavy bundles, and drag carts that are attached by hooks to their skin for more than four hours. Then they climb a mountain barefoot to reach the temple of Murugan. Afterward, researchers gave both the low-ordeal and severe-ordeal participants the opportunity to anonymously donate money to the temple. The severe-ordeal ritual produced much higher donations than the low-ordeal ritual. The greater the men's pain, the greater their commitment to the temple.

These findings do not mean that people enjoy painful experiences or that they enjoy things because they are associated with pain. What they mean is that if a person voluntarily goes through a difficult or painful experience *in order to attain* some goal or object, that goal or object becomes more attractive. If, on your way to join a discussion group, a flowerpot fell from the open window of an apartment building and hit you on the head, you would not like that discussion group any better. But if you volunteered to get hit on the head by a flowerpot to become a member of the group, you would definitely like the group more.

Believing Is Seeing

I will look at any additional evidence to confirm the opinion to which I have already come.

—Lord Molson, *twentieth-century British politician*

Dissonance theory exploded the self-flattering idea that we humans, being *Homo sapiens*, process information logically. On the contrary; if new information is consonant with our beliefs, we think it is well founded and useful—“Just what I always said!” But if the new information is dissonant, then we consider it biased or foolish—“What a dumb argument!” So powerful is the need for consonance that when people are forced to look at disconfirming evidence, they will find a way to criticize, distort, or dismiss it so that they can maintain or even strengthen their existing belief. This mental contortion is called the “confirmation bias.”⁸

Once you are aware of this bias, you’ll see it everywhere, including in yourself. Imagine that you are a world-class violinist and your proudest possession is your multimillion-dollar, three-hundred-year-old Stradivarius. What a thing of beauty it is! The aged warmth of its tone! Its resonance! Its ease of playability! Now some idiot researcher tries to convince you that modern violins, some of which cost a mere hundred thousand dollars or so, are in many ways better than your beloved Strad. It’s such a preposterous claim that you laugh out loud. “Wait,” the researcher says. “We set up blind tests in hotel rooms with twenty-one professional violinists and had them wear goggles that prevented them from knowing whether they were playing a modern instrument or a Stradivarius, and thirteen of them chose the new violin as their favorite. Everyone’s *least* favorite of the six instruments tested was a Strad.” “Impossible!” you say. “The testing conditions were unrealistic—who can judge a violin’s sound in a hotel room?” So the researcher and her colleagues fine-tune the study (so to speak). This time they use six three-hundred-year-old Italian violins and six contemporary ones. They have ten professional soloists blind-test them for seventy-five minutes in a rehearsal room and then for another seventy-five minutes in a concert hall. The soloists rated the modern violins higher on playability, articulation, and projection, and their guesses as to whether they were playing an old instrument or a new one were no better than chance.⁹

A subsequent study found that listeners, too, prefer the sound of new violins over the allegedly better acoustics of Strads.¹⁰ Strads were rated as sounding better than modern instruments only when the listeners knew what