

**Always the Hero to Ourselves:  
The Role of Self-Deception in Unethical Behavior**

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Number one and foremost, I threw my whole life and lived my life in a certain way to make sure that I would never violate any law -- certainly never any criminal laws -- and always maintained that most important to me was my integrity, was my character, were my values, and then -- and have always taken that very seriously.  
 --Former Enron CEO Ken Lay

Many people would doubt Ken Lay's sincerity as he claimed, during a 2004 interview on CNN, that what he valued most about himself was his integrity. Many people, that is, except Lay himself, who likely felt wholeheartedly sincere when he said so. Humans have a deep-seated need to see themselves in a positive light (Greenwald, 1980), a need that is particularly acute in the moral domain (Blasi, 1984). Nearly everyone believes strongly that they are moral, and holds the view that their actions are appropriate, honorable, and fair (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985; Van Lange & Sedikides, 1998). In other words, we are the heroes of our own narratives. However, this common belief sits uncomfortably with the fact that most of us behave, with distressing frequency, in ways are inappropriate, dishonorable, and unfair (Ariely, 2012; Callahan, 2004; Gabor, 1994). We resolve this common contradiction—that we often *in fact* behave in ways that we like to think we don't—through self-deception, “the active misrepresentation of reality to the conscious mind” (Trivers, 2000, p. 114). This chapter is about the way in which self-deception supports our ability to think of ourselves as the hero of our own narratives, when in fact we have been anything but.

### **THE ORIGINS OF RESEARCH ON SELF-DECEPTION**

The topic of self-deception was originally the domain of philosophers. Their main interest was in the epistemological paradox that strict understandings of self-deception represent (Fingarette, 1969; Haight, 1980; Mele, 2001). In its most literal sense, self-deception is a logical

fallacy, as it requires someone to simultaneously know and not know something to be true.

However, denying that self-deception exists depends upon a number of assumptions about the nature of human knowledge, most notably that we are conscious and actively aware of all of our beliefs at all times. Psychological theory since Freud introduced the idea that human perception, information processing, storage, and retrieval could be both motivated and function on multiple levels of consciousness (1900/1955) has questioned whether human knowledge was best understood as monolithic in this way. Once psychological theory opened up the possibility the self-deception might mean something other than consciously and simultaneously holding two contradictory beliefs, efforts to demonstrate it began to show the various ways in which we can trick ourselves into believing what we want to believe, and trick ourselves out of confronting what we would rather not admit about ourselves.

Gur and Sackheim (1979) published the first effort to demonstrate self-deception empirically. Their experiment was designed to demonstrate the following classic criteria of self-deception: (1) that an individual holds two contradictory beliefs, (2) simultaneously, (3) without being aware of doing so, and that (4) this is a motivated act. Using a clever paradigm, they had participants record their own voices, and then to listen to 30 audio clips, of both their own and others' voices, with instructions to indicate whether each clip was a recording of their own voice or someone else's. They were interested in when one misidentified another's voice as one's own (narcissistic self-deception), or misidentified one's own voice as another's (self-avoidant self-deception), without indicating conscious awareness of having done so. They also tracked participants' galvanic skin responses (GSR) while doing so, making an argument that high GSR levels represent an unconscious awareness of one's own voice, since individuals show higher levels of GSR when confronted with oneself compared to others (1979). They found that when

participants heard their own voice, GSR levels remained steady, regardless of whether they had consciously identified the voice as their own. The authors argue that these results show that individuals accurately recognize their own voice unconsciously, even when they do not identify it as such at a conscious level.

### **Self-Deception in Unethical Behavior**

Of course, the moral implications of disavowing one's own voice or identifying another's voice as one's own are not necessarily obvious. However, it is easier to make the case for the relevance of this research to moral psychology when one realizes that the participants' voice misidentifications were motivated by whether the self was positively or negatively regarded. Gur and Sackheim's final experiment demonstrated that individuals whose self-esteem had been temporarily boosted (making self-confrontation less aversive) were more likely to misidentify others' voices as their own, while individuals whose self-esteem had been threatened (making self-confrontation more aversive) were more likely to identify their own voice as someone else's (1979). This final study showed that one's conscious beliefs about whether the voice they were hearing was their own were motivated by whether the participants felt positively or negatively about themselves at the time. If the tendency to believe that an action is caused by oneself is greater when it has positive mental associations, and the tendency to believe an action is caused by another is greater when it has negative mental associations, then it becomes easier to see how self-deception one might facilitate unethical behavior. The same mental processes that support the conscious belief that our own voice is not our own when the self feels aversive support the disavowal of our immoral actions as our own (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004).

