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A Mind of Its Own

How Your Brain Distorts and Deceives

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Extract

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Introduction

Do you feel that you can trust your own brain? So maybe it falters for a moment, faced with the thirteen times table. It may occasionally send you into a room in search of something, only to abandon you entirely. And, if yours is anything like mine, it may stubbornly refuse to master the parallel park. Yet these are petty and ungrateful gripes when we consider all that our brains actually do for us. Never before have we been made so aware of the extraordinary complexity and sophistication of those one hundred billion brain cells that make up the engine of the mind. And barely a day goes by when these gathered neurons aren't exalted in a newspaper article highlighting a newly discovered wonder of their teamwork.

From day to day, we take our brains somewhat for granted, but (particularly with this book in hand) it's

likely that you're feeling a little quiet pride on behalf of your own. And, reading books on the subject of its own self aside, what else can't the thing do? After all, it tells you who you are, and what to think, and what's out there in the world around you. Its ruminations, sensations and conclusions are confided to you and you alone. For absolutely everything you know about anything, it is the part of yourself you have to thank. You might think that, if there's one thing in this world you can trust, it's your own brain. You are, after all, as intimate as it is possible to be.

But the truth of the matter – as revealed by the quite extraordinary and fascinating research described in this book – is that your unscrupulous brain is entirely undeserving of your confidence. It has some shifty habits that leave the truth distorted and disguised. Your brain is vainglorious. It deludes you. It is emotional, pigheaded and secretive. Oh, and it's also a bigot. This is more than a minor inconvenience. That fleshy walnut inside your skull is all you have in order to know yourself and to know the world. Yet, thanks to the masquerading of an untrustworthy brain with a mind of its own, much of what you think you know is not quite as it seems.

The Vain Brain

For a softer, kinder reality

A week after Icon commissioned this book, I discovered that I was pregnant with my second child. The manuscript was due three days before the baby. My husband, a project manager both by temperament and employ, drew up a project plan for me. To my eye, it entirely failed to reflect the complexity, subtlety, and unpredictability of the process of writing a book. It was little more than a chart showing the number of words I had to write per week, and when I was going to write them. It also had me scheduled to work every weekend until the baby was born.

'This plan has me scheduled to work every weekend until the baby is born', I said.

'Plus all the annual leave from your job', my husband added.

I felt that he had missed the point. 'But when do I *rest*?'

'Rest?' My husband pretended to examine the plan. 'As I see it, you rest for two days after you finish the manuscript, shortly before going into labour, giving birth, and becoming the sole source of nutrition for a newborn.'

I had a brief image of myself in labour, telling the midwife between gasps of gas what a treat it was to have some time to myself.

'What if I can't do it?' I asked.

My husband gave me a 'this really isn't difficult' look. '*This* is how you do it', he said, stabbing the plan. 'You write this many words a week.'

He was right, I told myself. Of course I could do it. It was irrelevant that I was pregnant. After all, growing a baby is easy – no project plan required. My first trimester nausea and exhaustion would soon pass. The brains of other, weaker women might be taken hostage by pregnancy hormones, but not my brain. My bump would remain well enough contained to enable me to reach the computer keyboard. And absolutely, definitely, without a doubt, the baby would not come inconveniently early. Of course I could write the book.

I then did something very foolish. I began research on this chapter – the vain brain. The vain brain that embellishes, enhances and aggrandises you. The vain brain that excuses your faults and failures, or simply rewrites them out of history. The vain brain that sets you up on a pedestal above your peers. The vain brain that misguidedly thinks you invincible, invulnerable and omnipotent. The brain so *very* vain that it even considers the letters that appear in your name to be more attractive than those that don't.[1]

I didn't want to know any of this. But then it got worse. I went on to read just how essential these positive illusions are. They keep your head high and your heart out of your boots. They keep you from standing atop railway bridges gazing contemplatively at approaching trains. Without a little deluded optimism, your immune system begins to wonder whether it's worth the effort keeping you alive. And most extraordinary, it seems that sometimes your vain brain manages to transform its grandiose beliefs into reality. Buoyed by a brain that loves you like a mother, you struggle and persevere – happily blind to your own inadequacies, arrogantly dismissive of likely obstacles – and actually achieve your goals.

I needed my vain brain back. *Immediately.*

As evidenced by the existence of this book, I managed to regain my positive illusions. (Either that or I truly *am* exceptional, talented, and blessed by the gods.) Now it's time for me to attempt to spoil your chances of happiness, health and success by disillusioning you.

