

## Self Deception and Evolutionary Theory

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I have been interested in the problem of self-deception (doing things for reasons that we don't properly understand or acknowledge) my entire adult life. Writers as diverse as Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and J-P Sartre thought self-deception was the primary source of human misery. They also argued that people should try to overcome their self-deception for moral reasons – self-deception is the cause of most bad behavior. In everyday life, self-deception most often appears as hypocrisy.

I have also been interested in evolutionary theory my entire adult life, but my views on evolutionary theory tend to depart from the conventional wisdom as set forth by John Tooby and Leda Cosmides. A central assumption of their view is that the mind is modular, that different components of the cognitive system evolved to solve different problems and that the degree to which these different mental modules communicate is an open question, and in many cases they may not.

Robert Kurzban recently published a book, *Why Everyone (Else) is a Hypocrite*, applying this mainstream evolutionary thinking to the problem of self-deception. Elliott Spitzer, the disgraced former Governor of New York, provides a good example of the problem. Spitzer notoriously campaigned publicly against prostitution while allegedly privately employing call girls with enthusiasm. The mainstream view of evolutionary psychology (Kurzban) explains Spitzer's hypocrisy by arguing that his moralistic module didn't communicate with his lust module. I think there are two problems with this argument.

First, the modular theory of the mind bears an eerie resemblance to 19<sup>th</sup> century phrenology. But more importantly, it seems wrong-headed. Karl Lashley (1890-1958) proposed what he called the law of mass action, based on a great deal of careful research on the actual workings of rats' brains. The law of mass action maintains that the brain operates as an organized whole; specific thoughts are distributed across the brain and somehow become organized to generate appropriate solutions or behavioral responses. Lashley is generally credited with showing that the brain is much more complex than earlier researchers realized. But more importantly, it seems intuitively obvious that inputs from the various sensory systems feed into some kind of central processing unit which organizes the data, and generates appropriate responses. Otherwise, how could an organism coordinate thought and action and survive?

Second, the propensity to reflect on one's actions and to compare them with internalized norms is an individual differences variable. People with low scores on HPI Adjustment and high scores on HPI Prudence are prone to intensive self-examination and self-criticism. People with high scores on HPI Adjustment and low scores on HPI Prudence are not prone to self-examination. Spitzer fits the second pattern to perfection.

But evolutionary theory provides a straightforward alternative account. In every social living species, cheaters or free-riders inevitably emerge. Free-riders participate in the benefits of social living – cooperation, group support, shared food – but act selfishly and contribute nothing to the welfare of the larger social group. Parenthetically, I think politicians are the free riders of democratic society. Social interaction is about impression management. Hypocrisy is the free-rider's solution to the problem of how to endorse altruistic values while behaving selfishly. And it is worth noting that Elliott Spitzer was a career politician.