Several scholars have noted the usefulness of self-deception in facilitating unethical behavior (Levy, 2004; Lu & Chang, 2011; Martin, 1986; Rick et al., 2008; Tenbrunsel,

Diekmann, Wade-Benzoni, & Bazerman, 2010; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). The contradiction between the deep-seated need to see ourselves as moral often succumbing to temptations to behave in morally compromised ways causes a misalignment between our actions and our beliefs about ourselves, leading to the aversive state known as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Festinger & Freedman, 1964). Resolving this dissonance requires us either to change our behavior to align more closely with our beliefs, or to change our beliefs to align more closely with our behavior. Since it is easier to change beliefs than it is to change behavior, we tend to resolve dissonance through changing our beliefs (Cooper, 2007). This is particularly convenient in the moral domain, as changing our moral beliefs is what allows us behave unethically without tarnishing our self-image.

Most research on self-deception from a psychological perspective does not provide evidence of two simultaneously held contradictory beliefs, as Gur and Sackheim criteria for self-deception require. Rather, psychological work on self-deception has focused on what Trivers calls “the active misrepresentation of reality to the conscious mind” (2000, p. 114), such that the view one has of oneself or one’s actions is distorted to facilitate believing that we are morally upstanding when we have not been. In this chapter I focus on the various strategies that individuals employ when faced with a potential misalignment between their morally questionable behavior and their belief that they are moral. These self-deceptive strategies tend to take one of three forms, together representing what Tenbrunsel and Messick call our “internal con game”, which “allow one to behave self-interestedly while, at the same time, falsely believing that one’s moral principles were upheld” (2004, p. 223).

The first of these strategies involves *motivated attention*. In this self-deceptive strategy, we either (1) under-attend to evidence that undermines our ability to maintain positive beliefs

about ourselves as moral, and (2) over-attend to evidence that supports our ability to maintain our heroic beliefs about ourselves. This strategy shines a spotlight on what we want to know about ourselves or our behavior, and helps keep what we'd prefer not know about ourselves or our behavior in the shadows.

The second of these strategies involves *motivated construal*. In this self-deceptive strategy, we are aware of the objective reality of our own morally problematic behavior, but find ways to redefine it as morally innocuous (or at least morally justifiable). We accomplish this through (3) reframing the act as acceptable or (4) minimizing our responsibility for our behavior, and (5) exploiting situational ambiguity to our advantage.

The third of these strategies involves *motivated recall*. This self-deceptive strategy mirrors motivated attention, except that it involves (6) forgetting what we'd rather not know about ourselves, and (7) inventing self-serving versions of past events, potentially even to the point that we create memories of past events that never happened. Since our self-view depends heavily on how we make sense of our past behavior, these strategies can be particularly useful in editing our narrative to ensure that we can claim that the most important thing to us is our integrity, and feel sincere as we do so, even when our actions do not support this belief. Just like Ken Lay was able to, even as he was being convicted of several counts of securities fraud.

### **Motivated Attention**

The primary way that individuals deceive themselves about the status of future behavior is to find ways to refrain from telling oneself the whole truth about the action or its potential consequences (von Hippel & Trivers, 2011, p. 7). This typically involves directing our attention to what we most want to believe, either by actively searching for information that allows us to

define our actions as more morally appropriate than they are, or by avoiding information that would force us to confront the moral status of our actions.

(1) *Overattention to or bolstering evidence that supports moral self-views.* Individuals also self-deceive through motivated information search strategies, such as cutting information search short once one has the information one is looking for, or continuing information search if one hasn't yet heard what one wants. These strategies are often grouped under the rubric of confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998). Classic demonstrations of motivated information search to support preferred beliefs about the self used paradigms involving personal health. In these studies, individuals given unfavorable diagnoses were more likely to retest the validity of the result, and evaluate the test as less accurate, compared to those given favorable diagnoses (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Ditto, Munro, Apanovitch, Scepanky, & Lockhart, 2003). In one study, individuals waited 60% longer for a saliva test strip to change color when they had been led to believe that a color change reveals a positive indication about one's health, compared to when they had been led to believe that it indicated disease (Ditto & Lopez, 1992). Motivated information search has been shown to be particularly pernicious in the legal domain, where expectations about an alleged perpetrator's guilt or innocence has been shown to drive investigators' questioning, and as a result, affects the likelihood that suspects will be considered guilty (Hill, Memon, & McGeorge, 2008; O'Brien, 2009).

It is easy to see how motivated information search would be useful in supporting unethical behavior. During a scandal that rocked Hewlett Packard in the mid-2000s, private detectives, hired to help determine whom among the members of the board of directors was leaking corporate strategy to the media, impersonated board members in order to access their phone records. Senior officials within Hewlett Packard associated with the investigation

continually sought reassurance from the legal department that the use of such strategies, called pretexting, were within the bounds of the law, and kept asking until they heard what they wanted to hear: that doing so wasn't *technically* illegal (Stewart, 2007). Asking repeatedly about the legality of impersonating others to access their phone records allowed the executives to wait until they heard what they wanted, which gave them permission to continue. They then overvalued this advice over the more tentative advice they had earlier received, considering it the final word on the practice—because they stopped asking once they heard what they wanted. These strategies—actively seeking evidence that pretexting was within the bounds of the law, and then giving preferential treatment to evidence supporting this desired belief—are both representative of a confirmation bias that supported the executives' beliefs that what they were doing was acceptable.

