

The Curse of the Self ¶¶

Self-Awareness, Egotism, and the Quality of Human Life

Mark R. Leary

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2004

PREFACE ❖

As a university professor, I regularly attend my university's graduation exercises each spring. As I've sat through my share of both excellent and dreadful commencement speeches, I have sometimes mused over what *I* would say to the graduating students and assembled guests if I were ever invited to give a graduation address. What important lesson could I impart in 15 minutes or less that, if heeded, might change the graduates' lives as they made their way out into the world?

A few years ago, as I listened to a speaker talk about the challenges that the graduates would face, I decided that my commencement speech would tell students that their greatest challenges in life would be ones that they inadvertently created for themselves. "You will face various disappointments, problems, and even tragedies in life," I would say, "many of which you will have little or no power to control. But the primary cause of your unhappiness will be you."

This claim is not new, of course. Others have suggested that people are often their own worst enemies. But others who have examined this topic rarely consider the possibility that people create so much unhappiness for themselves because of how the human mind is designed. As a social psychologist with interests in self and identity, I have come to the conclusion that the natural human tendencies to be egocentric, egotistical, and otherwise egoistic play a central role in our problems at both the personal and societal levels.

Although a few other animals can think consciously about themselves in rather basic ways, no other species possesses the powers of self-reflection that human beings have. The ability to self-reflect offers many

benefits by allowing us to plan ahead, reminisce about the past, consider options, innovate, and evaluate ourselves. However, self-awareness also sets us up for a host of problems that are unlike the difficulties faced by any other species. Among other things, the capacity for self-reflection distorts people's perceptions of the world, leading them to draw inaccurate conclusions about themselves and other people, and prompting them to make bad decisions based on faulty information. Self-awareness conjures up a great deal of personal suffering in the form of depression, anxiety, anger, and other negative emotions by allowing people to ruminate about the past or imagine what might befall them in the future. The inherently egocentric and egotistical manner in which the self processes information can blind people to their own shortcomings and undermine their relationships with others. The self also underlies a great deal of social conflict, leading people to dislike those who are different from them and to fight with members of other social groups. It also leads people to endanger their own well-being by putting egoistic goals over personal safety. For those inclined toward religion and spirituality, visionaries have proclaimed that the self stymies the quest for spiritual fulfillment and leads to immoral behavior. And, ironically, using self-reflection to help us deliberately control our own behavior can often backfire and create more problems than it solves.

The Curse of the Self is about the personal and social problems that result from self-reflection, egocentrism, and egotism. I wrote it for readers who want to understand why they—like all other people—have such difficulty finding the peaceful, happy, and satisfying life they desire. I suspect that many of them already have a vague sense that at least part of the reason lies in an excessively self-focused and egoistic approach to life. This book will explain how and why our natural tendency to talk to ourselves, see the world egocentrically, defend our egos, seek self-validation, and engage in other acts of selfhood often works against our best interests.

I also wrote the book to counteract what I view as the glorification of egoism in Western culture and pop psychology. People are often urged to solve their problems and improve their lives by focusing on themselves, setting more egoistic goals, enhancing their self-esteem, and otherwise strengthening their sense of self. Although these strategies are sometimes useful, those who promote an egoistic approach to solving life's problems fail to recognize that an excessive emphasis on self and ego is often part of the problem.

Although I wrote this book primarily for nonprofessionals, I believe that behavioral scientists, mental health professionals, and students in psychology and related disciplines will find the material useful and provocative. For them, I have included references to the scholarly literature on which my claims are based.

I would like to thank my students and colleagues, many of whom have contributed to my thinking about the self. I particularly appreciate the feedback that Geoff MacDonald and Robin Kowalski provided on early drafts of certain chapters. I also thank Connie Kuhlman, Roger Charles, Carolyn Crump, John Bloss, and Alexa Moderno for many provocative discussions regarding ways in which the self is a curse. Finally, I wish to acknowledge assistance from an R. J. Reynolds Research Leave from Wake Forest University, which allowed me to write portions of the book.

