

On the Phenomenon of Deception in Fictions

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Abstract. We human beings are not fact machines—beings who scan the environment for information and then process it in their extremely large brains to produce pasteurized lumps of truth. Thomas Gradgrind’s vision in Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times*—a board of fact, composed of commissioners of fact, who will force the people to be a people of fact—has never been realized. Through the course of the novel, Gradgrind comes to understand that human beings are not governed by facts and that they cannot be forced into a world of fact without a substantial amount of violence against their very natures. There are times, of course, when we need accurate information—but such times occur less frequently than we like to imagine.

Introduction

As the celebrated Norwegian playwright and poet Henrik Ibsen once said in *The Wild Duck*: “Deprive the average man of his vital lie, and you’ve robbed him of happiness as well.” The famous American writer Mark Twain hold the same idea in *Mark Twain’s Autobiography*: “When a person cannot deceive himself, the chances are against his being able to deceive other people.” Let us begin with literature’s greatest storytellers Scheherazade and Don Quixote. All that separates Don Quixote and Scheherazade is a thin layer of self-consciousness about the fictional nature of their shared enterprise; Scheherazade understands that the truths she tells her husband are embedded in fictions, while Quixote believes that the fictions he tells himself are derived from the truth. Quixote deceives himself, but this does not mean that his fictions are not useful. In many cases his fantastic stories are more valuable to him, his acquaintances, and his society than the truth. The utility of his fictions depends absolutely on his belief in their truth. The liar will always falter when the game is no longer worth the candle, but the true believer will live by, and die for, his or her beliefs no matter how ludicrous or impossible they seem to others.

Self-delusions the Enhancement of Fitness

To be sure, Quixote’s self-delusions are often painful and even life-threatening. Throughout his adventures he falls from windmills; stumbles over farm animals; and is assaulted by muleteers, convicts, soldiers, and travelers on nearly every stop on his journey. His delusions also do little to help with his reproductive success, as he devotes both body and soul to a woman—the peerless Dulcinea del Toboso—who does not actually exist. How, then, are Don Quixote’s delusions examples of the way that self-deception can enhance fitness? To answer this question, we must look at the places in the text where Quixote, the madman, places himself in competition with those who are sane. If his delusions give him an advantage in these competitions, we can at least

propose that there might be some advantage to self-deception in the area of intraspecies competition. We find an example of just such a phenomenon in the beginning of *Don Quixote, Part II*, Cervantes's 1615 sequel to the 1605 original.

The running joke of Part II is that all of the characters who encounter Don Quixote and Sancho Panza have read Part I and, therefore, know everything that readers know about the pair. Part II also has a somewhat more coherent story arc than the original, including a new antagonist for Quixote: Sampson Carrasco, a bachelor (i.e., university graduate) who lives in Quixote's village and sets out to use his intelligence to restore the good Don's sanity. To accomplish his goal, Carrasco enters Quixote's fantasy world and pretends to be a rival knight, the Knight of the Wood (later rechristened the "Knight of the Looking Glasses" or "Knight of the Mirrors"). Assured of victory by his youth and his intellect, Carrasco plans to "vanquish" Don Quixote—to forbid him, as only a victorious fellow knight can, to give up knight errantry for a period of two years. The distinguished bachelor should have an easy time defeating the less-than-distinguished knight-errant. Carrasco is in top physical shape; he is educated, clever, and well versed in strategy. He is also quite sane. Don Quixote, on the other hand, is nearly sixty years old. He rides a broken-down nag, wears a decrepit suit of armor with a cardboard box for a visor, and fights entirely for the glory of a woman who does not exist. Of course Don Quixote is also mad; he tilts at windmills, steals shaving basins, and wages epic battles against sheep. Quixote honestly believes he is a knight-errant, straight out of one of the sixteenth-century courtly romances that he has spent his life reading. To his credit, Carrasco is motivated partly by a sincere desire to keep Quixote from harm, but this is mingled with an equally sincere desire to demonstrate his cleverness and have some fun at the expense of a crazy old man. Carrasco approaches his encounter with Quixote without

