CHAPTER 1

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Cognitive Dissonance: The Engine of Self-justification

Press release date: November 1, 1993

WE DIDN'T MAKE A MISTAKE when we wrote in our previous releases that New York would be destroyed on September 4 and October 14, 1993. We didn't make a mistake, not even a teeny eeny one!

Press release date: April 4, 1994

All the dates we have given in our past releases are correct dates given by God as contained in Holy Scriptures. Not one of these dates was wrong . . . Ezekiel gives a total of 430 days for the siege of the city . . . [which] brings us exactly to May 2, 1994. By now, all the people have been forewarned. We have done our job. . . .

We are the only ones in the entire world guiding the people to their safety, security, and salvation!

We have a 100 percent track record![1]

IT'S FASCINATING, AND SOMETIMES funny, to read doomsday predictions, but it's even more fascinating to watch what happens to the reasoning of true believers when the prediction flops and the world keeps muddling along. Notice that hardly anyone ever says, "I blew it! I can't believe how stupid I was to believe that nonsense"? On the contrary, most of the time they become even more deeply convinced of their powers of prediction. The people who believe that the Bible's book of Revelation or the writings of the sixteenth-century self-proclaimed prophet Nostradamus have predicted every disaster from the bubonic plague to 9/11 cling to their convictions, unfazed by the small problem that their vague and murky predictions were intelligible only after the event occurred.

Half a century ago, a young social psychologist named Leon Festinger and two associates infiltrated a group of people who believed the world would end on December 21.[2] They wanted to know what would happen to the group when (they hoped!) the prophecy failed. The group's leader, whom the researchers called Marian Keech, promised that the faithful would be picked up by a flying saucer and elevated to safety at midnight on December 20. Many of her followers quit their jobs, gave away their homes, and dispersed their savings, waiting for the end. Who needs money in outer space? Others waited in fear or resignation in their homes. (Mrs. Keech's own husband, a nonbeliever, went to bed early and slept soundly through the night as his wife and her followers prayed in the living room.) Festinger made his own prediction: The believers who had not made a strong commitment to the prophecy—who awaited the end of the world by themselves at home, hoping they weren't going to die at midnight—would quietly lose their faith in Mrs. Keech. But those who had given away their possessions and were waiting with the others for the spaceship would increase their belief in her mystical abilities. In fact, they would now do everything they could to get others to join them.

At midnight, with no sign of a spaceship in the yard, the group felt a little nervous. By 2 A.M., they were getting seriously worried.

At 4:45 A.M., Mrs. Keech had a new vision: The world had been spared, she said, because of the impressive faith of her little band. "And mighty is the word of God," she told her followers, "and by his word have ye been saved—for from the mouth of death have ye been delivered and at no time has there been such a force loosed upon the Earth. Not since the beginning of time upon this Earth has there been such a force of Good and light as now floods this room."

The group's mood shifted from despair to exhilaration. Many of the group's members, who had not felt the need to proselytize before December 21, began calling the press to report the miracle, and soon they were out on the streets, buttonholing passersby, trying to convert them. Mrs. Keech's prediction had failed, but not Leon Festinger's.

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The engine that drives self-justification, the energy that produces the need to justify our actions and decisions—especially the wrong ones—is an unpleasant feeling that Festinger called "cognitive dissonance." Cognitive dissonance is a state of tension that occurs whenever a person holds two cognitions (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions) that are psychologically inconsistent, such as "Smoking is a dumb thing to do because it could kill me" and "I smoke two packs a day." Dissonance produces mental discomfort, ranging from minor pangs to deep anguish; people don't rest easy until they find a way to reduce it. In this example, the most direct way for a smoker to reduce dissonance is by quitting. But if she has tried to quit and failed, now she must reduce dissonance by convincing herself that smoking isn't really so harmful, or that smoking is worth the risk because it helps her relax or prevents her from gaining weight (and after all, obesity is a health risk, too), and so on. Most smokers manage to reduce dissonance in many such ingenious, if self-deluding, ways.