Sometimes our desire to see our actions or ourselves in a certain way can motivate us to go beyond the mere search for information that supports our desired beliefs. The need to see ourselves in a certain way can be so great that we will actively construct evidence to support our desired beliefs. This can be seen in another early study of self-deception, in which subjects were informed that individuals with healthy hearts could sustain their arm being submerged in extremely cold water for either an extremely long period or a very short period of time (Quattrone & Tversky, 1984). Compared to baseline tolerance levels, 71% of participants shifted their cold water tolerance in the direction that indicated they would live a long and healthy life, even when that meant keeping their arm submerged in intolerably cold water for longer than they had just claimed was their highest level of tolerance. Moreover, the majority of participants denied trying to shift their tolerance levels in the direction that would indicate a healthy heart. In other words, they inflicted pain on themselves in order to support their desired belief that they

had a “healthy” heart, even as they denied they were doing so. It turns out that suffering through physical pain is preferable to the psychological pain of accurate understanding.

(2) *Neglect or strategic avoidance of evidence that undermines moral self-views.* In addition to shining a light on evidence that supports our preferred beliefs about ourselves, we also disproportionately neglect information that may undermine our moral self-views. Avoiding information that might force us to confront ethical failings has been described as “willful ignorance”. Studies demonstrating selective attention to undesirable or unwanted information frequently use health contexts. For example, individuals avoid being tested for medical conditions they believe are untreatable (Dawson, Savitsky, & Dunning, 2006). Ethically motivated instances of willful ignorance have also been demonstrated in the literature. Ehrich and Irwin (2005) studied willful ignorance in the context of consumer choice, and showed that individuals under-request information about the ethical attributes of a product if that information is important to them. This intentional avoidance of potentially damning information about consumer products allows individuals to make purchasing decisions without having to face uncomfortable information about how that product is manufactured.

In a review of the literature, Sweeny and colleagues offer three primary reasons why individuals may be motivated to avoid information (Sweeny, Melnyk, Miller, & Shepperd, 2010). First, avoiding information allows individuals to *maintain beliefs* that might otherwise be threatened (such as “I am a moral person”). Second, avoidance allows us to *act* in ways that they might otherwise feel compelled to refrain from (such as unethical behavior). And finally, avoidance allows us to *avoid unpleasant emotions* elicited by the action (such as guilt or shame). One can see how all three of these reasons were at play in the actions of David Kugel, a longtime trader for Ponzi-schemer Bernie Madoff, as he avoided thinking about his role in the massive

financial losses suffered by victims of Madoff’s fraud. We know now that, starting as far back as the 1980s, Madoff created fictitious trading reports that demonstrated consistently high and stable investment returns, but instead used investors’ capital to pay out customers when they wanted to withdraw—simply robbing Peter to pay Paul. As one of his henchmen, Kugel’s trial testimony makes clear that he avoided questioning Madoff about the source of his investment returns (Hays & Neumeister, 2013). By ensuring he didn’t know the whole truth about the extent of Madoff’s fraud, he was able to (1) *maintain the belief* that he was not participating in a fraud, (2) *engage in activity* that generated significant financial returns for himself personally, and (3) *avoid the unpleasant emotion* of guilt while doing so. Avoiding information we prefer not to know allows us to maintain plausible deniability to ourselves, while receiving the benefits that unethical behavior often brings to us personally.

Our need to satisfy our tenacious desire to see ourselves in a positive light means that we will both actively avoid evidence that undermines this belief, as well as actively seek evidence that supports it. While these strategies may not mean that we consciously hold the truth in mind while attending to preferred information, it does mean that we are “acting in ways that keep one uninformed about unwanted information”, rendering the “knowable unknown” (Bandura, 2011, p. 16), thus actively ensuring we do not confront the truth about our behavior.

### **Motivated Construal**

The second way we deceive ourselves about unethical behavior involves the nature of the behavior itself, and the way we understand our responsibility for that behavior. This strategy does not require actively seeking evidence that supports our moral self-image, or actively avoiding evidence that would be difficult to square with a desire to see oneself as moral. Instead, it involves construing immoral behavior as morally unproblematic. We do this by (3) framing the

behavior as acceptable, (4) minimizing how we understand our responsibility for the behavior, and by (5) taking advantage of situational ambiguity to interpret the behavior in a preferred way. All of these strategies allow us to understand our behavior such that it tempers its less savory elements, allowing us to avoid confronting how it challenges our ability to think of ourselves as moral individuals.