seriousness, treating it as a game that he is certain to win. Don Quixote, on the other hand, has only one motive in the contest: to defend the honor of his lady fair, the lovely (albeit fictional) Dulcinea del Toboso. Quixote approaches the conflict with the high seriousness that, in his mind, it deserves. Quixote never doubts that his skills in battle and the rightness of his cause will bring him victory. And it does! Don Quixote unseats his opponent. Like his biblical namesake, Sampson Carrasco overestimates his abilities, underestimates his opponent, and comes crashing down in defeat. Carrasco is even mocked by the peasant he hires to impersonate his squire, who poignantly asks, "Which is the greater madman, he who is so because he cannot help it, or he who is so on purpose[1]?" The jousting match is more than a simple retelling of "The Tortoise and the Hare." Quixote wins largely because of a lucky break—when he stops to help Sancho climb a tree, Carrasco stops his horse, making him an easy target when Quixote starts again. Quixote also wins because of the way that he frames the task; both he and Sampson Carrasco expect to win, but Carrasco expects to win a trivial game with a crazy old man while Quixote expects to win a duel of honor with a dangerous opponent. In Quixote's mind the match is serious, the threat of death is real, and the stakes are worth dying for. Carrasco, who does not share Quixote's delusions, does not bring the same sense of purpose to the match, and when the crucial moment comes, he makes a careless misstep that comes very close to costing him his life[2]. In this situation—a battle that really could end in the death of one of the participants—Quixote's delusion focuses his attention, removes his hesitation, and gives him a critical edge over a stronger opponent. His false beliefs are more adaptive than Carrasco's true ones because they help him win the fight.

Deception as the a Kind of Instinctive Positive Adaptability Expressed in Fictions

Quixote would have lost any chance at victory if he had suddenly become sane and realized that he was an emaciated old man riding a broken-down nag and wearing a cardboard box on his head. He only wins by remaining deluded about his true nature and abilities. One line of recent research suggests that this kind of self-delusion might work just as well in actual modern combat as in fictional jousting matches. The Harvard primatologist Richard Wrangham has examined the evolutionary basis of “military incompetence,” which occurs in a battle when “one of the opponents is patently weaker than the other, but still chooses to fight despite nonviolent options[3].” While other primate species often engage in organized raids, these acts of violence are characterized by the ability “to assess accurately the costs of premeditated and unprovoked conflict” (6). Military incompetence, on the other hand, appears to be “evolutionarily novel in the hominid line”—a behavior that evolved after the split from chimpanzees and must therefore have evolved specifically, possibly to fulfill some adaptive purpose[4]. After surveying the problem, Wrangham offers two hypotheses to explain the evolution of self-delusion in combat. The “performance-enhancement hypothesis” suggests that “by suppressing conflicting thoughts or feelings, positive illusions enable individuals or groups to be more effective in achieving a goal.” The “opponent-deception hypothesis” proposes that “humans tend to deceive themselves as a way to bluff successfully.” The two hypotheses are mutually inclusive and suggest that, ultimately, “exaggerated assessment of the probability of winning increases the probability of winning[5].” Overconfidence, delusion, unrealistic expectations, and overall self-deception can therefore be more adaptive—and therefore more useful—than the ability to assess a situation accurately and respond appropriately. Self-deception can be adaptive in non-combat situations as well. Over the past twenty years psychologist Shelly E. Taylor and her collaborators have produced more than two dozen articles examining the mental and physical benefits of “positive illusions,” such as an inflated belief in one’s own abilities, an exaggerated sense of control, or an unjustified optimism in the future. In the first of these articles, Taylor and Jonathon D. Brown take direct aim at the common belief among professionals that “the psychologically healthy person is one who maintains close contact with reality.” They point to solid survey data showing that most people have an unrealistically positive perception of themselves, their abilities, and their ability to control events in their life[6]. If mental health is defined as having beliefs that align with reality, then most people would have to be considered mentally ill. However, they assert, evidence from converging sources suggests that positive illusions about the self, one’s control, and the future may be especially apparent and adaptive under circumstances of adversity, that is, circumstances that might be expected to produce depression or lack of motivation. Under these circumstances, the belief in one’s self as a competent, efficacious actor behaving in a world with a generally positive future may be especially helpful in overcoming setbacks, potential blows to self-esteem, and potential erosions in one’s view of the future. In subsequent articles Taylor and others have presented evidence that positive illusions increase people’s ability to recover from life-threatening diseases, combat aids, manage stress, and cope with extreme adversity. The effect of a positive illusion need not even be dramatic to be adaptive. Let’s say that a seriously ill person who had only a 1 percent chance of recovery could increase this to a 2 percent chance through unrestrained, completely unjustifiable optimism. Over thousands of generations, this slight survival advantage would cause selection to favor the unrealistic optimists over the somber realists.