Dissonance is disquieting because to hold two ideas that contradict each other is to flirt with absurdity and, as Albert Camus observed, we humans are creatures who spend our lives trying to

convince ourselves that our existence is not absurd. At the heart of it, Festinger's theory is about how people strive to make sense out of contradictory ideas and lead lives that are, at least in their own minds, consistent and meaningful. The theory inspired more than 3,000 experiments that, taken together, have transformed psychologists' understanding of how the human mind works. Cognitive dissonance has even escaped academia and entered popular culture. The term is everywhere. The two of us have heard it in TV newscasts, political columns, magazine articles, bumper stickers, even on a soap opera. Alex Trebek used it on *Jeopardy,* Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show,* and President Bartlet on *The West Wing.* Although the expression has been thrown around a lot, few people fully understand its meaning or appreciate its enormous motivational power.

In 1956, one of us (Elliot) arrived at Stanford University as a graduate student in psychology. Festinger had arrived that same year as a young professor, and they immediately began working together, designing experiments to test and expand dissonance theory.[3] Their thinking challenged many notions that were gospel in psychology and among the general public, such as the behaviorist's view that people do things primarily for the rewards they bring, the economist's view that human beings generally make rational decisions, and the psychoanalyst's view that acting aggressively gets rid of aggressive impulses.

Consider how dissonance theory challenged behaviorism. At the time, most scientific psychologists were convinced that people's actions are governed by reward and punishment. It is certainly true that if you feed a rat at the end of a maze, he will learn the maze faster than if you don't feed him; if you give your dog a biscuit when she gives you her paw, she will learn that trick faster than if you sit around hoping she will do it on her own. Conversely, if you punish your pup when you catch her peeing on the carpet, she will soon stop doing it. Behaviorists further argued that anything that was merely associated with reward would become more attractive—your

puppy will like you because you give her biscuits—and anything associated with pain would become noxious and undesirable.

Behavioral laws do apply to human beings, too, of course; no one would stay in a boring job without pay, and if you give your toddler a cookie to stop him from having a tantrum, you have taught him to have another tantrum when he wants a cookie. But, for better or worse, the human mind is more complex than the brain of a rat or a puppy. A dog may appear contrite for having been caught peeing on the carpet, but she will not try to think up justifications for her misbehavior. Humans think; and because we think, dissonance theory demonstrated that our behavior transcends the effects of rewards and punishments and often contradicts them.

For example, Elliot predicted that if people go through a great deal of pain, discomfort, effort, or embarrassment to get something, they will be happier with that "something" than if it came to them easily. For behaviorists, this was a preposterous prediction. Why would people like anything associated with pain? But for Elliot, the answer was obvious: self-justification. The cognition that I am a sensible, competent person is dissonant with the cognition that I went through a painful procedure to achieve something—say, joining a group that turned out to be boring and worthless. Therefore, I would distort my perceptions of the group in a positive direction, trying to find good things about them and ignoring the downside.

It might seem that the easiest way to test this hypothesis would be to rate a number of college fraternities on the basis of how severe their initiations are, and then interview members and ask them how much they like their fraternity. If the members of severe-initiation fraternities like their frat brothers more than do members of mild-initiation fraternities, does this prove that severity produces the liking? It does not. It may be just the reverse. If the members of a fraternity regard themselves as being a highly desirable, elite group, they may require a severe initiation to prevent the riffraff from joining. Only those who are highly attracted to the severe-initiation group to begin with

would be willing to go through the initiation to get into it. Those who are not excited by a particular fraternity but just want to be in one, any one, will choose fraternities that require mild initiations.

That is why it is essential to conduct a controlled experiment. The beauty of an experiment is the random assignment of people to conditions. Regardless of a person's degree of interest at the outset in joining the group, each participant would be randomly assigned to either the severe-initiation or the mild-initiation condition. If people who go through a tough time to get into a group later find that group to be more attractive than those who get in with no effort, then we know that it was the effort that caused it, not differences in initial levels of interest.

