

Robert Kurzban

(else)

Why everyone is a hypocrite



Evolution and the Modular Mind

Robert Kurzban

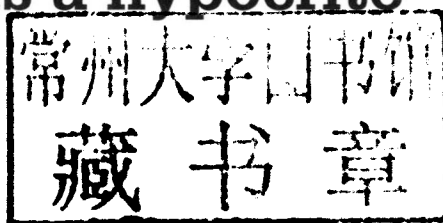
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Why everyone (*else*) is a hypocrite**

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Dedicated to all those denied liberty for pursuing happiness

acknowledgments

Some time ago, I was lucky enough to attend a small workshop on “self-deception” with some of my scientific idols, including economist Thomas Schelling and biologist Robert Trivers. Surprisingly, to me anyway, the overall timbre of the conversation—and I think that the people who were there would probably agree with this characterization—was a general intellectual spinning of tires.

What struck me during and especially after the workshop was how the concept of modularity—a conceptual backbone of my graduate training in evolutionary psychology—easily unraveled the Gordian knot of self-deception. When I returned to the University of Pennsylvania after the workshop, I started work on what would eventually become two papers that I co-authored with a graduate student who was working with me at the time, Athena Aktipis. Writing the papers got me thinking about a number of issues in the literatures in psychology and economics that modularity helped clarify. For whatever reason, researchers in the social sciences have been, by and large, allergic to evolutionary explanations, and the commitment to modularity. This meant that there were large areas of research that could be

usefully informed by this approach. The results of my thinking about these areas, more or less, became this book.

I want to thank the people who were kind enough to take the time to read part or all of various versions of this manuscript, including Clark Barrett, Terry Burnham, John Christner, Angela Duckworth, James Fowler, Amy Kurzban, Nina Kurzban, Steven Kurzban, Mike McCullough, Hugo Mercier, Steve Pinker, Alex Shaw, Ewa Szymanska, and Bart Wilson. Not a few of the ideas in here were developed in concert with another former graduate student of mine, Peter DeScioli. Some of the material toward the end draws heavily on the ideas of yet another former graduate student at Penn—though he was not my student—Jason Weeden, who also provided comments on an earlier draft.

Special thanks to my father, Stan Kurzban, and my sweetie, Nicole Buttermore, who bravely endured various iterations of this project and whose contributions cannot be overstated. My appreciation also to my agent, Max Brockman and, at Princeton University Press, Eric Schwartz and Debbie Tegarden, all of whom were very tolerant of me in general and my various rookie mistakes in particular during the process. I can't possibly thank Jodi Beder enough for her careful copyediting and many helpful suggestions. Any and all errors, of course, are my own.

And finally, thanks to all the people who have been subjected to the ideas in this book in classes, seminars, conferences, and even the Thanksgiving table. I appreciate the tolerance, the feedback, and the yams.

Robert Kurzban
Philadelphia, PA
March 2010

Why everyone (*else*) is a hypocrite

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prologue

Ignorance can save your life in Philadelphia.

If, like me, you've spent some time in Southern California, then you're probably accustomed to cars stopping when you're in a crosswalk. You might even occasionally make eye contact with a driver coming your way. *I see you, you see me, so we both know you have to stop.*

This could get you killed in Philadelphia. If a driver sees that you see that he's coming, then he knows that you know that your best bet is to stay out of the street, since in the game of person versus car, person always wishes she hadn't played.

So, here's the best way to cross the street in Philadelphia. Keep your eyes away from any lanes of traffic with cars that might run you over. Cross the street looking a little lost or confused; try to "walk like a tourist."

The goal is to appear conspicuously ignorant. Because drivers will actually stop for a pedestrian who has no chance of escaping if they barrel through the intersection, your best ally is ignorance: to appear completely—blissfully—unaware. This way, the driver knows you don't know he's com-

ing, and you're now safely categorized as someone who can't be counted on to try to escape.

He'll slow down.

Well, he'll probably slow down. If you really want to be safe, cross with other pedestrians. If you really, really want to be safe, stay in your car. Or out of Philadelphia.

Life in Philadelphia is, in many ways, very much unlike the old video game, Frogger. In the game, you had to move your frog across five lanes of traffic without getting run over by the cars or trucks speeding along the road. After you got past the road, there was a stream with logs, alligators, and turtles in it, and you had to hop on top of these, using them like stepping-stones to get to the other side, paying careful attention to the turtles, which could suddenly submerge beneath your frog, which, I guess, couldn't swim.

