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# **Mistakes Were Made (but not by *me*)**

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

Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson

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A C E G I K J H F D B

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*To Ronan, my Wonderful O'*  
—Carol Tavis

*To Vera, of course*  
—Elliot Aronson

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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 (194

A great nation is like a great man:  
When he makes a mistake, he realizes it.  
Having realized it, he admits it.  
Having admitted it, he corrects it.  
He considers those who point out his faults as his most benevolent teachers.

—Lao Tz

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## Introduction

*Knaves, 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 bishop who failed to deal with child molesters among the Catholic clergy

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

—McDonald's, apologizing to Hindus and other vegetarians for failing to inform them that the "natural flavoring" in their potatoes contained beef byproduct

This week's question: How can you tell when a presidential scandal is serious?

- A. The president's poll numbers drop.
- B. The press goes after him.
- C. The opposition calls for his impeachment.
- D. His own party members turn on him.
- E. Or the White House says, "mistakes were made"

AS FALLIBLE HUMAN BEINGS, all of us share the impulse to justify ourselves and avoid taking responsibility for any 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 course of action but justify it even more tenaciously. Even irrefutable evidence is rarely enough to pierce the mental armor of self-justification. When we began working on this book, the poster boy for "tenacious clinging to a discredited belief" was George W. Bush. Bush was wrong in his claim that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, he was wrong in claiming that Saddam was linked with Al Qaeda, he was wrong in predicting that Iraqis would be dancing joyfully in the streets to receive the American soldiers, he was wrong in predicting that the conflict would be over quickly, he was wrong in his gross underestimate of the financial cost of the war, and he was most famously wrong in his photo-op speech six weeks after the invasion began, when he announced (under a banner reading MISSION ACCOMPLISHED) that "major combat operations in Iraq have ended."

At that time, the two of us watched with fascination as commentators from the right and left began fantasizing in print about what it would be like to have a president who admitted mistakes. The conservative columnist George Will and the liberal columnist Paul Krugman both called for Bush to admit he had been wrong, but the president remained intransigent. In 2006, with Iraq sliding into civil war and sixteen American intelligence agencies having issued a report that the occupation of Iraq had increased Islamic radicalism and the risk of terrorism, Bush said to a delegation of conservative columnists, "I've never been more convinced that the decisions I made are the right decisions."<sup>1</sup> Of course, Bush had to justify the war his administration pursued in Iraq; he had too much invested in that course of action to do otherwise—thousands of deaths and, according to a conservative estimate from the American Enterprise Institute in 2006, at least a trillion dollars. Accordingly, when he was proved wrong in his original reasons for the war, he found new ones: getting rid of a "very bad guy," fighting terrorists, promoting peace in the Middle East, bringing democracy to Iraq, increasing the security of the United States, and finishing "the task [our troops] gave their lives for." In other words we must continue the war because we began the war.

Politicians are the most visible of self-justifiers, which is why they provide such juicy examples. They have refined the art of speaking in the passive voice; when their backs are to the wall they will reluctantly acknowledge *error*, but not responsibility. Oh all right, mistakes were made, but not by me; by someone else, who shall remain nameless.<sup>2</sup> When Henry Kissinger said that the "administration" may have made mistakes, he was sidestepping the fact that as national security adviser and secretary of state (simultaneously) he, in effect, *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, psychologically, 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 merely one that is

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 we 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 what a guilty man says to the public to convince them of something he knows is untrue ("I did not have sex with that woman"; "I am not a crook"), and the process of 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 not only minimizes our mistakes and bad decisions; it is also the reason that everyone can see a hypocrite in action except the hypocrite. It allows us to create a distinction between our moral lapses and someone else's, and to blur the discrepancy between our actions and our moral convictions. Aldous Huxley was right when he said, "There is probably no such thing as a conscious hypocrite." It seems unlikely that 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. 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 writing personal e-mails and surfing the Net at your office when you should have been tending to business? Those are perks of the job, and besides, it's your own protest against those stupid company rules, and besides, 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."<sup>3</sup>

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 I spend a little time on e-mail 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 lies a fascinating gray area, patrolled by that unreliable, self-serving historian—memory. Memories are often pruned and shaped by an ego-enhancing bias that blurs the edges of past events, softens culpability, and distorts what really happened. When researchers ask husbands and wives what percentage of the housework they do, the wives say, "Are you kidding? I do almost everything, at least 90 percent." And the husbands 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 distort 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, believing privately what we originally 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.<sup>5</sup>

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 he "had a remarkable capacity to convince himself that he held the principle 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."<sup>6</sup> 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 only to the public might be induced to change them. A president who has justified his actions to himself, believing that he has *the truth*, becomes impervious to self-correction.

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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.<sup>7</sup> How come?

In 1847, Ignac Semmelweiss famously exhorted his fellow physicians to wash their hands before delivering babies. He realized that they must have acquired some kind of "morbid poison" on their hands from doing autopsies on women who had died of childbed fever, then transferred the poison to women in labor. (He didn't know the exact mechanism, but he had the right idea.) Semmelweiss ordered his own medical students to wash their hands in a chlorine antiseptic solution, and death rate from childbed fever dropped rapidly thereafter. Yet his colleagues refused to accept Semmelweiss's concrete evidence, the lower death rate among his own patients.<sup>8</sup> Why didn't they embrace Semmelweiss's discovery immediately, thanking 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 achieves in "male spheres of action" may seem to be successful in the "big league," but she pays 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 makes her frigid, besides: "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."<sup>9</sup> 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 fundamental instinctual strivings?