And so Elliot and his colleague Judson Mills conducted just such an experiment.[4] Stanford students were invited to join a group that would be discussing the psychology of sex, but before they could qualify for admission, they would first have to pass an entrance requirement. Some of the students were randomly assigned to a severely embarrassing initiation procedure: They had to recite, out loud to the experimenter, lurid, sexually explicit passages from *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and other racy novels. (For conventional 1950s students, this was a painfully embarrassing thing to do.) Others were randomly assigned to a mildly embarrassing initiation procedure: reading aloud sexual words from the dictionary.

After the initiation, each of the students listened to an identical tape recording of a discussion allegedly being held by the group of people they had just joined. Actually, the audiotape was prepared in advance so that the discussion was as boring and worthless as it could be. The discussants talked haltingly, with long pauses, about the secondary sex characteristics of birds—changes in plumage during courtship, that sort of thing. The taped discussants hemmed and hawed, frequently interrupted one another, and left sentences unfinished.

Finally, the students rated the discussion on a number of dimensions. Those who had undergone only a mild initiation saw the dis-

cussion for what it was, worthless and dull, and they correctly rated the group members as being unappealing and boring. One guy on the tape, stammering and muttering, admitted that he hadn't done the required reading on the courtship practices of some rare bird, and the mild-initiation listeners were annoyed by him. What an irresponsible idiot! He didn't even do the basic reading! He let the group down! Who'd want to be in a group with him? But those who had gone through a severe initiation rated the discussion as interesting and exciting and the group members as attractive and sharp. They forgave the irresponsible idiot. His candor was refreshing! Who wouldn't want to be in a group with such an honest guy? It was hard to believe that they were listening to the same tape recording. Such is the power of dissonance.

This experiment has been replicated several times by other scientists who have used a variety of initiation techniques, from electric shock to excessive physical exertion.[5] The results are always the same: Severe initiations increase a member's liking for the group. These findings do not mean that people enjoy painful experiences, such as filling out their income-tax forms, or that people enjoy things because they are associated with pain. What they do show is that if a person voluntarily goes through a difficult or a painful experience *in order* to attain some goal or object, that goal or object becomes more attractive. If, on your way to join a discussion group, a flowerpot fell from the open window of an apartment building and hit you on the head, you would not like that discussion group any better. But if you volunteered to get hit on the head by a flowerpot to become a member of the group, you would definitely like the group more.

Believing Is Seeing

> I will look at any additional evidence to confirm the opinion to which I have already come.
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> —Lord Molson, British politician (1903–1991)

Dissonance theory also exploded the self-flattering idea that we humans, being *Homo sapiens,* process information logically. On the contrary: If the new information is consonant with our beliefs, we think it is well founded and useful: "Just what I always said!" But if the new information is dissonant, then we consider it biased or foolish: "What a dumb argument!" So powerful is the need for consonance that when people are forced to look at disconfirming evidence, they will find a way to criticize, distort, or dismiss it so that they can maintain or even strengthen their existing belief. This mental contortion is called the "confirmation bias."[6] Lenny Bruce, the legendary American humorist and social commentator, described it vividly as he watched the famous 1960 confrontation between Richard Nixon and John Kennedy, in the nation's very first televised presidential debate:

> I would be with a bunch of Kennedy fans watching the debate and their comment would be, "He's really slaughtering Nixon." Then we would all go to another apartment, and the Nixon fans would say, "How do you like the shellacking he gave Kennedy?" And then I realized that each group loved their candidate so that a guy would have to be this blatant—he would have to look into the camera and say: "I am a thief, a crook, do you hear me, I am the worst choice you could ever make for the Presidency!" And even then his following would say, "Now there's an honest man for you. It takes a big guy to admit that. There's the kind of guy we need for President."[7]

In 2003, after it had become abundantly clear that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Americans who had supported the war and President Bush's reason for launching it were thrown into dissonance: We believed the president, and we (and he) were wrong. How to resolve this? For Democrats who had thought Saddam Hussein had WMDs, the resolution was relatively easy: The Republicans were wrong again; the president lied, or at least was too eager to lis-

ten to faulty information; how foolish of me to believe him. For Republicans, however, the dissonance was sharper. More than half of them resolved it by refusing to accept the evidence, telling a Knowledge Networks poll that they believed the weapons *had* been found. The survey's director said, "For some Americans, their desire to support the war may be leading them to screen out information that weapons of mass destruction have not been found. Given the intensive news coverage and high levels of public attention to the topic, this level of misinformation suggests that some Americans may be avoiding having an experience of cognitive dissonance." You bet.[8]

