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Enhanced Views

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Recommended Citation

Ellsworth, Phoebe C. "Enhanced Views." Review of Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me), by C. Tavis and E. Aronson. *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5478 (2008): 30.

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Enhanced views

PHOEBE C. ELLSWORTH

Carol Tavris
and Elliot Aronson

MISTAKES WERE MADE
(BUT NOT BY ME)

Why we justify foolish beliefs, bad decisions,
and hurtful acts
304pp. Harvett Books. Paperback, \$9.95.
978 0 151 603492 0

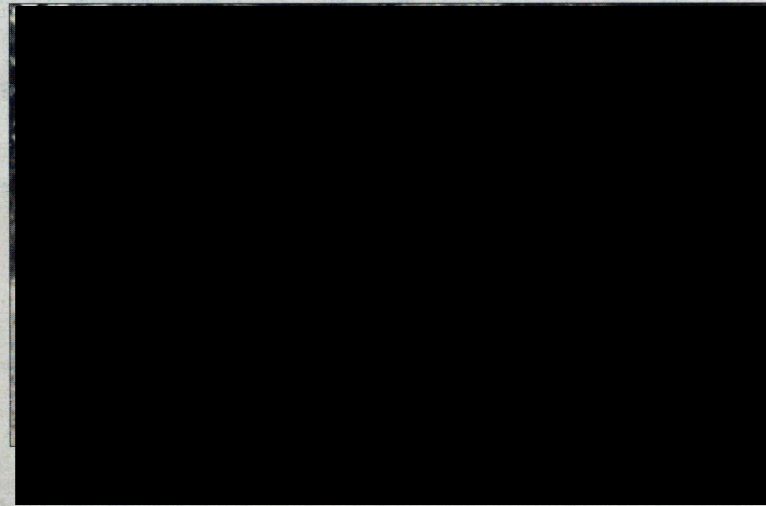
"Cognitive dissonance" has become one of those scientific terms that everyone knows and uses so freely and so loosely that its original meaning has been obscured. We speak of cognitive dissonance when we find our glasses in the kitchen instead of the bedroom, when oestrogen replacement turns out to be unhealthy rather than healthy, whenever we are less than pleasantly surprised. In Leon Festinger's original theory, cognitive dissonance arises when a person is forced to entertain two mutually inconsistent ideas, which creates an unpleasant tension that motivates the person to engage in various mental gymnastics to minimize the dissonance, usually by denying one of the inconsistent cognitions. Elliot Aronson, Festinger's most distinguished student, showed that cognitive dissonance is most common and most excruciating when new information is inconsistent with one's concept of oneself as an honest, intelligent and well-meaning person, and that the urge to maintain a favourable self-conception usurps all other possible strategies for escaping the dissonance. Cognitive dissonance can be as immediate and powerful as the response to physical danger.

In *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)*, Aronson joins Carol Tavris, a social psychologist and an accurate and insightful writer, to follow this basic process of dissonance reduction through public policy, medicine, law, psychotherapy, intergroup prejudice, personal memories and marriage. In general, people forget facts that suggest that they may have behaved stupidly or badly, they seek and believe information that confirms what they already "know", and deny or dismiss contradictory evidence. For example, drug companies will dismiss the results of studies showing that their new drugs are no better, and sometimes worse, than the cheaper varieties already available. Doctors will fail to notice symptoms that are inconsistent with their initial diagnosis. Police and prosecutors identify a prime suspect and from that moment it becomes increasingly difficult for them to consider – or even to notice – any evidence to the contrary. Even if DNA testing eventually proves the suspect's innocence, some prosecutors still cannot admit – or even believe – that they were wrong.

When people stay in a bad relationship for too long, they tend to justify their disappointing choice by repeatedly telling themselves that their partner's inconsiderate behaviour is transitory. But when people do begin to think about breaking up, they rewrite history, deciding that the annoying behaviour is the mark of a bad character, not a bad day, collecting bits of incriminating evidence until all redeeming features are erased and the decision to leave is completely justified, and finally resorting to "the pitiless remark said by many a departing spouse after twenty or thirty years, 'I never loved you'".

Tavris and Aronson's analysis of these and other domains is both scientifically accurate and wonderfully readable. Their book is very serious, and very funny. The underlying principles are based on a wide-ranging review of research in cognitive and social psychology. According to the principle of "naive realism",

we believe that we see the world the way it is, and that therefore people who see things differently must be biased by self-interest, ideology or their individual or cultural backgrounds. If we are tolerant, we can understand and explain other people's opinions; our own seem to need no explanation. According to "the fundamental attribution error", we see other people's behaviour – especially their bad behaviour – as a reflection of the kind of people they are, and our own as a reflection of our circumstances. When people close to us forget our birthdays, we grumble about how self-centred and inconsiderate they are; if we forget theirs, it is because of the crushing demands on our time. On a larger scale, the enemy behaves as he does because he is evil; we behave the way we do because the situation requires it. They attack; we defend. And the process is often gradual, as we all should



remember from the classic Milgram studies of obedience, in which normal people progressed by small steps to delivering dangerous shocks to others. We succumb to a small temptation, commit a small misdeed, we justify it, the next time it is easier, and there is no clear place to draw the line. Self-enhancing distortions of memory take care of any lingering regrets.