CONTENTS ❖

- 1 The Self-Aware Animal 3
 - 2 Living in Two Worlds 25
 - 3 Through the Eyes of the Ego 53
 - 4 Making Ourselves Miserable 78
 - 5 When Selves Collide 101
 - 6 Risking Life and Limb 124
 - 7 Religion and Morality 146
 - 8 The Self Out of Control 162
 - 9 Bringing Out the Best in the Self 185
- Notes 199
- Index 221

3 ■

Through the Eyes of the Ego

We don't see the world as it is. We see it as we are.

— ANAÏS NIN

According to Greek myth, Narcissus was a handsome young man whose high opinion of himself led him to dismiss the advances of the nymphs who sought his attention. One day, a maiden whom Narcissus had spurned prayed that he, too, might feel what it was like to love someone and receive no affection in return. Nemesis, the goddess of righteous anger, granted the maiden's prayer by causing Narcissus to fall in love with his own reflection. When Narcissus glimpsed his reflection in a clear pool, he became so enamored that he could not tear himself away from his image, losing all interest in food or sleep until he pined away and died. Even as he was being ferried to Hades across the River Styx, Narcissus could not resist leaning over the edge of the boat to catch one last glimpse of himself in the water.

The English language has borrowed Narcissus's name to refer to people who have a particularly inflated view of their appearance, cleverness, importance, or worth. At the upper extremes of narcissism lies the *narcissistic personality disorder*, a psychiatric classification applied to people who not only have a grandiose self-image of being special and unique, but who also insist on excessive admiration and special treatment and feel entitled, by virtue of their superiority, to use and exploit other people.

The narcissistic personality disorder is a fascinating phenomenon in its own right, but we are not interested here in the exceedingly annoying behavior of the pathological narcissist. Rather, our focus is on the everyday variety of narcissism that characterizes virtually everyone. Because we view ourselves and our worlds through the eyes of our own egos, our

perceptions are often biased in ways that flatter ourselves. We are all occasional narcissists who believe that we are a tad more wonderful than we really are.

Most people go through life assuming that they perceive themselves and the world accurately. We are all aware, of course, that our senses can be fooled by optical illusions, and from time to time, each of us realizes that we have misinterpreted a situation, misjudged a person, or drawn some other mistaken conclusion. But most of the time, we regard these mistakes as atypical errors in judgment against a broad backdrop of general accuracy. Most of us fail to realize, much less come to terms with, the fact that our perceptions of the world are often distorted in ways that are impossible for us to discern.

Contrary to our strong sense that we usually know what's going on around us, people don't perceive the world as it actually is. Never mind that our senses are designed to register only certain kinds of stimuli—certain wavelengths of light or frequencies of sound, for example—and that everything that lies outside our sense modalities goes undetected. Even in the realm of the knowable, our experience of the events that unfold around us is accompanied by an ongoing internal commentary about them that modifies the nature of our experience. In everyday language, we “talk to ourselves” about what we experience. Furthermore, what we say to ourselves about what's happening is often not correct.

This stream of internal chatter about our ongoing experiences is far more pervasive than most people realize. We are quite aware of those times in which we consciously deliberate about something, carrying on an explicit conversation in our heads about its pros and cons. But we are usually not aware that our ordinary daily activities are accompanied by an ongoing inner interpretation about what we are experiencing, what it means, whether it is good or bad, what we ought to do about it, and often whether we'd rather be somewhere else doing something different. Right now, you may be thinking to yourself “I see what he means” or “that doesn't make sense” or “so what?” Whatever your reaction, you are not having the pure experience of simply reading this book. Rather, you are adding new layers of meaning and interpretation on top of the original, real event. When you watch TV, talk to other people, go to work, or eat dinner, your experience is also a blend of the actual event and your analysis of it. “My neighbor doesn't seem to like me much.” “My job is so boring.” “This show is an insult to my intelligence.” “This food is delicious.” The way that you talk to yourself about what happens to you becomes an inseparable part of the experience itself, just as when we watch a sporting

event on television, our experience is a combination of the actual competition plus the ongoing patter and analysis of the sports announcer. Only in this case, the announcer is us.