While it troubles philosophers, for the rest of us it is vastly more comfortable that we can only know ourselves and the world through the distorting lens of our brains. Freud suggested that the ego 'rejects the unbearable idea', and since then experimental psychologists have been peeling back the protective layers encasing your self-esteem to reveal the multitude of strategies your brain uses to keep your ego plump and self-satisfied. Let's start with some basic facts. When asked, people will modestly, reluctantly confess that they are, for example, more ethical, more nobly motivated employees, and better drivers than the average person.[2] In the latter case, this even includes people interviewed in hospital shortly after extraction from the mangled wrecks that were once

their cars. No one considers themselves to fall in the bottom half of the heap, and statistically, that's not possible. But in a sample of vain brains, it's inevitable.

For one thing, if possible your brain will interpret the question in the way that suits you best. If I were asked how my driving compares with others, I would rate myself better than average without hesitation. My driving record at speeds above one mile per hour is flawless. Yet below this speed my paintwork, and any stationary object I am attempting to park near, are in constant peril. These expensive unions between the stationary and the near-stationary are so frequent that at one point I actually considered enveloping the vulnerable portions of my car in bubble-wrap. My mother, in contrast, can reverse with exquisite precision into a parking spot at whiplash speeds. On the other hand, she regularly rams into the back of cars that 'should have gone' at roundabouts. She, too, considers her driving to be superb. You begin to see how everyone is able to stake their claim to the superior half of the driving population. If the trait or skill you're being asked about is helpfully ambiguous, you interpret the question to suit your own idiosyncratic strengths.[3]

Even if you are unambiguously hopeless in an area of life, your brain gets round this by simply diminishing the importance of that skill. I, for example, cannot draw. I am the artistic equivalent of being tone deaf. However this doesn't bother me in the slightest because to my brain, drawing is an unnecessary extra. I can see that it would be useful if one were an artist, but in the same way that it's useful for a contortionist to be able to wrap his legs behind his head. Essential for a small minority, but nothing more than a showy party trick for everyone else.[4] And in a final clever enhancement of this self-enhancement, people believe that their weaknesses are so common that they should hardly even be considered weaknesses, yet their strengths are rare and special.[5]

What these strategies reveal is that a bit of ambiguity can be taken a very long way by a vain brain. The next technique in your brain's arsenal of ego defence exploits ambiguity to the full. When we explain to ourselves and others why things have gone well or badly, we prefer explanations that cast us in the best possible light. Thus we are quick to assume that our successes are due to our own sterling qualities, while

responsibility for failures can often be conveniently laid at the door of bad luck or damn fool others. This self-serving bias, as it is known, is all too easy to demonstrate in the psychology lab.[6] People arbitrarily told that they did well on a task (for example, puzzle solving) will take the credit for it, whereas people arbitrarily told that they did badly will assign responsibility elsewhere, such as with their partner on the task. The brain is especially self-advancing when your performance on the task could potentially deliver a substantial bruise to your ego.[7] So people told that puzzle solving is related to intelligence are much more likely to be self-serving than those told that puzzle solving is just something that people who don't like reading books do on trains. The bigger the potential threat, the more self-protective the vain brain becomes. In a final irony, people think that others are more susceptible to the self-serving bias than they are themselves.[8] (Allow yourself a moment to take that sentence fully on board, should you need to.)

Thus when life or psychology researchers are kind enough to leave the reasons for success or failure ambiguous, the self-serving bias is readily and

easily engaged to protect and nurture the ego. However, our vain brains aren't completely impervious to reality. No matter how partial my explanation of why I added up the restaurant bill incorrectly, I have no intention of applying for any professorships in mathematics. In a way, this is definitely good. When we lose all sight of our ugly face in reality's mirror, this generally means that we have also lost grip on our sanity. But on the other hand, who wants an ugly face right in their face? We've already seen how the vain brain casts our features at their most flattering angle. We'll now begin to rummage deeper into the brain's bag of tricks. By calling on powerful biases in memory and reasoning, the brain can selectively edit and censor the truth, about both ourselves and the world, making for a softer, kinder, and altogether more palatable reality.

Failure is perhaps the greatest enemy of the ego, and that's why the vain brain does its best to barricade the door against this unwelcome guest. The self-serving bias we've already encountered provides a few extra services to this end. One approach is to tell yourself that, in retrospect, the odds were stacked against you and failure was all but inevitable.