(3) *Framing our actions as morally acceptable.* It is difficult to participate in behavior that we actively admit is unethical, as to do so challenges our need to maintain a positive moral self-image. As a result, one might think it is only possible to actively engage in unethical behavior while maintaining it isn't through blatant insincerity—as one might suspect upon hearing Ken Lay proclaiming how important integrity was to him. However, individuals are adept at construing their actions, whatever they are, as being morally innocuous—or at the least, morally justifiable—even though they may very clearly violate moral principles that the individual consciously and actively upholds. Nearly sixty years ago, Mills (1958) showed this in a study of schoolchildren. First, their views about cheating were solicited. Then, after then being presented with an opportunity to cheat, the views of those who did cheat (particularly those who did so with the promise of only a small reward) became substantially more lenient.

Recently, an MBA student I taught wrote an essay for my class in which he clearly stated that theft was wrong, and that he would never steal. In the next paragraph, he claimed that the fact that he took the newspaper without paying for it every day from Starbucks was not theft, but rather a justified act of retaliation against a greedy corporation that charged too much for their coffee. When I suggested in my feedback that these two positions were logically inconsistent—trying to force him to confront the objective reality that taking the newspaper without paying for it *was* theft—he reiterated that taking the newspaper was not theft, because he wouldn't steal.

Rather, taking the paper allowed him to get “one up on this huge money sucking organization”, “preventing a bad organization from earning the most minute and irrelevant of costs”. I detected no insincerity in his comments. He did truly believe that theft was wrong, but very clearly defined the action of taking the newspaper without paying for it as unrepresentative of the immoral category of “theft”.

When we cannot deny having engaged in a behavior (in this example, taking the newspaper without paying for it), the only route available that allows us to maintain our positive moral self-regard is to define that behavior as morally innocuous or justifiable. My student was able to neutralize the cognitive dissonance he would have experienced if he had construed taking the newspaper as theft through a series of cognitive mechanisms that have come to be known as moral disengagement (Bandura, 1990). These mechanisms include moral justification (thinking of one’s action as worthy as it meets a higher purpose, such as when my student considered theft of the paper as “preventing a bad organization from earning”), distorting consequences (thinking of the theft as an insignificant act, calling it “minute and irrelevant”), euphemistic labeling (using exonerating language to support thinking of the act as morally innocuous, such as when the student called the decision to steal the paper on a daily basis “a new Starbucks purchasing policy”). Moral disengagement allows us to engage in unethical behavior while believing it is moral, and facility in using these mechanisms is associated with a host of unethical behaviors, from cheating on tests to outright criminality (for a review, see Moore, in press).

Though Bandura denies that moral disengagement requires literal self-deception, he does acknowledge that when individuals are confronted with evidence that would dispute their ability to maintain positive moral self-regard, moral disengagement allows them to “question its credibility, dismiss its relevance, or twist it to fit their views” (Bandura, 1991, p. 95). Thus,

while the act of morally disengaging may not meet the strict criteria of self-deception that confounds the philosophers—actively believing what one consciously knows to be false—it does meet the definition of self-deception put forward by Trivers, “the active misrepresentation of reality to the conscious mind” (2000, p. 114). In the case of my MBA student, this involved actively holding the belief that theft was wrong and that he would not steal, while simultaneously defining taking the newspaper without paying for it as “not theft”. To deceive himself about the moral status of his actions, he did not need to consciously hold the belief that taking the newspaper is theft while consciously acknowledging he was taking the newspaper without paying for it. Rather, he twisted his understanding of his actions, using morally disengaged logic, so that it didn’t fall into a category he actively holds as morally problematic.

Research supports the idea that self-exonerating construals of our immoral acts are motivated by our desire to ensure our positive moral self-regard (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). This work shows that when exonerating justifications are available, unethical behavior increases (Shalvi, Dana, Handgraaf, & De Dreu, 2011), and when the opportunity to use exonerating logic is hampered, unethical behavior decreases (Bersoff, 1999). In Shalvi and colleagues’ work (2011), participants were paid based on the outcome of a die roll, receiving in dollars the number they reported rolling on the die. In some conditions, participants only rolled the die once; in other conditions, they rolled the die multiple times (but were instructed to report only the outcome of the first roll). Participants were more likely to lie when the die had been rolled multiple times, and particularly when one of their “uncounted” rolls was a high number, as this provided them with a “desired counterfactual”, allowing them to think “I *almost* got a high number”, and report that number instead. The presence of the desired counterfactual supported over-reporting their die roll with less harm to the self-concept.