The sheriff's department in Kern County, California, arrested a retired high-school principal, Patrick Dunn, on suspicion of the murder of his wife. They interviewed two people who told conflicting stories. 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. The other was a career criminal facing six years in prison, who had offered to incriminate Dunn as part of a deal with prosecutors, and who offered nothing to support his story except his word for it. The detectives had to choose between believing the woman (and in Dunn's innocence), or the criminal (and in Dunn's guilt). They chose to believe the criminal.<sup>10</sup> Why?

By understanding the inner workings of self-justification, we can answer these questions and make sense of dozens of other things that people do that would 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 people who cheat their siblings out of a family inheritance: 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 be harmful to the public.

None of us can live without 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 or 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 any? 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 the final chapter, we will step back and see what solutions emerge for ourselves as individuals, for our relationships, for society. Understanding is the first step toward finding solutions that will lead to change and redemption. That is why we wrote this book.

# Chapter 1

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## 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!<sup>1</sup>

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 they 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 their vague and murky predictions were intelligible only after the event occurred.

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.<sup>2</sup> 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 homes, and dispersed their savings, waiting for the end. Who needs money in outer space? Others waited in fear or resignation in their homes. (Mrs. Keech's own husband, a nonbeliever, went to bed early and slept soundly through the night as 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 were waiting with the others for the spaceship would increase their belief in her mystical abilities. In fact, they would now do everything 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 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's members, who had not felt the need to proselytize before December 21, began calling the press to report the miracle, and soon they were out on the streets, buttonholing passersby, trying to convert them. Mrs. Keech's prediction had failed, but not Leon Festinger's.

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The engine that drives self-justification, the energy that produces the need to justify our actions and decisions—especially the wrong ones—is an unpleasant feeling that Festinger called "cognitive dissonance." Cognitive dissonance is a state of tension that occurs whenever a person holds two cognitions (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions) that are psychologically inconsistent, 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, ranging 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, or that smoking is worth the risk because it helps her relax or prevents her from gaining weight (and 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 humans 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 3,000 experiments that, taken together, have transformed psychologists' understanding of how the human mind works. Cognitive dissonance has even escaped academia and entered popular culture. The term is everywhere. The two of us have heard it in TV newscasts, political columns, magazine articles, bumper stickers, even on a soap opera. Alex Trebek used it on *Jeopardy*, Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*, and President Bartlet on *The West Wing*. 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 arrived that same year as a young professor, and they immediately began working together, designing experiments to test and expand dissonance theory.<sup>3</sup> Their thinking challenged many notions that were 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 human beings generally 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 are 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; 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 merely 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 do 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 demonstrated that our behavior transcends the effects of rewards and punishments and often contradicts them.

For example, 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 that I am a sensible, competent person is dissonant with the cognition that I went through a painful procedure to achieve something—say, joining a group that turned out to be boring and worthless. Therefore, I would distort my perceptions of the group in a positive direction, trying to find good things about them 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, and then interview members and ask them how much they like their fraternity. 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 but just want to be in one, any one, will choose fraternities that require mild initiations.

That is why it is 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 at the outset in joining the group, each participant would be randomly assigned to either the severe-initiation or the mild-initiation condition. If people who go through a tough time to get into a group later find that group to be more attractive than those who get in with no effort, then we know that it was the effort that caused it, not differences in initial levels of interest.

And so Elliot and his colleague Judson Mills conducted just such an experiment.<sup>4</sup> Stanford students were invited to join a group that would be discussing the psychology of sex, but before they could qualify for admission, they would first have to pass 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 who have used a variety of initiation techniques, from electric shock to excessive physical exertion.<sup>5</sup> The results are always the same: Severe initiations increase a member's liking for the group. These findings do not mean that people enjoy painful experiences, such as filling out their income-tax forms, or that people enjoy things because they are associated with pain. What they do show is that if a person voluntarily goes through a difficult or a 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, British politician (1903–1991)

Dissonance theory also exploded the self-flattering idea that we humans, being *Homo sapiens*, process information logically. On the contrary: If the 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."<sup>6</sup> Lenny Bruce, the legendary American humorist and social commentator, described it vividly as he watched the famous 1960 confrontation between Richard Nixon and John Kennedy, in the nation's very first televised presidential debate:

I would be with a bunch of Kennedy fans watching the debate and their comment would be, "He's really slaughtering Nixon." Then we would all go to another apartment, and the Nixon fans would say, "How do you like the shellacking he gave Kennedy?" And then I realized that each group loved their candidate so that a guy would have to be this blatant—he would have to look into the camera and say: "I am a thief, a crook, do you hear me, I am the worst choice you could ever make for the Presidency!" And even then his following would say, "Now there's an honest man for you. It takes a big guy to admit that. There's the kind of guy we need for President."<sup>7</sup>

