Don't Lie to Yourself

By
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Cypher is a character in the 1999 blockbuster film, *The Matrix*, who has awaked from a false reality to see the world as it truly is: dreary and miserable. In the end, he betrays his friends so he can return to his state of delusion. "I know this steak doesn't exist," he tells his subjugators, over a virtual meal. "I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss … I don't want to remember nothing, nothing! … Okay, get my body back in the power plant. Reinsert me into the Matrix." In Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, the original Matrix story, prisoners who have been chained within a dark cave for their entire lives, knowing of no other reality, murder the one inmate who has escaped and discovered the real world before returning to lead them out of captivity.

It is one matter to deceive others, but to deceive ourselves by intentionally ignoring and resisting what is true and real isn't just a betrayal of our friends, as in *The Matrix*, or the abandonment of our society, as in Plato's allegory; it is self-deception, a betrayal of oneself.

Yet how many of us prefer it this way? How many, like the Cypher character and Plato's prisoners, prefer our lies to the truth? Our delusions to reality? How many would rather remain blind than see? We prefer to deceive ourselves because our fantasies, like Cypher's imaginary steak, are often easier to swallow than reality. Delusion is a psychological coping mechanism, which is why most mental illnesses are dissociative in nature, meaning they enable us to break from reality, to avoid it, to enter the Matrix, to stay in the cave, even if it means betraying the truth and attacking the truthtellers.

I will submit that most of us prefer lies to the truth much of the time. Life is hard, deciphering the truth is difficult and uncertain compared to the false certainty and security of self-deception. Falsehood is easy because it is negatively and positively reinforced by our families, friends, and society. Ascribing to the *status quo* secures our place amongst others. It gives us a sense of belonging and reassurance that we will have access to the benefits of society so long as we go along with the crowd. It is the truthtellers, the whistleblowers, those who dare say "Look, the Emperor has no clothes," who are most likely to find themselves on the outs; silenced, ostracized, and unemployable.

So, the fear of truth isn't entirely unreasonable. There are sound reasons for sometimes keeping our mouths shut. Yet it is one thing to keep what we think to ourselves and another to deny it even to ourselves. Each of us, according to psychologist Carl Jung, must put on a false face in the world, a psychological state he called the *persona*, named after the masks once worn by ancient Greek actors. "In order to move into the world," he said, "we have need of a certain attitude or persona, the mask we turn toward the world."[1] Jung believed the persona can be of some social utility so long as we ourselves don't mistake ours for the authentic self behind it. Yet, "In doing all their small tasks," he said, "most people believe that they are their masks, and thus they become neurotic."[2] That's when our dissociative and delusional states form, when our social masks deceive even ourselves. "If I should

believe I was exactly what I am doing, it would be a terrible mistake, I would not fit that fellow," Jung said. "As soon as I say that I am only playing a role for the time being to please you, I am all right."[3] It's necessary to put on a public face, to hold back our feelings, to keep our thoughts to ourselves, to temper our words, to compromise—so long as we remain honest with ourselves about who we truly are, what we truly believe and feel. In other words, just don't lie to yourself.

On the other hand, sometimes we must be brave enough to reveal our true face. We must risk being ourselves, risk taking a stand, speaking up, and saying what we mean. Knowing when to wear our masks and when to take them off is related to the greatest source of human angst, the dilemma between freedom or belonging, between the authentic self and the social self. It is a chronic source of anxiety and a lifelong balancing act in which we continue to sometimes stumble and fall. I can't tell you exactly when to wear your mask and when to take it off—when to choose freedom rather than belonging—but, whether it's on or off, just don't lie to yourself.

Resist the easy way out by going through life ignoring what you know deep down is true and real, as Cypher does in *The Matrix*. Escaping from reality is not a healthy means of coping with life's challenges. At its worst, this can lead to serious dissociative disorders causing individuals to break from reality. For most, however, it means, at minimum, being out of integrity with ourselves. It means living a life of self-deception. It means lying to ourselves. This is what makes Cypher such a tragic character, because his name literally suggests he has the ability to decipher the difference between what's real and what isn't, yet he consciously chooses to live an unconscious life.

Coping with life's pain by denying it is one of the main reasons we choose, consciously or unconsciously, to deceive ourselves. Another, again, is our need for belonging, our desire for companionship and social security. When it comes to finding acceptance, conformity is almost always an easier path than authenticity. This is why most would choose belonging before their own freedom, like the prisoners in Plato's cave who kill their would-be liberator.