Conversely, Bersoff (1999) tested whether removing obvious avenues of exonerating logic would decrease unethical behavior. He showed that participants were less likely to keep an experimenter's overpayment in experimental conditions that intentionally undermined the participants' ability to construct neutralizing rationalizations for keeping the extra money. When participants were informed that the money they were being paid was coming from a student's personal funds, or when participants were asked directly by the experimenter whether the amount they had just counted out to pay them was correct, it became more difficult for the participants' to trick themselves into thinking that keeping the overpayment was acceptable, and made them less likely to do so (Bersoff, 1999).

*(4) Minimizing or responsibility for the act.* It can sometimes be easier to minimize the extent to which we consider ourselves morally responsible for our actions than it is to reconstrue the actions themselves as morally unproblematic. Thus, another way that we misrepresent reality to ourselves is by denying that we were responsible for our own behavior. This route towards self-deception involves denying responsibility for actions that the actor clearly undertook. That we are motivated to make internal attributions about positive outcomes (thinking that we were personally responsible for them) and external attributions for negative outcomes (thinking that external factors caused them) is a basic truth in social psychology (Arkin, Cooper, & Kolditz, 1980; Zuckerman, 1979). In addition, our tendency to make self-serving attributions about the causes of our behavior increases to the extent that our ego is involved in the outcome (Miller, 1976).

Given that unethical behavior is a negative outcome with particular relevance to our egos, we will be particularly motivated to make external attributions about the unethical outcomes we cause. People can go to great lengths to pass off their moral responsibility to external causes. The

legal defense of Ken Lay, for example, blamed short sellers, a nervous stock market, and negative press for Enron's failings—anything but understanding that, as the CEO, he likely played a role in the company's failure (New York Times, 2006). That we are motivated to misattribute the causes of our bad behavior to external sources was cleverly shown in a study of collegiate cheating (Forsyth, Pope, & McMillan, 1985). The authors created an experimental paradigm in which participants either actively cheated, or merely observed a confederate cheating. When participants cheated, they were more likely to make external attributions for their actions, and more likely to see those actions as not representative of their typical behavior, than when they did not cheat (Forsyth et al., 1985). We are actually more likely to elicit causal reasoning about negative outcomes than positive outcomes, perhaps as a means to support the self-deception that we aren't the causal agents of negative outcomes (Taylor, 1991).

Two mechanisms of moral disengagement—displacement and diffusion of responsibility—represent examples how we can make self-serving attributions about the causes of events (Kunda, 1987; Miller & Ross, 1975), supporting a self-deceptive belief that we are something less than the causal agent of negative ethical outcomes. Displacement of responsibility occurs when individuals attribute responsibility for their actions to an authority figure rather than themselves. Milgram's studies on obedience to authority revealed how individuals were able to inflict pain on others so long as they were able to think of the authority figure as the person, ultimately, to blame for their actions—a cognitive move Milgram termed the “agentic shift” (1974). Similarly, the classic studies on the bystander effect show how the presence of others allows us to diffuse our responsibility to those in our vicinity (Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané & Darley, 1968). These classic studies show how easily we can treat moral responsibility for undesirable outcomes like a hot potato: easily thrown to anyone within range.

We can also misattribute responsibility for our actions to those whom we harm as causally initiating our own behavior. Calling Starbucks a “bad... money sucking organization” allowed my MBA student to reframe newspaper theft as a justified act of revenge. A more heinous example of blaming the victim for one’s own behavior can be found in the history of the My Lai massacre, an episode in the American conflict with Vietnam during which U.S. soldiers killed several hundred civilians (the exact figure has never been conclusively determined). Paul Meadlo, one of the primary perpetrators of the massacre, reported shortly afterward that the killings “did take a load off my conscience” because they represented “revenge... for the buddies we’d lost” (Hersh, 2015). When we cast ourselves as victims of other’s prior misdeeds, we are more able to hold on to the belief that we deserve no blame for our misbehavior (Zitek, Jordan, Monin, & Leach, 2010). In addition, construing victims as undeserving of kind or respectful treatment facilitates perceiving our actions against them as moral because they “deserve” it.

If we trick ourselves into thinking that we are not the causal agent of our own behavior, we can forgive ourselves for engaging in it, leaving our moral self-image untarnished. A compelling study that included in-depth interviews with several bystanders during the Holocaust found they described their inaction as predetermined: they understood doing nothing as their only possible course of action (Monroe, 2001). Of course, this conviction flies in the face of the hundreds of similar others who fought in the Resistance or actively strove to rescue endangered others (and who, interestingly, also describe their actions as predetermined). However, conceiving of the decision to stand by as the only possible course of action while millions were murdered for their faith or other differences permitted immunity from feeling responsible for what they did. It also allowed them to believe that their inaction did not undermine their identity

as moral individuals: if there was nothing else they could have done, then their identity is moral individuals remained threatened (Monroe, 2008).