In 2003, after it had become abundantly clear that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Americans who had supported the war and President Bush's reason for launching it were thrown into dissonance: We believed the president, and we (and he) were wrong. How to resolve this? For Democrats who had thought Saddam Hussein had WMDs, the resolution was relatively easy: The Republicans were wrong again; the president lied, or at least was too eager to listen to faulty information; how foolish of me to believe him. For Republicans, however, the dissonance was sharper. More than half of them resolved it by refusing to accept the evidence, telling a Knowledge Networks poll that they believed the weapons *had* been found. The survey's director said, "For some Americans their desire to support the war may be leading them to screen out information that weapons of mass destruction have not been found. Given the intensive news coverage and high levels of public attention to the topic, this level of misinformation suggests that some Americans may be avoiding having an experience of cognitive dissonance." You bet.<sup>8</sup>

Neuroscientists have recently shown that these biases in thinking are built into the very way the brain processes information—all brains, regardless of their owners' political affiliation. For example in a study of people who were being monitored by magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) while they were trying to process dissonant or consonant information about George Bush or John Kerry, Drew Westen and his colleagues found that the reasoning areas of the brain virtually shut down when participants were confronted with dissonant information, and the emotion circuits of the brain lit up happily when consonance was restored.<sup>9</sup> These mechanisms provide a neurological basis for the observation that once our minds are made up, it is hard to change them.

Indeed, even reading information that goes against your point of view can make you all the more convinced you are right. In one experiment, researchers selected people who either favored or opposed capital punishment and asked them to read two scholarly, well-documented articles on the emotionally charged issue of whether the death penalty deters violent crimes. One article concluded that it did; the other that it didn't. If the readers were processing information rationally, they would at least realize that the issue is more complex than they had previously believed and would therefore move a bit closer to each other in their beliefs about capital punishment as a deterrence. But dissonance theory predicts that the readers would find a way to distort the two articles. They would find reasons to classify the confirming article to their bosoms, hailing it as a highly competent piece of work. And they would be supercritical of the disconfirming article, finding minor flaws and magnifying them into major

reasons why they need not be influenced by it. This is precisely what happened. Not only did each side discredit the other's arguments; each side became even more committed to its own. <sup>10</sup>

The confirmation bias even sees to it that no evidence—the absence of evidence—is evidence for what we believe. When the FBI and other investigators failed to find any evidence whatsoever for the belief that the nation had been infiltrated by Satanic cults that were ritually slaughtering babies, believers in these cults were unfazed. The absence of evidence, they said, was confirmation of how clever and evil the cult leaders were: They were eating those babies, bones and all. It's not just fringe cultists and proponents of pop psychology who fall prey to this reasoning. When Franklin D. Roosevelt made the terrible decision to uproot thousands of Japanese Americans and put them in incarceration camps for the duration of World War II, he did so entirely on the basis of rumors that Japanese Americans were planning to sabotage the war effort. There was no proof then or later to support this rumor. Indeed, the Army's West Coast commander, General John DeWitt, admitted that they had no evidence of sabotage or treason against a single Japanese-American citizen. "The very fact that no sabotage has taken place," he said, "is a disturbing and confirming indication that such action *will* be taken."<sup>11</sup>

## Ingrid's Choice, Nick's Mercedes, and Elliot's Canoe

Dissonance theory came to explain far more than the reasonable notion that people are unreasonable processing information. It also showed why they continue to be biased after they have made important decisions. <sup>12</sup> Social psychologist Dan Gilbert, in his illuminating book *Stumbling on Happiness*, asks us to consider what would have happened at the end of *Casablanca* if Ingrid Bergman did not patriotically rejoin her Nazi-fighting husband but instead remained with Humphrey Bogart in Morocco.<sup>13</sup> Would she, as Bogart tells her in a heart-wrenching speech, have regretted it—"maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of your life"? Or did she forever regret leaving Bogart? Gilbert marshals a wealth of data to show that the answer to both questions is no, that either decision would have made her happy in the long run. Bogart was eloquent but wrong, and dissonance theory tells us why: Ingrid would have found reasons to justify either choice, along with reasons to be glad she did not make the other.

Once we make a decision, we have all kinds of tools at our disposal to bolster it. When our frugal, unflashy friend Nick traded in his eight-year-old Honda Civic on a sudden impulse and bought a new, fully loaded Mercedes, he began behaving oddly (for Nick). He started criticizing his friends' cars, saying things like "Isn't it about time you traded in that wreck? Don't you think you deserve the pleasure of driving a well-engineered machine?" and "You know, it's really unsafe to drive little cars. If you got in an accident, you could be killed. Isn't your life worth an extra few thousand dollars? You have no idea how much peace of mind it brings me to know that my family is safe because I'm driving a solid automobile."

It's possible that Nick simply got bitten by the safety bug and decided, coolly and rationally, that it would be wonderful if everyone drove a great car like the Mercedes. But we don't think so. His behavior, both in spending all that money on a luxury car and in nagging his friends to do the same, was so uncharacteristic that we suspected that he was reducing the dissonance he must have felt over impulsively spending a big chunk of his life's savings on what he would once have referred to as "just a car." Besides, he was doing this just when his kids were about to go to college, an event that would

put a strain on his bank account. So Nick began marshalling arguments to justify his decision: "The Mercedes is a wonderful machine; I've worked hard all my life and I deserve it; besides, it's so safe." And if he could persuade his cheapskate friends to buy one too, he would feel doubly justified. Like Mrs. Keech's converts, he began to proselytize.