In many ways, this running commentary creates the world we experience. I don't mean that the world itself does not really exist but, rather, that our ultimate experience is of our perceptions, ideas, and opinions about what happens rather than of the world itself. As the Yacqui shaman Don Juan explained to his apprentice, Carlos Castaneda, "the internal dialogue is what grounds us. The world is such and such or so and so only because we talk to ourselves about its being such and such or so and so."¹ We are almost always at least one step removed from the real world, separated from it by our ongoing thoughts, interpretations, opinions, and judgments. Only rarely do we experience events with no conscious interpretation or self-related comments about them.

If the self's commentary on our experiences was consistently fair, objective, and accurate (as it sometimes is), there would be no problem. In fact, it might be useful to have an objective analysis of our lives as we go along—something like a sports announcer's play-by-play coverage of a fast-paced event. Difficulties arise, however, because our self-talk puts a decidedly one-sided spin on our experiences. The play-by-play announcer in our mind is unabashedly biased in favor of the home team. As a result, the self sometimes leads us to perceive a world that differs in important respects from the one that really exists "out there." This biased announcer provides us with a one-sided, somewhat distorted picture of ourselves, other people, and the world.

❖ Perceiving Ourselves

Ever since the Oracle at Delphi admonished the ancient Greeks to "know thyself," people have regarded having an accurate understanding of oneself as a hallmark of maturity and personal adjustment. People cannot function optimally if they do not know themselves well or are deluded about who they are.

Most people assume that they understand themselves reasonably well. Each of us can easily see that other people's self-views are often distorted, if not deluded, but most of us believe that we have a relatively dispassionate view of who and what we are. We admit that we may sometimes be misled and even occasionally biased, but in general, most of us think that we see ourselves plainly, warts and all.

In reality, each of us holds illusions about ourselves that distort the truth in a variety of ways. I am not talking here about the fact that we simply don't know certain facts about ourselves because we lack sufficient information or have never thought carefully about certain things. Rather, I'm referring to the fact that we are systematically biased in how we think about ourselves. Instead of having a clear and unencumbered view of who we are, our self-perceptions are occluded and distorted in a number of ways. And, perhaps most troubling, we are nearly blind to the illusions we have about ourselves.

Perhaps the biggest bias in people's perceptions of themselves involves their penchant for overestimating their own positive qualities. People have a pervasive tendency to interpret events in ways that maintain an image of themselves as being competent, capable, and good.² This is not to say that people never admit their failures, shortcomings, and ethical lapses; they do, of course. But even so, they display a broad tendency to see themselves as better than they really are. Rather than holding a balanced view of their personal strengths and weaknesses, people dramatically overperceive their positive qualities and underperceive their negative ones. Thus, even when they think they are seeing their faults accurately, their self-perceptions of their deficiencies are still often distorted in a positive direction!

In an influential article on what he called the "totalitarian ego," social psychologist Tony Greenwald compared the self to a totalitarian political regime.³ Totalitarian regimes are well known for their ongoing programs of propaganda that promote an image of the dictator as a capable and benevolent leader. To maintain a desired image of the dictator, the government's office of public misinformation rewrites the country's history in ways that reflect well on the government, hides ugly truths about the leader's failures and misdeeds, and embellishes, if not fabricates, the dictator's accomplishments. Greenwald suggested that the human ego operates much like a totalitarian office of misinformation, fabricating and revising our personal histories to cast us in an unrealistically positive light.

Everyone Is Better Than Average

Author Garrison Keillor describes fictitious Lake Wobegon as a place "where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." In fact, we all live in a private Lake Wobegon of our own making. Most people think not only that they are

better than the average person, but that their friends, lovers, and children are above average as well.