*(5) Taking advantage of ambiguity to construe behavior as morally innocuous.* Our circumstances often have characteristics that facilitate ambiguous interpretations of our actions. When situational ambiguity is present, we tend to interpret available cues and information in ways that allow us to paint ourselves in the best light. For example, when making self-evaluations about what traits one possesses, individuals take advantage of ambiguity in the definitions of positive and negative traits to ensure that they can be most associated with positive traits and distanced from negative ones (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). In assessing whether one is moral, for example, an individual would give preferential weight to their charitable work (using “charitable” as a defining characteristic of the trait “moral”), and minimize all the times they had misrepresented their income on their taxes (failing to use “honest” as a defining characteristic of the trait “moral”).

Situational ambiguity can be exploited to an actor’s advantage, facilitating problematic behavior while allowing the individual to interpret the behavior in a more flattering way. Snyder documented this in the domain of discrimination using an experimental paradigm in which individuals had to choose to sit either near to or far from someone who was disabled (Snyder, Kleck, Strenta, & Mentzer, 1979). In front of each empty seat was a television, but in one condition, the televisions were showing the same program, and in the other they were showing different programs. Not wanting to appear prejudiced, individuals largely chose to sit near the disabled person when the televisions were showing the same program, but largely chose to avoid the disabled person when the programs were different. The different programs created an

ambiguity about the participants' motives that allowed them to behave prejudicially without seeming that they were.

Batson's experiments on moral hypocrisy provide a good example of how we can abuse situational ambiguity to "appear moral to oneself without being so" (Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999). In these experiments, participants were informed the experiment involved two tasks which they had to delegate between themselves and another participant. One task was long and boring and the other was fun and came with the opportunity to win an additional financial bonus. When participants were informed that prior participants had rated a coin flip as the fairest way to assign the tasks, half chose to assign the tasks this using this method, yet 90% of participants who flipped the coin somehow ended up with the fun task (Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997). By not specifying in advance which side of the coin meant that they would take on the fun task, participants were free to interpret the result of any coin toss in a way more favorable to themselves, while allowing themselves the appearance of being fair (for an overview, see Batson, this volume).

Ambiguity also allows us to more easily trick ourselves into thinking that our actions do not fit problematic moral categories. Like the MBA student who was able to construe "taking the newspaper" as not belonging to the category of theft, Mazar and colleagues' tested "categorical malleability" as an amplifier of unethical behavior. They found that participants were more likely to dishonestly report their performance when they earned tokens for correct answers rather than money, even though the participants knew that were going to exchange the tokens 1:1 for money at the end of the experiment (Mazar et al., 2008). In their view, using tokens as a medium between over-reporting their performance and actually taking unearned money for it increased

unethical behavior because it was less like theft to take extra tokens, and then convert them to money, than to take the extra cash outright.

Another type of ambiguity involves “wobble room”. In this type of ambiguity, actors use situational elements to ease taking advantage of others. In a series of experiments, Schweitzer and Hsee (2002) manipulated the wobble room participants had to misrepresent reality to others, to give them an advantage in various negotiation contexts. For example, in one study participants took on the role of someone trying to sell a used car for which accurate mileage information was unavailable, and that the buyers would believe the car had 60,000 miles on it. In one condition they were told that the likely mileage of the car was between 74,000 and 76,000, and in a second condition they were told that the likely mileage was between 60,000 and 90,000. Given the wobble room of a wider range of the possible mileage of the car, participants were much more likely to report that the actual mileage was 60,000 (Schweitzer & Hsee, 2002). In another series of experiments designed to test wobble room, Dana and colleagues (2007) adapted a standard dictator game in a number of ways to make the role of the dictator in making unfair allocations more opaque. In the standard paradigm, three quarters of participants chose to fairly distribute \$10 between themselves and the recipient. However, in each of the three additional conditions that introduced ambiguity about whether the dictators chose fairly or not, the proportion of dictators who did so halved (Dana et al., 2007).

Examples from the real world show how easy it is to take advantage of situational ambiguity in order to further selfish agendas. For example, Carmen Segarra, a recent whistleblower at the New York Federal Reserve, exposed how Goldman Sachs was operating without a comprehensive and articulated policy to define and manage conflicts of interest. Without a clear, written conflict of interest policy that applied to all divisions of the bank,

Goldman bankers had the procedural room to operate on both sides of a deal. Representing both the buyer and the seller in a transaction creates a conflict of interest because the motivations of each cannot be kept confidential, and the fiduciary duty of undivided loyal to one's client is becomes divided. When Segarra asked Goldman executives how such conflicts were managed, they pointed to "briefings" of the parties to the transaction, and an invisible "Chinese Wall" between the bankers on either side of the deal. In reality, however, the ambiguity created by the lack of a comprehensive policy facilitated interpreting these measures as an effective way to manage such conflicts of interest, when in fact they were not (Bernstein, 2013, 2014).