Nick's need to reduce dissonance (like Ingrid's) was increased by the irrevocability of his decision; he could not unmake that decision without losing a lot of money. Some scientific evidence for the power of irrevocability comes from a clever study of the mental maneuverings of gamblers at racetrack. The racetrack is an ideal place to study irrevocability because once you've placed your bet, you can't go back and tell the nice man behind the window you've changed your mind. In this study, the researchers simply intercepted people who were standing in line to place two-dollar bets and other people who had just left the window. The investigators asked everyone how certain they were that their horses would win. The bettors who had placed their bets were far more certain about their choice than were the folks waiting in line.<sup>14</sup> But, of course, nothing had changed except the finality of placing the bet. People become more certain they are right about something they just did if they can't undo it.

You can see one immediate benefit of understanding how dissonance works: Don't listen to Nick. The more costly a decision, in terms of time, money, effort, or inconvenience, and the more irrevocable its consequences, the greater the dissonance and the greater the need to reduce it by overemphasizing the good things about the choice made. Therefore, when you are about to make a big purchase or an important decision—which car or computer to buy, whether to undergo plastic surgery or whether to sign up for a costly self-help program—don't ask someone who has just done it. That person will be highly motivated to convince you that it is the right thing to do. Ask people who have spent twelve years and \$50,000 on a particular therapy if it helped, and most will say, "Dr. Weltschmerz is wonderful! I would *never* have found true love [got a new job] [lost weight] if it hadn't been for him." After all that time and money, they aren't likely to say, "Yeah, I saw Dr. Weltschmerz for twelve years, and boy, was it ever a waste." If you want advice on what product to buy, ask someone who is still gathering information and is still open-minded. And if you want to know whether a program will help you, don't rely on testimonials: Get the data from controlled experiments.

Self-justification is complicated enough when it follows our conscious choices; at least we know we can expect it. But it also occurs in the aftermath of things we do for unconscious reasons, when we haven't a clue about why we hold some belief or cling to some custom but are too proud to admit it. For example, in the introduction we described the custom of the Dinka and Nuer tribes of the Sudan, who extract several of the permanent front teeth of their children—a painful procedure, done with a fish hook. Anthropologists suggest that this tradition originated during an epidemic of lockjaw; missing front teeth would enable sufferers to get some nourishment. But if that were the reason, why in the world would the villagers continue this custom once the danger had passed?

A practice that makes no sense at all to outsiders makes perfect sense when seen through the lens of dissonance theory. During the epidemic, the villagers would have begun extracting the front teeth of all their children, so that if any later contracted tetanus, the adults would be able to feed them. But this is a painful thing to do to children, especially since only some would become afflicted. To further justify their actions, to themselves and their children, the villagers would need to bolster the decision by adding benefits to the procedure after the fact. For example, they might convince themselves that pulling teeth has aesthetic value—say, that sunken-chin look is really quite attractive—and they might even turn the surgical ordeal into a rite of passage into adulthood. And, indeed, that is just what



happened. "The toothless look is beautiful," the villagers say. "People who have all their teeth are ugly: They look like cannibals who would eat a person. A full set of teeth makes a man look like a donkey." The toothless look has other aesthetic advantages: "We like the hissing sound it creates when we speak." And adults reassure frightened children by saying, "This ritual is a sign of maturity." <sup>15</sup> The original medical justification for the practice is long gone. The psychological self-justification remains.

People want to believe that, as smart and rational individuals, they know why they made the choices they did, so they are not always happy when you tell them the actual reason for their actions. Elliot learned this firsthand after that initiation experiment. "After each participant had finished," he recalls, "I explained the study in detail and went over the theory carefully. Although everyone who went through the severe initiation said that they found the hypothesis intriguing and that they could see how most people would be affected in the way I predicted, they all took pains to assure me that their preference for the group had nothing to do with the severity of the initiation. They each claimed that they liked the group because that's the way they really felt. Yet almost all of them liked the group more than any of the people in the mild-initiation condition did."

No one is immune to the need to reduce dissonance, even those who know the theory inside out. Elliot tells this story: "When I was a young professor at the University of Minnesota, my wife and I tired of renting apartments; so, in December, we set out to buy our first home. We could find only two reasonable houses in our price range. One was older, charming, and within walking distance from the campus. I liked it a lot, primarily because it meant that I could have my students over for research meetings, serve beer, and play the role of the hip professor. But that house was in an industrial area, without a lot of space for our children to play. The other choice was a tract house, newer but totally without distinction. It was in the suburbs, a thirty-minute drive from campus but only a mile from a lake. After going back and forth on that decision for a few weeks, we decided on the house in the suburbs.

"Shortly after moving in, I noticed an ad in the newspaper for a used canoe and immediately bought it as a surprise for my wife and kids. When I drove home on a freezing, bleak January day with the canoe lashed to the roof of my car, my wife took one look and burst into laughter. 'What's so funny?' I asked. She said, 'Ask Leon Festinger!' Of course! I had felt so much dissonance about buying the house in the suburbs that I needed to do something right away to justify that purchase. I somehow managed to forget that it was the middle of winter and that, in Minneapolis, it would be months before the frozen lake would thaw out enough for the canoe to be usable. But, in a sense, without my quite realizing it, I used that canoe anyway. All winter, even as it sat in the garage, its presence made me feel better about our decision."