Neuroscientists have recently shown that these biases in thinking are built into the very way the brain processes information—all brains, regardless of their owners' political affiliation. For example, in a study of people who were being monitored by magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) while they were trying to process dissonant or consonant information about George Bush or John Kerry, Drew Westen and his colleagues found that the reasoning areas of the brain virtually shut down when participants were confronted with dissonant information, and the emotion circuits of the brain lit up happily when consonance was restored.[9] These mechanisms provide a neurological basis for the observation that once our minds are made up, it is hard to change them.

Indeed, even reading information that goes against your point of view can make you all the more convinced you are right. In one experiment, researchers selected people who either favored or opposed capital punishment and asked them to read two scholarly, well-documented articles on the emotionally charged issue of whether the death penalty deters violent crimes. One article concluded that it did; the other that it didn't. If the readers were processing information rationally, they would at least realize that the issue is more complex than they had previously believed and would therefore move a bit closer to each other in their beliefs about capital punishment as a deterrence. But dissonance theory predicts that the readers would

find a way to distort the two articles. They would find reasons to clasp the confirming article to their bosoms, hailing it as a highly competent piece of work. And they would be supercritical of the disconfirming article, finding minor flaws and magnifying them into major reasons why they need not be influenced by it. This is precisely what happened. Not only did each side discredit the other's arguments; each side became even more committed to its own.[10]

The confirmation bias even sees to it that no evidence—the absence of evidence—is evidence for what we believe. When the FBI and other investigators failed to find any evidence whatsoever for the belief that the nation had been infiltrated by Satanic cults that were ritually slaughtering babies, believers in these cults were unfazed. The absence of evidence, they said, was confirmation of how clever and evil the cult leaders were: They were eating those babies, bones and all. It's not just fringe cultists and proponents of pop psychology who fall prey to this reasoning. When Franklin D. Roosevelt made the terrible decision to uproot thousands of Japanese Americans and put them in incarceration camps for the duration of World War II, he did so entirely on the basis of rumors that Japanese Americans were planning to sabotage the war effort. There was no proof then or later to support this rumor. Indeed, the Army's West Coast commander, General John DeWitt, admitted that they had no evidence of sabotage or treason against a single Japanese-American citizen. "The very fact that no sabotage has taken place," he said, "is a disturbing and confirming indication that such action *will* be taken."[11]

Ingrid's Choice, Nick's Mercedes, and Elliot's Canoe

Dissonance theory came to explain far more than the reasonable notion that people are unreasonable at processing information. It also showed why they continue to be biased after they have made impor-

tant decisions.[12] Social psychologist Dan Gilbert, in his illuminating book *Stumbling on Happiness,* asks us to consider what would have happened at the end of *Casablanca* if Ingrid Bergman did not patriotically rejoin her Nazi-fighting husband but instead remained with Humphrey Bogart in Morocco.[13] Would she, as Bogart tells her in a heart-wrenching speech, have regretted it—"maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of your life"? Or did she forever regret leaving Bogart? Gilbert marshals a wealth of data to show that the answer to both questions is no, that either decision would have made her happy in the long run. Bogart was eloquent but wrong, and dissonance theory tells us why: Ingrid would have found reasons to justify either choice, along with reasons to be glad she did not make the other.

Once we make a decision, we have all kinds of tools at our disposal to bolster it. When our frugal, unflashy friend Nick traded in his eight-year-old Honda Civic on a sudden impulse and bought a new, fully loaded Mercedes, he began behaving oddly (for Nick). He started criticizing his friends' cars, saying things like "Isn't it about time you traded in that wreck? Don't you think you deserve the pleasure of driving a well-engineered machine?" and "You know, it's really unsafe to drive little cars. If you got in an accident, you could be killed. Isn't your life worth an extra few thousand dollars? You have no idea how much peace of mind it brings me to know that my family is safe because I'm driving a solid automobile."