Unlike in Philadelphia, in Frogger, *refusing to watch for traffic won't help you*. It won't work because the cars and trucks on the screen don't care if you know they're coming. They're programmed to run you over, and that's that.

The basic point is that in Frogger, you're not playing a game against another *person*, but rather you're playing a game against *Nature*. Only cold, hard reality determines how well you do. *Being ignorant or stupid can't help you*. In contrast, in Philadelphia, you're playing a game against other people. Here, the rules are very different. Ignorance and stupidity can help.

In cases like Frogger, in which outcomes depend only on Nature, it's no use being stupid or ignorant because Nature doesn't care one way or the other. If you don't watch for cars, she runs over your frog, and you're done.

Ah, but . . . but when you play games against other people, everything changes. In cases like crossing the street in Philadelphia, in which your outcome depends on other people rather than Nature, it can be useful to be ignorant or stupid.

■ ■ ■

I'm an evolutionary psychologist, and I think a lot about how the human mind is designed. Natural selection has made us, humans, capable of wonders, and from our hands—or, really, our brains—have come spacecraft to explore the heavens, sonnets to lift the spirit, and Frogger, to consume the quarters I was supposed to use to buy lunch in my high school cafeteria.

But amid the wonder at the marvels of fine works of engineering like the human eye and our immune system, the reputation of various bits of human brains have been taking a beating. Books and headlines are filled with reports of human shortcomings and frailties, about how we make bad decisions (*Predictably Irrational*), are swayed by irrelevant information (*Nudge*), and behave poorly while driving (*Traffic*).

I'd like to say that this book will turn the tide and strike a blow for human nature, telling you that, hey, we're actually not all that bad after all . . . but it won't.

This book is, rather, an attempt to explain *why* we act the way we act, and, perhaps partly in our defense, to show that if we are wrong a lot, well, being right isn't everything.

My argument is going to be that much, or at least some, of what makes us ignorant, mind-numbingly stupid—and hypocritical—is that we evolved to play many different kinds of strategic games with others, and our brains are built to exploit the fact that being knowledgeable, right, or morally consistent is not always to our advantage. Because humans are such social creatures, while being right is still really important, it's very far from everything.

In fact, being ignorant, wrong, irrational, and hypocritical can make you much better off than being knowledgeable, correct, reasonable, and consistent.

As long as you're ignorant, wrong, irrational, and hypocritical in the right ways.

chapter 1

Consistently Inconsistent

- *The mind consists of many different parts. These parts often “believe” different, mutually inconsistent things. Sometimes this is obvious, as illustrated in cases of brain damage and optical illusions. Other cases are less obvious, but no less interesting.* ■

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

—Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, section 51

The very constitution of the human mind makes us massively inconsistent. In this book, I try to persuade you that the human mind consists of many, many mental processes—think of them as little programming subroutines, or maybe individual iPhone applications—each operating by its own logic, designed by the inexorable process of natural selection; and, further, that what you think and what you do depends on which process is running the show—your show—at any particular moment. Because which part of the mind is in charge changes over time, and because these different parts are designed to do very different things, human behavior is—and this shouldn't be a surprise—complicated.

What's worse, because so much of what goes on in our heads is inaccessible—that is, we don't know why we think what we do, an idea recently

made popular by, among others, Malcolm Gladwell in *Blink*—we are often not able to say what’s really causing our behavior. If you’re like me, you have often—and quite honestly—answered the question “Why did you do that?” with “I have absolutely no idea.”⁺

But the good news is that a fundamental insight about human psychology allows us to think more sensibly than ever before about all the different subroutines in your head and the way that they are organized. Evolutionary psychology—my discipline—focuses our attention on the idea that the different bits of our brain have *functions*. Just as some of your mind’s subroutines are for seeing, some for processing language, and some for controlling muscles, the rest have functions as well, some of them having to do with choosing mates, some with making friends, and—one subject I currently study—some with morally condemning others for doing things like baking pot brownies.

This is *not*, however, just another book about how people are irrational, or why we make bad decisions. There are enough of those already.