## **Spirals of Violence—and Virtue**

Feeling stressed? One Internet source teaches you how to make your own little Damn It Doll, which "can be thrown, jabbed, stomped and even strangled till all the frustration leaves you." A little poem goes with it:

When you want to kick the desk or throw the phone and shout

Here's a little damnit doll you cannot do without.

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Just grasp it firmly by the legs, and find a place to slam it.

And as you whack its stuffing out, yell, "damnit, damnit, damnit!"

The Damn It Doll reflects one of the most entrenched convictions in our culture, fostered by the psychoanalytic belief in the benefits of catharsis: that expressing anger or behaving aggressively gets rid of anger. Throw that doll, hit a punching bag, shout at your spouse; you'll feel better afterward. Actually, decades of experimental research have found exactly the opposite: that when people vent their feelings aggressively they often feel worse, pump up their blood pressure, and make themselves even angrier. <sup>16</sup>

Venting is especially likely to backfire if a person commits an aggressive act against another person directly, which is exactly what cognitive dissonance theory would predict. When you do anything that harms someone else—get them in trouble, verbally abuse them, or punch them out—a powerful new factor comes into play: the need to justify what you did. Take a boy who goes along with a group of his fellow seventh graders who are taunting and bullying a weaker kid who did them no harm. The boy likes being part of the gang but his heart really isn't in the bullying. Later, he feels some dissonance about what he did. "How can a decent kid like me," he wonders, "have done such a cruel thing to a nice, innocent little kid like him?" To reduce dissonance, he will try to convince himself that the victim is neither nice nor innocent: "He is such a nerd and crybaby. Besides, he would have done the same to me if he had the chance." Once the boy starts down the path of blaming the victim, he becomes more likely to beat up on the victim with even greater ferocity the next chance he gets. Justifying his first hurtful act sets the stage for more aggression. That's why the catharsis hypothesis is wrong.

The first experiment that demonstrated this actually came as a complete surprise to the investigator. Michael Kahn, then a graduate student in clinical psychology at Harvard, designed an ingenious experiment that he was sure would demonstrate the benefits of catharsis. Posing as a medical technician, Kahn took polygraph and blood pressure measurements from college students, one at a time, allegedly as part of a medical experiment. As he was taking these measurements, Kahn feigned annoyance and made some insulting remarks to the students (having to do with their mothers). The students got angry; their blood pressure soared. In the experimental condition, the students were allowed to vent their anger by informing Kahn's supervisor of his insults; thus, they believed they were getting him into big trouble. In the control condition, the students did not get a chance to express their anger.

Kahn, a good Freudian, was astonished by the results: Catharsis was a total flop. The people who were allowed to express their anger about Kahn felt far greater animosity toward him than did those who were not given that opportunity. In addition, expressing their anger increased their already heightened blood pressure; the high blood pressure of those who were not allowed to express their anger soon returned to normal. <sup>17</sup> Seeking an explanation for this unexpected pattern, Kahn discovered cognitive dissonance theory, which was just getting attention at the time, and realized it could beautifully account for his results. Because the students thought they had gotten him into serious trouble, they had to justify their action by convincing themselves that he deserved it, thus increasing their anger against him—and their blood pressure.

Children learn to justify their aggressive actions early: They hit a younger sibling, who starts to cry, and immediately claim, "But he started it! He deserved it!" Most parents find these childish self-justifications to be of no great consequence, and usually they aren't. But it is sobering to realize that the same mechanism underlies the behavior of gangs who bully weaker children, employers who mistreat workers, lovers who abuse each other, police officers who continue beating a suspect who has surrendered, tyrants who imprison and torture ethnic minorities, and soldiers who commit atrocities against civilians. In all these cases, a vicious circle is created: Aggression begets self-justification, which begets more aggression. Fyodor Dostoevsky understood perfectly how this process works. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, he has Fyodor Pavlovitch, the brothers' scoundrel of a father, recall "how he had once in the past been asked, 'Why do you hate so and so, so much?' And he had answered them, with his shameless impudence, 'I'll tell you. He has done me no harm. But I played him a dirty trick, and ever since I have hated him.'"

Fortunately, dissonance theory also shows us how a person's generous actions can create a spiral of benevolence and compassion, a "virtuous circle." When people do a good deed, particularly when they do it on a whim or by chance, they will come to see the beneficiary of their generosity in a warmer light. Their cognition that they went out of their way to do a favor for this person is dissonant with any negative feelings they might have had about him. In effect, after doing the favor, they ask themselves: "Why would I do something nice for a jerk? Therefore, he's not as big a jerk as I thought he was—as a matter of fact, he is a pretty nice guy who deserves a break."