There is no overstating the importance of the book's message: if we could recognize our blind spots and see our personal and professional behaviour more clearly, the world would be a better place. But, as the book itself suggests, there are daunting mental obstacles to incorporating these ideas into our everyday thinking. It is easy to detect bias in other people, but it takes a great deal of effort to see it in oneself.

Also, Tavris and Aronson tell us that these "self-protective delusions and blind spots are built into the way the brain works". As Virginia Woolf put it, "The voice of protest is the voice of another and an ancient civilization which seems to have bred in us the instinct to enjoy and fight rather than to suffer and understand". But the belief that there is nothing we can do about it is both self-serving and false. "Genetic" does not mean "unmodifiable". We are not ants: our behaviour is hardly ever controlled by triggering stimuli that automatically elicit fixed action sequences. We have the mental capacity to reinterpret the stimulus and to choose among responses.

This book is somewhat at odds with the popular psychology of the day, which constantly reassures us that we are better than we think. The lesson people learn from Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* (2005), for example, is that snap judgements are more reliable than sober consideration. Motivational speakers and the popular version of the current Positive Psychology movement suggest that in order to thrive all we need is self-confidence and self-satisfaction. Tavris and Aronson suggest that many of the worst personal and political errors stem from too much self-confidence rather than too little. Self-satisfaction without self-criticism is mindless; self-confidence without self-insight is dangerous.

Not all cultures, however, are as susceptible to the sort of automatic self-justification characteristic of Western Europe and America. In Japan children are taught that the only way to improve their abilities is to acknowl-

edge their mistakes. If we can easily recognize biases in other people but not in ourselves, then we should perhaps ask the opinions of others more often, since they are the ones who can recognize our biases. And we should not be afraid that our reputation will be destroyed if we confess that we were wrong. People who can admit that they have made mistakes are often seen as models of courage and integrity. People who cannot are at risk of being unmasked by others, and held up to public ridicule or condemnation. Is self-satisfaction really such a worthy goal? Tavris and Aronson would recommend self-development: "at all ages, people can learn to see mistakes not as terrible personal failings to be denied or justified, but as inevitable aspects of life that help us grow, and grow up".

And for my next trick . . .

PETER LAMONT

Stephen Braude

THE GOLD LEAF LADY
And other parapsychological investigations
205pp. University of Chicago Press. \$22.50;
distributed in the UK by Wiley. £12.
978 0 226 07152 7

The highlight of last year's Los Angeles Conference on Magic History was a rare performance of Dr Hooker's Rising Cards. This legendary card trick left me (along with every other magician who has ever seen it) unable to explain how it might have been done. It was an astonishing reminder of the gap between the unexplained and the inexplicable. This gap, which lies at the very heart of magic, is one reason why many magicians are reluctant to believe in the paranormal. After all, does the absence of an explanation suggest paranormal abilities or merely reflect ignorance of the explanation?

The Gold Leaf Lady seeks to convince its readers that phenomena dismissed by orthodox science are real, and that those who dismiss them are at best narrow-minded and at worst guilty of intellectual cowardice. Stephen Braude himself feels that he has been the victim of uninformed and unfair criticisms by irrational and misleading critics, and is angry that his honest, courageous and scholarly work has been dismissed by those with weaker hearts and minds. He has become so sure of his own position that he considers the sceptics to be either ignorant of the evidence, or else to have been driven by fear of the implications into a position of intellectual dishonesty.

In a historical interlude, Braude introduces us to the two great psychics of the nineteenth and turn of the twentieth centuries, Daniel Dunglas Home and Eusapia Palladino. He relates the compelling evidence that these individuals had genuine psychic powers, and rehearses the weaknesses in the arguments that they did not, pointing out the ignorance, cowardice and dishonesty of those who make such arguments. Along the way, he points out the errors of others on a variety of details (including an error I made myself when I described the cage employed in a key experiment with Home as metal, when in fact it was made of wood). And if such details were relevant to any argument that has ever been made about the genuineness of Home or anyone else, this would indeed be fruitful. Alas, instead, they are only further evidence of "resistance to and fear of" the paranormal.

Yet Braude is at least as guilty of omission and error. He fails even to mention well-known criticisms of the Palladino case, makes claims about Home that are no less questionable than those he questions, and misrepresents some of the very arguments that he dismisses as misrepresentative.