Together, the work described in this section shows that engaging in an unethical act—from cheating to stealing the newspaper at Starbucks to following military orders to kill civilians—triggers us to seek understandings of that act as consonant with our beliefs, even if that means deceiving ourselves about our original views about the moral status of the act. It underscores the importance of cognitive dissonance in the relationship between self-deception and unethical behavior. Since it is aversive to our self-concept to think of ourselves as unethical, when we do behave unethically, we seek ways to square having done this with our understanding of ourselves as moral. If this requires that we change our beliefs about the moral status of our actions, we are more than happy to comply. As Private First Class Paul Meadlo described his participation in My Lai, where he estimates he killed 15 civilians, "At the time it didn't bother me. We all thought we were doing the right thing" (Hersh, 2015). Clearly, an outsider's perspective allows one to see how Meadlo was deceiving himself about the moral status of his actions. However, the drive to reduce the dissonance triggered by the discrepancy between what he was doing and his need to believe that was he was doing was the right thing made him able to

construe participation in a massacre as moral. So long as we are adept at redefining our actions as moral, we can deceive ourselves in to thinking that any atrocity we engage in is acceptable.

### **Motivated Recall**

The third way that self-deception supports unethical behavior is through faulty encoding and retrieval of our past actions. Research has robustly shown how faulty human memory is (Walker, Skowronski, & Thompson, 2003). Time allows us to forget things that we would rather not remember, or, if forced to recall them, time gives us the space to invent more self-serving explanations for having participated in them. Self-serving attributions are exacerbated in memory, such that we make even more external attributions for negative outcomes when we recall them a few days later than when we did immediately after the event (Burger, 1986). Biased memory is particularly evident in the moral domain (Tenbrunsel et al., 2010). Since it is so important both to believe we are ethical, and to recall our prior actions as coherent with how we see ourselves, prior transgressions will be recalled less often than prior good deeds, and when we do recall prior transgressions, both the acts and our involvement in them will have morphed to be for forgiving to our moral self-image.

(6) *Forgetting what we'd rather not know.* Since we are threatened by feedback that has unfavorable implications for our central self-aspects, poor recall of this information facilitates our ability to think of our past behavior in a positive light. Sedikides, Green and colleagues have studied how individuals exhibit poorer recall of self-relevant information that is negative—though they are able to recognize this information as easily as self-relevant positive information (Green, Sedikides, & Gregg, 2008; Sedikides & Green, 2004, 2009). However, this bias is eliminated when individuals have affirmed the self prior to recalling the events, suggesting that our selective recall of information that reflects poorly on us is motivated by self-enhancement

needs (Green et al., 2008). In terms of unethical behavior, poor recall allows us to maintain a view of ourselves about which we can be proud rather than ashamed. And in fact, we remember in greater detail personal history about which we are proud, compared to personal history about which we are ashamed, even though we do not show the same bias when recalling stories about others about whom we feel admiration and contempt (D'Argembeau & Van der Linden, 2008).

Perhaps the tendency to forget prior actions that threaten our moral self-image explains why former U.S. President Ronald Reagan's Congressional testimony regarding his involvement in the Iran-Contras scandal is so liberal in its use of the phrase "I don't recall" (Chicago Tribune, 1990). While there were certainly important legal and public relations advantages to Reagan's inability to remember ways in which he may have approved actions or condoned decisions during the Iran-Contra affair, his failures in recall are also useful in maintaining his moral self-image, through the belief that he was uninvolved in the scandal. Higher levels of selective memory are associated with lower levels of social anxiety, suggesting there is something adaptive about forgetting what we would rather not remember (O'Banion & Arkowitz, 1977). In fact, we get better at distorting our memories as we get older—older adults show more "emotionally gratifying memory distortion" than younger adults (Mather & Carstensen, 2005), suggesting that self-deception in our memory and recall is part of an adaptive process that allows us to maintain a more even emotional keel as we age.

Perhaps the clearest effort to show that we are motivated to forget what we would rather not remember in terms of our unethical behavior comes from Shu and colleagues (Shu & Gino, 2012; Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011). They document how individuals "forget" moral rules (such as elements of an honor code that they were exposed to before being given an opportunity to cheat) after cheating, even though they are no less likely to "forget" other pieces of

information (such as facts from the Department of Motor Vehicles manual). Moreover, ethics-related concepts appear to be less cognitively accessible for individuals who cheat—a sort of motivated attention away from ethical concepts, but this time in the rear view mirror (Shu & Gino, 2012). These findings are supported by recent research in neurobiology that documents, on a neural level, that we can actively forget unwanted memories (Anderson et al., 2004). In other words, there are neural systems designed to keep things we would rather not know outside our awareness.