Several experiments have supported this prediction. In one, college students participated in a contest where they won a substantial sum of money. Afterward, the experimenter approached one third of them and explained that he was using his own funds for the experiment and was running short, which meant he might be forced to close down the experiment prematurely. He asked, "As a special favor to me, would you mind returning the money you won?" (They all agreed.) A second group was also asked to return the money, but this time it was the departmental secretary who made the request, explaining that the psychology department's research fund was running low. (They still all agreed.) The remaining participants were not asked to return their winnings at all. Finally, everyone filled out a questionnaire that included an opportunity to rate the experimenter. Participants who had been cajoled into doing a special favor for him liked him the best; they convinced themselves he was a particularly fine, deserving fellow. The others thought he was pretty nice but not anywhere near as wonderful as the people who had done him a personal favor believed.<sup>18</sup>

Although scientific research on the virtuous circle is new, the general idea may have been discovered in the eighteenth century by Benjamin Franklin, a serious student of human nature as well as science and politics. While serving in the Pennsylvania legislature, Franklin was disturbed by the opposition and animosity of a fellow legislator. So he set out to win him over. He didn't do it, he wrote, by "paying any servile respect to him"—that is, by doing the other man a favor—but by inducing his target to do a favor for *him*—loaning him a rare book from his library:

He sent it immediately and I returned it in about a week with another note, expressing strongly my sense of the favor. When we next met in the House, he spoke to me (which he had never done before), and with great civility; and he ever after manifested a readiness to serve me on all occasions, so that we became great friends, and our friendship continued to his death. This is another instance of the truth of an old maxim I had learned, which says, "He

that has once done you a kindness will be more ready to do you another than he whom you yourself have obliged."<sup>19</sup>

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Dissonance is bothersome under any circumstance, but it is most painful to people when an important element of their self-concept is threatened—typically when they do something that is inconsistent with their view of themselves.<sup>20</sup> If an athlete or celebrity you admire is accused of rape, child molestation, or murder, you will feel a pang of dissonance. The more you identify with this person, the greater the dissonance, because more of yourself would be involved. But you would feel a much more devastating rush of dissonance if you regarded yourself as a person of high integrity and you did something criminal. After all, you can always change your allegiance to a celebrity and find another hero. But if you violated your own values, you would feel much greater dissonance because, at the end of the day, you have to go on living with yourself.

Because most people have a reasonably positive self-concept, believing themselves to be competent, moral, and smart, their efforts at reducing dissonance will be designed to preserve their positive self-images.<sup>21</sup> When Mrs. Keech's doomsday predictions failed, for example, imagine the excruciating dissonance her committed followers felt: "I am a smart person" clashed with "I just did an incredibly stupid thing: I gave away my house and possessions and quit my job because I believed in a crazy woman." To reduce that dissonance, her followers could either have modified their opinion of their intelligence or justified the "incredibly stupid" thing they did. It's not a close contest; it's justification by three lengths. Mrs. Keech's true believers saved their self-esteem by deciding they hadn't done anything stupid; in fact, they had been really smart to join this group because their faith saved the world from destruction. In fact, if everyone else were smart, they would join, too. Where's that busy street corner?

None of us is off the hook on this one. We might feel amused at *them*, those foolish people who believe fervently in doomsday predictions; but, as political scientist Philip Tetlock shows in his book *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?*, even professional "experts" who are in the business of economic and political forecasting are usually no more accurate than us untrained folks—or than Mrs. Keech, for that matter.<sup>22</sup> Hundreds of studies have shown that predictions based on an expert's "personal experience" or "years of training" are rarely better than chance, in contrast to predictions based on actuarial data. But when experts are wrong, the centerpiece of their professional identity is threatened. Therefore, as dissonance theory would predict, the more self-confident and famous they are, the less likely they will be to admit mistakes. And that is just what Tetlock found. Experts reduce the dissonance caused by their failed forecasts by coming up with explanations of why they would have been right "if only"—if only that improbable calamity had not intervened; if only the timing of events had been different; if only blah blah blah.

Dissonance reduction operates like a thermostat, keeping our self-esteem bubbling along on high. That is why we are usually oblivious to the self-justifications, the little lies to ourselves that prevent us from even acknowledging that we made mistakes or foolish decisions. But dissonance theory applies to people with low self-esteem, too, to people who consider themselves to be schnooks, crooks, or incompetents. They are not surprised when their behavior confirms their negative self-image. When they make a wrongheaded prediction or go through a severe initiation to get into a dull group, they merely say, "Yup, I screwed up again; that's just like me." A used-car salesman who

knows that he is dishonest does not feel dissonance when he conceals the dismal repair record of the car he is trying to unload; a woman who believes she is unlovable does not feel dissonance when men reject her; a con man does not experience dissonance when he cheats an old man out of his life's savings.

Our convictions about who we are carry us through the day, and we are constantly interpreting the things that happen to us through the filter of those core beliefs. When they are violated, even by a good experience, it causes us discomfort. An appreciation of the power of self-justification helps us understand, therefore, why people who have low self-esteem, or who simply believe that they are incompetent in some domain, are not totally overjoyed when they do something well; why, on the contrary, they often feel like frauds. If the woman who believes she is unlovable meets a terrific guy who starts pursuing her seriously, she will feel momentarily pleased, but that pleasure is likely to be tarnished by a rush of dissonance: "What does he see in me?" Her resolution is unlikely to be "How nice; I must be more appealing than I thought I was." More likely, it will be "As soon as he discovers the real me, he'll dump me." She will pay a high psychological price to have that consonance restored.

Indeed, several experiments find that most people who have low self-esteem or a low estimate of their abilities do feel uncomfortable with their dissonant successes and dismiss them as accidents or anomalies.<sup>23</sup> This is why they seem so stubborn to friends and family members who try to cheer them up. "Look, you just won the Pulitzer Prize for literature! Doesn't *that* mean you're good?" "Yeah, it's nice, but just a fluke. I'll never be able to write another word, you'll see." Self-justification, therefore, is not only about protecting high self-esteem; it's also about protecting low self-esteem if that is how a person sees himself.