Yet there is another and, I believe, more pervasive cause of self-deception that's hardest of all to overcome because it's hardwired into our very neurology—fear. Fear is considered one of our six primary emotions, the others being happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, and surprise. But, unlike these others, fear has a special place in our brains, two almond shaped nuggets called the amygdala, which are wired to our hippocampus, the area in our temporal lobe responsible for processing emotions, among other functions. Authors Peter Diamandis and Steven Kotler say, "It's our early warning system, an organ always on high alert, whose job is to find anything in our environment that could threaten us … Anxious under normal conditions, once stimulated, the amygdala becomes hypervigilant."[4] This coincides with Evolutionary Psychology's theory that "the most important question faced everyday by all animals, including humans, is whether their immediate environment is dangerous or not."[5]

This instinctive fear of new environments, of unfamiliar circumstances and of strangers, is called *neophobia* (fear of the new), and is likely rooted in the rational fear that our primitive hunter-gatherer ancestors had of wandering too far from the safety of the group, and of going alone into untrodden territory. There is safety in numbers and sticking to the well-traveled path. Although we don't face the same sort of threats they faced thousands of years ago, we have inherited their neurology which manifests as fear of the new and fear of being alone.

Feeling safer by going along than going alone additionally requires us to convince ourselves that the crowd must be right. We accomplish this by purging ourselves of any doubt about our shared ways and beliefs, and by ridding our community of any threatening outliers. In the process, we adopt a false sense of certainty that leads to a false sense of security. They are false because nothing in life is certain, not even sticking to the tried and true, which will only work until it doesn't. Even in our liberal church I sometimes hear people complain, "But that's the way we've always done it," or behave as if any change is a moral crisis, even if it's just moving the furniture. Fortunately, this isn't so of most, but it does happen and when it does, it's the primitive brain talking, not the liberal brain, not the liberated brain, not the free mind.

In his book, *On Being Certain*, neurologist Robert Burton says, "Certainty and similar states of knowing what we know arise out of involuntary brain mechanisms that, like love or anger, function independently of reason."[6] This is an incredibly provocative assertion, that certainty is not the result of sound thinking, but of emotion. As Burton goes on to say, the "*feeling of knowing* and its kindred feelings should be considered as primary as the states of fear and anger."[7] In other words, when we feel sure we are right, the only thing we might really be certain of is that we are having an emotional reaction, probably to something that frightens us, whether it is truly frightening or not.

Fear of new ways, combined with certainty about old ways, kept our primitive ancestors safer than not, which is why our brains also evolved to reward us with dopamine, a neurotransmitter that makes us feel good when we are sure and exhibit repetitive behavior. That's why habits, including habitual ways of thinking, become habits, because they are addictive.

So, to summarize what I've said thus far, we have a greater tendency to deceive ourselves than not because we prefer belonging to freedom, have brains that evolved to make us fearful of anything new and that reward us for feeling certain, even when we're wrong. So, if we are psychologically and neurologically wired for self-deception, what can be done for us to live a life of self-integrity? To answer this, let's shift gears by considering some of the mechanisms I have found helpful in my own efforts to be more honest with myself. Based upon what I've already said, the first may be self-evident; *Learn to recognize the most obvious signs of self-deception, which are the feelings of fear and certainty.*

For example, there is currently a lot of fearful thinking about the advent of Artificial Intelligence. This isn't to say there aren't legitimate reasons to be cautious about its

potential misuse. As Joseph Heller wrote in *Catch 22*, “Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't after you.” Fear has been important in the survival of our species, which is why it has a special place in our brains. It’s there to keep us safe by motivating us to proceed with caution or to not proceed at all. But when our beliefs are based on fear rather than reason, we need to reexamine them and be brave enough to explore other possibilities.

The same goes for the feeling of certainty. The more certain we feel, the surer we can be that we are not being rational. Truth is a philosophical problem because we cannot know anything with absolute certainty. This is why I often say, “Base your next leap of faith on your best educated guess.” This means researching the evidence for specific ideas and evaluating their logic, rather than relying on our feelings to drive us to our beliefs. But be careful of confirmation bias, especially when doing research on the Internet, where we can find an argument supporting just about anything our feelings desire.

Always strive to base your beliefs on reliable evidence and sound reasoning, which is the second mechanism for having ideological integrity. Logic is a skill, and it is a difficult one to learn. But the most important part of being logical is easy. Always ask, *Why*? *Why*? is one of the first questions we learn to ask as children, sometimes annoyingly and incessantly so. It is also one of the first questions we are discouraged from asking by being told things like, “Don’t question me,” “Just do as I say,” or “Because I said so.” If you’ve been discouraged from asking *Why?*, I urge you to reclaim this intellectual prerequisite. Logic is also called reason for a reason, because it requires reasons for the ideas we decide to believe. Asking *Why?* is the only means of obtaining those reasons and determining if they sound or not. “Because I said so,” is not a sound reason.