It's possible that Nick simply got bitten by the safety bug and decided, coolly and rationally, that it would be wonderful if everyone drove a great car like the Mercedes. But we don't think so. His behavior, both in spending all that money on a luxury car and in nagging his friends to do the same, was so uncharacteristic that we suspected that he was reducing the dissonance he must have felt over impulsively spending a big chunk of his life's savings on what he would once have referred to as "just a car." Besides, he was doing this just when his kids were about to go to college, an event that would

put a strain on his bank account. So Nick began marshalling arguments to justify his decision: "The Mercedes is a wonderful machine; I've worked hard all my life and I deserve it; besides, it's so safe." And if he could persuade his cheapskate friends to buy one too, he would feel doubly justified. Like Mrs. Keech's converts, he began to proselytize.

Nick's need to reduce dissonance (like Ingrid's) was increased by the irrevocability of his decision; he could not unmake that decision without losing a lot of money. Some scientific evidence for the power of irrevocability comes from a clever study of the mental maneuverings of gamblers at a racetrack. The racetrack is an ideal place to study irrevocability because once you've placed your bet, you can't go back and tell the nice man behind the window you've changed your mind. In this study, the researchers simply intercepted people who were standing in line to place two-dollar bets and other people who had just left the window. The investigators asked everyone how certain they were that their horses would win. The bettors who had placed their bets were far more certain about their choice than were the folks waiting in line.[14] But, of course, nothing had changed except the finality of placing the bet. People become more certain they are right about something they just did if they can't undo it.

You can see one immediate benefit of understanding how dissonance works: Don't listen to Nick. The more costly a decision, in terms of time, money, effort, or inconvenience, and the more irrevocable its consequences, the greater the dissonance and the greater the need to reduce it by overemphasizing the good things about the choice made. Therefore, when you are about to make a big purchase or an important decision—which car or computer to buy, whether to undergo plastic surgery, or whether to sign up for a costly self-help program—don't ask someone who has just done it. That person will be highly motivated to convince you that it is the right thing to do. Ask people who have spent twelve years and $50,000 on a particular therapy if it helped, and most will say, "Dr. Weltschmerz is won-

derful! I would *never* have found true love [got a new job] [lost weight] if it hadn't been for him." After all that time and money, they aren't likely to say, "Yeah, I saw Dr. Weltschmerz for twelve years, and boy, was it ever a waste." If you want advice on what product to buy, ask someone who is still gathering information and is still open-minded. And if you want to know whether a program will help you, don't rely on testimonials: Get the data from controlled experiments.

Self-justification is complicated enough when it follows our conscious choices; at least we know we can expect it. But it also occurs in the aftermath of things we do for unconscious reasons, when we haven't a clue about why we hold some belief or cling to some custom but are too proud to admit it. For example, in the introduction we described the custom of the Dinka and Nuer tribes of the Sudan, who extract several of the permanent front teeth of their children—a painful procedure, done with a fish hook. Anthropologists suggest that this tradition originated during an epidemic of lockjaw; missing front teeth would enable sufferers to get some nourishment. But if that were the reason, why in the world would the villagers continue this custom once the danger had passed?

A practice that makes no sense at all to outsiders makes perfect sense when seen through the lens of dissonance theory. During the epidemic, the villagers would have begun extracting the front teeth of all their children, so that if any later contracted tetanus, the adults would be able to feed them. But this is a painful thing to do to children, especially since only some would become afflicted. To further justify their actions, to themselves and their children, the villagers would need to bolster the decision by adding benefits to the procedure after the fact. For example, they might convince themselves that pulling teeth has aesthetic value—say, that sunken-chin look is really quite attractive—and they might even turn the surgical ordeal into a rite of passage into adulthood. And, indeed, that is just what happened. "The toothless look is beautiful," the villagers say. "People who have all their teeth are ugly: They look like cannibals who

would eat a person. A full set of teeth makes a man look like a donkey." The toothless look has other aesthetic advantages: "We like the hissing sound it creates when we speak." And adults reassure frightened children by saying, "This ritual is a sign of maturity."[15] The original medical justification for the practice is long gone. The psychological self-justification remains.