## The Pyramid of Choice

Imagine two young men who are identical in terms of attitudes, abilities, and psychological health. They are reasonably honest and have the same middling attitude toward, say, cheating: They think it not a good thing to do, but there are worse crimes in the world. Now they are both in the midst of taking an exam that will determine whether they will get into graduate school. They each draw a blank on a crucial essay question. Failure looms ... at which point each one gets an easy opportunity to cheat by reading another student's answers. The two young men struggle with the temptation. After a long moment of anguish, one yields and the other resists. Their decisions are a hair's breadth apart; it could easily have gone the other way for each of them. Each gains something important, but at a cost: One gives up integrity for a good grade, the other gives up a good grade to preserve his integrity.

Now the question is: How do they feel about cheating a week later? Each student has had ample time to justify the course of action he took. The one who yielded to temptation will decide that cheating is not so great a crime. He will say to himself: "Hey, everyone cheats. It's no big deal. And I really needed to do this for my future career." But the one who resisted the temptation will decide that cheating is far more immoral than he originally thought: "In fact, people who cheat are disgraceful. In fact, people who cheat should be permanently expelled from school. We have to make an example of them."

By the time the students are through with their increasingly intense levels of self-justification, two things have happened: One, they are now very far apart from one another; and two, they have

internalized their beliefs and are convinced that they have always felt that way.<sup>24</sup> It is as if they had started off at the top of a pyramid, a millimeter apart; but by the time they have finished justifying their individual actions, they have slid to the bottom and now stand at opposite corners of its base. The one who didn't cheat considers the other to be totally immoral, and the one who cheated thinks the other is hopelessly puritanical. This process illustrates how people who have been sorely tempted, battled temptation, and almost given in to it—but resisted at the eleventh hour—come to dislike, even despise, those who did not succeed in the same effort. It's the people who *almost* decide to live in glass houses who throw the first stones.

The metaphor of the pyramid applies to most important decisions involving moral choices or life options. Instead of cheating on an exam, for example, now substitute: deciding to begin a casual affair (or not), sample an illegal drug (or not), take steroids to improve your athletic ability (or not), stay in a troubled marriage (or not), name names to the House Un-American Activities Committee (or not), lie to protect your employer and job (or not), have children (or not), pursue a demanding career (or stay home with the kids). When the person at the top of the pyramid is uncertain, when there are benefits and costs of both choices, then he or she will feel a particular urgency to justify the choice made. But by the time the person is at the bottom of the pyramid, ambivalence will have morphed into certainty, and he or she will be miles away from anyone who took a different route.

This process blurs the distinction that people like to draw between "us good guys" and "those bad guys." Often, standing at the top of the pyramid, we are faced not with a black-and-white, go/ no-go decision, but with a gray choice whose consequences are shrouded. The first steps along the path are morally ambiguous, and the right decision is not always clear. We make an early, apparently inconsequential decision, and then we justify it to reduce the ambiguity of the choice. This starts a process of entrapment—action, justification, further action—that increases our intensity and commitment, and may end up taking us far from our original intentions or principles.

It certainly worked that way for Jeb Stuart Magruder, Richard Nixon's special assistant, who was a key player in the plot to burglarize the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate complex, concealed the White House's involvement, and lied under oath to protect himself and others responsible. When Magruder was first hired, Nixon's adviser Bob Haldeman did not tell him that perjury, cheating, and breaking the law were part of the job description. If he had, Magruder almost certainly would have refused. How, then, did he end up as a central player in the Watergate scandal? It is easy, in hindsight, to say "He should have known" or "He should have drawn the line the first time they asked him to do something illegal."

In his autobiography, Magruder describes his first meeting with Bob Haldeman at San Clemente. Haldeman flattered and charmed him. "Here you're working for something more than just to make money for your company," Haldeman told him. "You're working to solve the problems of the country and the world. Jeb, I sat with the President on the night the first astronauts stepped onto the moon ... I'm part of history being made." At the end of a day of meetings, Haldeman and Magruder left the compound to go to the president's house. Haldeman was enraged that his golf cart was not right there awaiting him, and he gave his assistant a "brutal chewing out," threatening to fire the guy if he couldn't do his job. Magruder couldn't believe what he was hearing, especially since it was a beautiful evening and a short walk to their destination. At first Magruder thought Haldeman's tirade was rude and excessive. But before long, wanting the job as much as he did, Magruder was justifying Haldeman's behavior: "In just a few hours at San Clemente I had been struck by the sheer *perfection*

life there ... After you have been spoiled like that for a while, something as minor as a missing golf cart can seem a major affront."<sup>25</sup>

And so, before dinner and even before having been offered a job, Magruder is hooked. It is a tiny first step, but he is on the road to Watergate. Once in the White House, he went along with all of the small ethical compromises that just about all politicians justify in the goal of serving their party. Then, when Magruder and others were working to reelect Nixon, G. Gordon Liddy entered the picture hired by Attorney General John Mitchell to be Magruder's general counsel. Liddy was a wild card, a James Bond wannabe. His first plan to ensure Nixon's reelection was to spend one million dollars to hire "mugging squads" that would rough up demonstrators; kidnap activists who might disrupt the Republican convention; sabotage the Democratic convention; use "high-class" prostitutes to entice and then blackmail leading Democrats; break into Democratic offices; and use electronic surveillance and wiretapping on their perceived enemies.