Another mechanism for ideological integrity is *learning to recognize some of the most basic logical fallacies*. There are several, so I’ll mention those I find to be the most common, including among those on both the left and right of things. First, especially nowadays, is the *ad hominem* fallacy, which occurs when, rather than arguing the merits of ideas, we simply attack the character or motives of those who hold them. Cirticising Elon Musk as an “unelected billionaire,” for example, has nothing to do with whether or not his ideas are right or wrong. If we are critical of what he’s doing as head of the new Department of Government Efficiency, then we should stick to the facts or, in this case, the lack thereof. Despite his claims that DOGE has uncovered hundreds of billions of dollars in waste and already saved billions, the agency has provided little proof that either is true, making it illogical to believe such claims. Attacking Musk’s character to disprove these assertions is illogical, and vandalizing Tesla vehicles only proves that some people are extremely angry but says nothing about the worth of their ideas.

When Trump, on the other hand, plays on people’s emotions, as he did prior to the election by making unsubstantiated claims about millions and million of criminals invading our country, or that he is the only person who can prevent World War III and nuclear holocaust, or, as he is doing now, claiming that his tariffs will make us all wealthier than we can imagine, he is playing our feelings, on our worst fears and greatest hopes. These claims are

also illogical because he seldom, if ever, gives us any reasons for *why* we should believe him, which makes them illogical to accept.

Another common fallacy is raising a *strawman*, a quick and sometimes unnoticeable switch from the argument at hand to a similar argument that's easier to win. Trump's now infamous attempt to manipulate Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during his recent visit to the White House is a good example. Based upon what transpired before their meetings—his conversation with and praise of Vladimir Putin, while blaming Zelenskyy for the war and calling him the authoritarian, along with statements about obtaining Ukraine's mineral rights—it is logical to conclude the Trump wanted to convince Zelenskyy to accept Putin's terms, which meant ceding what territory Russia had already taken and agreeing never to join NATO, and, in exchange for Trump arranging this "great deal," give the U.S. half of his country's mineral rights. But the argument Trump stated was quite different. He simply asked Zelenskyy if he wanted peace and to save millions and millions of lives. Who could say *no* to that? Yet, when Zelenskyy didn't take the bait, Trump and VP Vance pounced on him with *ad hominem* attacks.

As I've said, there are plenty of other fallacies, but let's leave it with these three, *ad hominem*, appeal to emotion, and strawmen. For now, I'll just say, learn to see these fallacies in the thinking of others but, more importantly, learn to notice them in your own thinking.

This leads to another mechanism for avoiding self-deception; *explore the merits of those ideas you most disagree with*. We all have a primitive instinct to automatically disagree with the ideas of those on the other side of an issue. Republicans automatically disagree with most anything a Democrat says and visa versa. The same is true of liberals and conservatives in general. Yet, I have spent some time listening to a few conservative investors and economists whom I respect about the potential value of tariffs, trying to understand the thinking behind them. Although their arguments did not convince me, I considered them with courage, respect, and openness, and now have a new appreciation for the roll of tariffs. I've also read and listened to the voices of those on the left who are critical of the left. I'm not afraid of changing my mind if that's where the evidence leads. Rather, I am eager to evolve if I discover better ways of thinking.

Now, getting back to the persona—the mask we wear in public in order to secure our place in society—I offer a final mechanism for avoiding self-deception; *Don't sweat the small stuff but be brave about the important stuff.* As I said, we are always trying to juggle our competing need for both freedom and belonging. In order to belong, we need to compromise, which means not always getting our way, not always saying exactly what we think, and having to set aside some of our desires. Learning to give and take is part of what it means to be in community. It's what it means to have healthy relationships. But when it comes to important matters, like our integrity and adhering to our core values, we need to express ourselves, even at risk of offending others and finding ourselves estranged or ostracized. Just be careful not to inflate the small stuff into big stuff out of pride or selfishness. The matters we stand up and stand out for ought to take real courage and

selflessness because our own comfort and welfare may be put and risk, and because we do so for something greater than ourselves, like the universal values we hold and the welfare of others.

We are wired to fear new ideas and new ways, and to go along with the crowd and not wander too far into unfamiliar territory. That's the belonging part of our psychology. But we are also driven toward freedom, exploration, and discovery, which is why our species now inhabits nearly every climate on Earth and has even traveled into the crushing depths of the sea and the lonely emptiness of space. This part of our psychology takes courage, just as it takes courage for us to live a life of intellectual integrity by doing our best not to deceive ourselves. So be brave. Think well. And discover a world of wonders.

[1] Jung, C.G., *Dream Analysis*, Bollingen Series XCIX, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1984, p. 51.

[2] Ibid., p. 74.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Diamandis, Peter and Kotler, Steven, *Abundance: The Future is Better than You Think*, Free Press, New York, NY, 2012, p. 32.

[5] Flannelly, Kevin J., and Galek, Kathleen, *Religion, Evolution, and Mental Health: Attachment Theory and ETAS Theory,* **Journal of Religion and Health** (2010) 49-337-350, Published online, March 17, 2009, Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, 2009, p. 340.

[6] Ibid., Preface.

[7] Burton, Robert, *On Being Certain*, St. Martin's Press, New York, NY, 2008, p. 40.