People want to believe that, as smart and rational individuals, they know why they made the choices they did, so they are not always happy when you tell them the actual reason for their actions. Elliot learned this firsthand after that initiation experiment. "After each participant had finished," he recalls, "I explained the study in detail and went over the theory carefully. Although everyone who went through the severe initiation said that they found the hypothesis intriguing and that they could see how most people would be affected in the way I predicted, they all took pains to assure me that their preference for the group had nothing to do with the severity of the initiation. They each claimed that they liked the group because that's the way they really felt. Yet almost all of them liked the group more than any of the people in the mild-initiation condition did."

No one is immune to the need to reduce dissonance, even those who know the theory inside out. Elliot tells this story: "When I was a young professor at the University of Minnesota, my wife and I tired of renting apartments; so, in December, we set out to buy our first home. We could find only two reasonable houses in our price range. One was older, charming, and within walking distance from the campus. I liked it a lot, primarily because it meant that I could have my students over for research meetings, serve beer, and play the role of the hip professor. But that house was in an industrial area, without a lot of space for our children to play. The other choice was a tract house, newer but totally without distinction. It was in the suburbs, a thirty-minute drive from campus but only a mile from a lake. After going back and forth on that decision for a few weeks, we decided on the house in the suburbs.

"Shortly after moving in, I noticed an ad in the newspaper for a used canoe and immediately bought it as a surprise for my wife and kids. When I drove home on a freezing, bleak January day with the canoe lashed to the roof of my car, my wife took one look and burst into laughter. 'What's so funny?' I asked. She said, 'Ask Leon Festinger!' Of course! I had felt so much dissonance about buying the house in the suburbs that I needed to do something right away to justify that purchase. I somehow managed to forget that it was the middle of winter and that, in Minneapolis, it would be months before the frozen lake would thaw out enough for the canoe to be usable. But, in a sense, without my quite realizing it, I used that canoe anyway. All winter, even as it sat in the garage, its presence made me feel better about our decision."

Knowing how dissonance works won't make any of us automatically immune to the allure of self-justification, as Elliot learned when he bought that canoe in January. You can't just say to people, as he did after the initiation experiments, "See how you reduced dissonance? Isn't that interesting?" and expect them to reply, "Oh, thank you for showing me the real reason I like the group. That sure makes me feel smart!" All of us, to preserve our belief that we are smart, will occasionally do dumb things. We can't help it. We are wired that way.

But this does not mean that we are doomed to keep striving to justify our actions after the fact—like Sisyphus, never reaching the top of the hill of self-acceptance. A richer understanding of how and why our minds work as they do is the first step toward breaking the self-justification habit. And that, in turn, requires us to be more mindful of our behavior and the reasons for our choices. It takes time, self-reflection, and willingness.

The conservative columnist William Safire once described the "psychopolitical challenge" that voters face: "how to deal with cognitive dissonance."[29] He began with a story of his own such challenge. During the Clinton administration, Safire recounted, he had criticized Hillary Clinton for trying to conceal the identity of the members of her health-care task force. He wrote a column castigating her efforts at secrecy, which he said were toxic to democracy. No dissonance there; those bad Democrats are always doing bad things. Six years later, however, he found that he was "afflicted" by cognitive dissonance when Vice President Dick Cheney, a fellow conservative Republican whom Safire admires, insisted on keeping the identity of his energy-policy task force a secret. What did Safire do? Because of his awareness of dissonance and how it works, he took a deep breath, hitched up his trousers, and did the tough but virtuous thing: He wrote a column publicly criticizing Cheney's actions. The irony is that because of his criticism of Cheney, Safire received several laudatory letters from liberals—which, he admitted, produced enormous dissonance. Oh, Lord, he did something *those* people approved of?

Safire's ability to recognize his own dissonance, and resolve it by doing the fair thing, is rare. As we will see, his willingness to concede that his own side made a mistake is something that few are prepared to share. Instead, people will bend over backward to reduce dissonance in a way that is favorable to them and their team. The specific ways vary, but our efforts at self-justification are all designed to serve our need to feel good about what we have done, what we believe, and who we are.