Mitchell disapproved of the more extreme aspects of this plan; besides, he said, it was too expensive. So Liddy returned with a proposal merely to break into the DNC offices at the Watergate complex and install wiretaps. This time Mitchell approved, and everyone went along. How did they justify breaking the law? "If [Liddy] had come to us at the outset and said, 'I have a plan to burglarize and wiretap Larry O'Brien's office,' we might have rejected the idea out of hand," wrote Magruder. "Instead, he came to us with his elaborate call girl/kidnapping/mugging/sabotage/wiretapping scheme and we began to tone it down, always with a feeling that we should leave Liddy a little something—we felt we needed him, and we were reluctant to send him away with nothing." Finally, Magruder added, Liddy's plan was approved because of the paranoid climate in the White House: "Decisions that now seem insane seemed at the time to be rational....We were past the point of halfway measures or gentlemanly tactics."<sup>26</sup>

When Magruder first entered the White House, he was a decent man. But, one small step at a time, he went along with dishonest actions, justifying each one as he did. He was entrapped in pretty much the same way as were the 3,000 people who took part in the famous experiment created by social psychologist Stanley Milgram.<sup>27</sup> In Milgram's original version, two-thirds of the participants administered what they thought were life-threatening levels of electric shock to another person, simply because the experimenter kept saying, "The experiment requires that you continue." This experiment is almost always described as a study of obedience to authority. Indeed it is. But it is more than that: It is also a demonstration of long-term results of self-justification.<sup>28</sup>

Imagine that a distinguished-looking man in a white lab coat walks up to you and offers you twenty dollars to participate in a scientific experiment. He says, "I want you to inflict 500 volts of incredibly painful shock to another person to help us understand the role of punishment in learning." Chances are you would refuse; the money isn't worth it to harm another person, even for science. Of course, a few people would do it for twenty bucks and some would not do it for twenty thousand, but most would tell the scientist where he could stick his money.

Now suppose the scientist lures you along more gradually. Suppose he offers you twenty dollars to administer a minuscule amount of shock, say 10 volts, to a fellow in the adjoining room, to see if this zap will improve the man's ability to learn. The experimenter even tries the 10 volts on you, and you can barely feel it. So you agree. It's harmless and the study seems pretty interesting. (Besides, you've always wanted to know whether spanking your kids will get them to shape up.) You go along

for the moment, and now the experimenter tells you that if the learner gets the wrong answer, you must move to the next toggle switch, which delivers a shock of 20 volts. Again, it's a small and harmless jolt. Because you just gave the learner 10, you see no reason why you shouldn't give him 20. And because you just gave him 20, you say to yourself, 30 isn't much more than 20, so I'll go to 30. He makes another mistake, and the scientist says, "Please administer the next level—40 volts."

Where do you draw the line? When do you decide enough is enough? Will you keep going to 45 volts, or even beyond that, to a switch marked XXX DANGER? When people are asked in advance how far they imagine they would go, almost no one says they would go to 450. But when they are actually in the situation, two-thirds of them go all the way to the maximum level they believe is dangerous. They do this by justifying each step as they went along: This small shock doesn't hurt; 20 isn't much worse than 10; if I've given 20, why not 30? As they justified each step, they committed themselves further. By the time people were administering what they believed were strong shocks, most found it difficult to justify a sudden decision to quit. Participants who resisted early in the study, questioning the very validity of the procedure, were less likely to become entrapped by it and more likely to walk out.

The Milgram experiment shows us how ordinary people can end up doing immoral and harmful things through a chain reaction of behavior and subsequent self-justification. When we, as observers, look at them in puzzlement or dismay, we fail to realize that we are often looking at the end of a long slow process down that pyramid. At his sentencing, Magruder said to Judge John Sirica: "I know what I have done, and Your Honor knows what I have done. Somewhere between my ambition and my ideals, I lost my ethical compass." How do you get an honest man to lose his ethical compass? You get him to take one step at a time, and self-justification will do the rest.

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Knowing how dissonance works won't make any of us automatically immune to the allure of self-justification, as Elliot learned when he bought that canoe in January. You can't just say to people, as he did after the initiation experiments, "See how you reduced dissonance? Isn't that interesting?" and expect them to reply, "Oh, thank you for showing me the real reason I like the group. That sure makes me feel smart!" All of us, to preserve our belief that we are smart, will occasionally do dumb things. We can't help it. We are wired that way.

But this does not mean that we are doomed to keep striving to justify our actions after the fact—like Sisyphus, never reaching the top of the hill of self-acceptance. A richer understanding of how and why our minds work as they do is the first step toward breaking the self-justification habit. And that, in turn, requires us to be more mindful of our behavior and the reasons for our choices. It takes time, self-reflection, and willingness.

The conservative columnist William Safire once described the "psychopolitical challenge" that voters face: "how to deal with cognitive dissonance."<sup>29</sup> He began with a story of his own such challenge. During the Clinton administration, Safire recounted, he had criticized Hillary Clinton for trying to conceal the identity of the members of her health-care task force. He wrote a column castigating her efforts at secrecy, which he said were toxic to democracy. No dissonance there; those bad Democrats are always doing bad things. Six years later, however, he found that he was "afflicted by cognitive dissonance when Vice President Dick Cheney, a fellow conservative Republican whom



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