This book also isn’t about our “emotional self” and our “rational self,” or about the difference between “affect” and “cognition.” It’s not about our right brain and our left brain. It’s not about the duality of man, the duality of woman, or the triality of Freud’s id, ego, and superego. As we’ll see, cutting up the brain into such a small number of parts undersells, by a fair amount, just how complicated things are.

Instead, this book is about contradictions. It’s about how you—OK, *I*—can, at one and the same time, want to go for a training run and also want to stay in bed on a cold November morning. It’s about how you can, at one and the same time, during a severe economic downturn, both want to know how your retirement fund is doing and also not want to know how your retirement fund is doing. It’s about how you can, at one and the same time, want the government to leave people alone as long as they’re not hurting anyone and also very much want the government to interfere with people’s lives even when they’re not hurting anyone.

*In many ways, you’re holding a book-length apology for (many) such moments. Sorry, sweetie!

⁺I’ll use footnotes, here on the bottom of the page, for material that is important enough that you might want to read it, but not so important that it needs to go in the main text. I’ll use numbered endnotes, which are at the end of the book, for references to others’ work and for a small number of technical discussions. Endnotes are more or less serious, but footnotes . . . not so much.

It's also about how many, perhaps even most, contradictions in our heads go unnoticed.

The reason it sometimes feels as though we're conflicted, the reason it feels like we have multiple competing motives, and the reason we're inconsistent in the way we think and reason about fundamental issues of morality, are all explained by this important insight about the human mind. Because of the way evolution operates, the mind consists of many, many parts, and these parts have many different functions. Because they're designed to do different things, they don't always work in perfect harmony.

The large number of parts of the mind can be thought of as, in some sense, being different "selves," designed to accomplish some task. This book is about all these different selves, some of which make you run, some of which make you lazy, some of which make you smart, and some of which keep you ignorant. You're unaware of many of them. They just do what they're designed to do, out of sight and, as it were, out of mind.

This book is about how all of these different parts of mental machinery get along or, occasionally, don't get along, and it's about how thinking about the mind this way explains the large number of contradictions in human thought and behavior.

It explains why we are conflicted, inconsistent, and even hypocritical.

Understanding the whole of human behavior requires understanding all of the large number of different parts that produce it.

These parts are called *modules*.

Half-truths

To start off, I'm going to persuade you that you—yes, *you*—simultaneously believe (or, at least, "believe," with quotation marks around it) many, many things that are mutually contradictory. I'll start out by talking about some weird people, continue by talking about some weird cases, and before I'm done I'll talk a little bit about why you do weird things like locking your refrigerator door at night.*

* I'll explain about the refrigerator by and by.

If you know about the structure of the brain, you probably know that it is divided into two hemispheres, the left and the right. The two hemispheres are, in normal people, connected by the corpus callosum, which, roughly, allows the two halves of the brain to “talk” to each other. That is, it allows for the transmission of information from the left cerebral hemisphere to the right, and vice versa.

In some cases, this connection is surgically severed in patients with epilepsy to prevent the spread of epileptic seizure activity from one cerebral hemisphere to the other. This procedure, called a corpus callosotomy, prevents the spreading not only of seizures, but also of information that would normally move from one hemisphere to the other. People who have undergone this procedure are called “split-brain” patients for this reason.

Why am I telling you this? Because a brain in which there is limited or no direct communication between its two hemispheres illustrates a very straightforward case—albeit an unnatural case—in which a brain can have mutually inconsistent pieces of information. Suppose that the connections between the two hemispheres, under normal conditions, allow information from the two sides to be integrated and reconciled. If so, then if these connections are cut, you can wind up with information in one that is inconsistent with information in the other.

Neuroscientists Mike Gazzaniga and Joseph LeDoux performed experiments that illustrate exactly this. They took advantage of the fact that the way the nervous system is set up, it is possible to present information to one hemisphere but not the other. Further, it is also possible, in some sense, to get one hemisphere to respond to a question without involvement from the other. Split-brain patients make it easy to think about having “multiple selves” because you can communicate with each hemisphere separately.

The short (and slightly imprecise) story is this. When you present information to these patients in the right visual field (basically, stuff in front of them to the right of their nose), that information goes only to the left hemisphere, and when you present information to the left visual field it goes to the right hemisphere.

Now, because the right hemisphere controls the left hand and the left hemisphere controls the right hand, if you want to ask the right hemisphere a question, you can ask the question verbally—which goes through both ears