(7) *Fabricating alternate histories.* We do not only proactively forget what we would rather not remember. We also “remember” versions of the past that never existed. For example, research suggests that individuals come to believe fabrications about the past events, and that their “memory” of these past events gains traction over time (Chrobak & Zaragoza, 2008; Gonsalves & Paller, 2002; Gonsalves et al., 2004). In one study, participants watched a video and were then asked to recall specific scenes from the video that did not exist. Immediately following the videos, the majority of participants denied having watched the fabricated scene. However, two months later, 50% of them freely reported remembering details from these unwatched scenes (Chrobak & Zaragoza, 2008). Once the idea of an alternate history is suggested to us, it germinates and slowly becomes more real. Moreover, the idea of an alternate history may be particularly attractive for us to think about if we regret prior unethical behavior, planting the seeds of later fabrication to take root.

One can see how our need to see ourselves as moral might cause us to imagine alternatives to actual past misdeeds, causing confusion between the real (unethical) past and our imagined alternative to it, leading to “remembering” a wrong—though self-serving—version of events. In a regrettable instance from my own history, I once sublet my bedroom in my New

York apartment to a perfectly nice young woman for the summer, and kept her deposit when I returned in September. My “memory” of the event was that our original agreement had been that she would pay a deposit to cover the costs of her wear and tear on the room. It was only when catching up with my old roommate from that time (who chided me for my unfairness to her) that I realized I had fabricated the agreement that her deposit would cover those costs, and in fact I had failed to return her deposit for no good reason at all. Unfortunately, most of the time, once we’ve sanitized our past behavior by inventing a preferred truth about what happened, we typically have no reason to challenge ourselves with the truth again.

### **Is Self-Deception About Unethical Behavior Adaptive?**

Individuals who are adept at self-deception (measured as a disposition) show higher rates of athletic success (Starek & Keating, 1991), higher levels of pain tolerance (Jamner & Schwartz, 1986) and a greater ability to withstand stress (Linden, Paulhus, & Dobson, 1986). Dispositional self-deception even predicts mating success among women (Lynn, Pipitone, & Keenan, 2014). In addition, as the research overviewed in this chapter makes clear, it seems also true that misplaced optimism about our morality is adaptive as well. If, as Trivers argues (2000), the value of self-deception is the decreased cognitive load of believing the truth while propagating a falsehood, then unethical behavior will be made cognitively easier if one can actively misrepresent the action to ourselves as morally appropriate. Certainly, deceiving oneself about the moral status about an act seems useful in successfully defending oneself to others, as in Ronald Regan’s limited ability to recall many aspects of his involvement in the Iran-Contra scandal.

However, ultimately, the most important audience for self-deception about one’s (im)moral actions may be oneself. In a series of experiments by Chance and colleagues (2011),

individuals who are provided with the answers to a series of questions testing their general knowledge and IQ attribute their higher levels of performance (compared to those without the benefit of seeing the answers) to their own abilities rather than their unfair advantage they had by seeing the answers (Chance, Norton, Gino, & Ariely, 2011). Moreover, this bias towards overestimating their own abilities is resistant to interventions to increase their accuracy in self-assessment, and the tendency to over-estimate their abilities is higher for those who are higher in dispositional self-deception. There seems to be something specifically adaptive about this type of self-deceit: it allows individuals to feel good about themselves without doing the work. In other words, it allows them to feel good about themselves while cheating.

There appears to be a confluence of factors that lead to a perfect storm facilitating self-deception as a critical process supporting unethical behavior. We have a strong desire to believe that we are moral, but are often tempted to cheat, lie, steal, or take other moral shortcuts in order to gain something for ourselves we do not deserve. Our ability to misrepresent reality to ourselves so that we can believe the best of ourselves while profiting from the unearned or unsavory gains that unethical behavior provides allows us to have our cake (positive moral self-regard) and eat it too (the benefits that unethical behavior can provide). The extent to which self-deception allows us to maintain this positive moral self-regard while behaving in ways that ought to tarnish it makes it unsurprising that another correlate of dispositional self-deception is self-reports of how moral one is (Lu & Chang, 2011).

In this chapter I have described a number of ways in which individuals actively misrepresent reality to themselves, so that we can remain the heroes of our own narratives, even as we act in ways that are less than heroic. I have called this phenomenon self-deception, though I concede that some of the phenomena I describe do not meet strict criteria for self-deception

(those that require holding two inconsistent beliefs in one's conscious mind simultaneously). As the research I have discussed shows, the human mind is more creative than the philosophers who originally worried about the logical fallacy of true self-deception considered. Self-deception of this variety—only attending to (or even creating) information that supports positive narratives about how moral we are, manipulating our beliefs about our actions or our agency within them to ensure that we construe what we do as moral, or recalling our past actions with rose-colored glasses, all support being able to take advantage of unethical behavior without tarnishing our self-image. For a number of psychologically adaptive reasons, we are proficient at tricking ourselves into believing that we are the heroes of our own narratives, even when our actions clearly indicate otherwise.

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