Clinical studies have repeatedly demonstrated that optimism and positive thinking in the seriously ill can increase chances of survival by far more than a single percentage point. Sexual selection, too, benefits from increased self-confidence—even when such confidence is entirely unjustified. Confident people, especially confident men, are often seen as more attractive than unconfident people—even if their confidence is unfounded. Confidence accompanies material success or physical prowess often enough for potential mates to equate one with the other. In a long-term committed relationship, a woman can see through the bluster of an overconfident male. Yet, according to evolutionary psychologist David M. Buss this is not true in casual encounters, where confidence itself often proves inherently valuable. To illustrate how this works, Buss relates the following narrative from an interview with a single woman: I was sitting at a corner table talking to my girlfriend and sipping on a gin and tonic. Then Bob walked in. He walked into the bar like he owned the place, smiling broadly and very confident. He caught my eye, and I smiled. He sat down and started talking about how horses were his hobby. He casually mentioned that he owned a horse farm. When the last call for alcohol came, he was still talking about how expensive his horses were, and said that we should go riding together. He said, “In fact, we could go riding right now.” It was 2:00 a.m., and I left the bar and had sex with him. I never did find out whether he owned horses.¹⁰ The evolutionary value of these horses does not depend on their factual existence. It does not matter if the man has them, thinks he has them, or is lying about having them. All that matters to his success in the mating game is that he can talk about them with confidence. This discussion of the value of illusions, delusions, and self-deceptions takes us to the heart of Cervantes’s project in *Don Quixote*. One of the most tantalizing things about Cervantes’s masterpiece is that it occasionally forces us to come to grips with the superiority of its hero’s delusions—to ask, as Carrasco’s squire asks, which one of us is mad? Quixote’s madness parallels that of the optimists who believe, against all odds, that they will recover from fatal illnesses—and then do so. It is also similar to the general who believes that he can defeat the most powerful army on earth or the civil rights leader who believes that a powerful country or empire can be persuaded to change by nonviolent resistance. Such people are usually considered insane by their cultures, and only a few of them ever prove to be otherwise. As Michael Schermer reminds us, the mere fact that someone is universally considered wrong is not a guarantee that he or she is right. Enough supposed delusions turn out to be true, however, to maintain some selection pressure for self-deception—to act as a corrective to the inherent limitations of “reality” as perceived by sane and rational minds.

Conclusion

As discussed in the previous passages, the final scene of William Wycherly’s *The Country Wife* is an example of the possible adaptive value of believing a lie. Mr. Pinchwife’s closing words in this play—“For my own sake fain I would all believe / Cuckolds, like lovers, should themselves deceive”—suggest that the real adaptive value of deception might be in the ability to deceive oneself successfully. We have already seen how this can be true in combat situations and in one’s general sense of well-being; research suggests that it may also be true in precisely the case that Mr. Pinchwife describes: the fate of the cuckold. The word cuckold comes from one of the most impressive cons found anywhere in nature: the actions of the cuckoo bird. Cuckoos lay their eggs in the nests of other species, often convincing unsuspecting birds to raise young cuckoos as their own. For the cuckoo parents, this is an evolutionary jackpot.

Many of us will tell the truth when it is clearly not in our interests to do so. Additionally, almost all of us lie so badly that our bodies give us away even when we are firmly committed to the deception. It is because we are *not* good liars, and because we often feel compelled to deal truthfully with other people, that natural selection endowed us with the ability to deceive ourselves.

References

- [1] Irwin, *Arabian Nights* provides an exceptionally useful guide to the complicated textual history of *The Book of the One Thousand and One Nights*.
- [2] Bettelheim, *Uses of Enchantment*, 88; Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body*.
- [3] Hernadi, "Literature and Evolution".
- [4] Green and Brock, "In the Mind's Eye."
- [5] Green, et al, "Fact Versus Fiction Labeling" .
- [6] The unification of knowledge in general is the topic of Wilson's 1998 book *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*.
- [7] See for example Mithen, *Singing Neanderthals*, 11–27; Carroll, *Evolution and Literary Theory*, 478–85.