People tend to judge themselves as better than the average person on virtually every dimension that one can imagine. In one study of the “better-than-average effect,” university students rated themselves and the “average college student” of their own sex on 20 positive traits (such as dependable, intelligent, mature, and friendly) and 20 negative traits (such as insecure, humorless, mean, and unpleasant). Results showed that the average participant rated him- or herself more positively than average on 38 of the 40 traits!⁴ Similarly, most people rate themselves as safer than the average driver, more sexually adroit than the average lover, and more ethical than the average person.⁵ A study from Australia revealed that 86% of employees rate their job performance as “above average,” whereas only 1% say that they perform below average at work. Most people also tend to see themselves as less prejudiced than other people they know.⁶ Other research has shown that most people also say that their chances of encountering life misfortunes such as divorce, a serious accident, or personal bankruptcy are lower than the average person’s. On only a select few dimensions, such as computer programming ability, do most people rate themselves as average or worse.⁷

People also think that they are more likely to go to heaven when they die than other people are. A *U. S. News and World Report* survey asked 1,000 Americans to rate whether they and various celebrities were likely to go to heaven. Of the celebrities, Mother Teresa ranked highest on the list; 79% of the respondents thought Mother Teresa was likely to go to heaven. Oprah Winfrey (66%), Michael Jordan (65%), and Princess Diana (60%) were not far behind. In contrast, only 19% thought that O. J. Simpson was heaven-bound. The most interesting finding, though, was that when asked about themselves, 87% of the respondents indicated that they were destined to go to heaven.⁸ Put simply, respondents thought that they were personally more likely to go to heaven than anybody else on the list, including Mother Teresa!

A moment’s thought will show the logical absurdity of the better-than-average effect. Virtually every human characteristic—intelligence, physical attractiveness, social skill, kindness, athletic ability, morality, driving ability, sexual skill, and so on—falls into a normal, bell-shaped distribution. Thus, on every characteristic that is normally distributed, the same number of people fall below average on the characteristic as above average. Whether we are talking about kindness, laziness, driving ability, or skill in bed, 50% of all individuals will, by definition, fall at

or below average and 50% will fall at or above average. If every person knew where he or she fell along the distribution of a particular characteristic (for example, if each of us knew precisely how we compared to everyone else in “creativity”), half of us would acknowledge that we are above average and half of us would acknowledge that we are below average on that dimension. Yet only a few people indicate that they are below average on any given attribute, and even then, they probably underestimate how far below average they really are! This, of course, is a statistical impossibility. A great number of people who think they are above average on any given dimension are fooling themselves.

When people do encounter someone who is clearly better than they are on some important dimension, they naturally conclude that the other person is a uniquely superior individual! By viewing people who unambiguously outperform them as exceptional, people can preserve a positive view of themselves. It’s not that they themselves are personally deficient on the dimension in question, but rather that the “superstar” is so unquestionably good.

In a demonstration of this effect, researchers provided participants with feedback indicating that they had performed somewhat worse than another person (who was actually an accomplice of the researcher) on a bogus test of “perceptual intelligence.” After seeing the scores, both the participant and an uninvolved observer rated the perceptual intelligence of both the participant and the accomplice. Given that the accomplice had outscored the participant, it is not surprising that both the participant and the observer rated the accomplice as having greater perceptual intelligence than the participant. The interesting finding, though, was that although the participant and the observer rated the participant’s perceptual intelligence about the same, the participant (who had been outperformed by the accomplice) rated the accomplice’s intelligence significantly higher than the observer did. By concluding that the person who outperformed them was a genius, participants could reassure themselves that the disparity between their and the accomplice’s performance was due more to the accomplice’s obvious superiority than to their own incompetence. The observers, whose egos were not involved in this judgment, did not show this self-serving effect.⁹

In addition to seeing themselves as better than average, people also tend to view themselves more favorably than they are viewed by others. When researchers compare people’s ratings of themselves to other people’s ratings of them, they invariably find that most people rate themselves more positively than other people rate them.¹⁰ This is a sobering

fact because it means that other people rarely perceive us as positively as we perceive ourselves! Even if we don't like some aspect of ourselves very much, chances are that other people like it even less. The bias toward egotistical self-perceptions is strong and pervasive and, as we will see, it can undermine the quality of people's lives.

Self-Serving Attributions

Psychologists use the term *attributions* for people's explanations of the events in their lives. For example, people may make attributions as to why their lovers left them, why their children are not doing well in school, why they are having a problem at work, or why they won or lost an important game. Psychologists are interested in attributions because the attributions that people make for an event influence their reactions to it. Attributing the breakup of a relationship to a lover's problem with alcohol results in different reactions than attributing the breakup to one's own shortcomings as a lover. Even though the event (the breakup of one's relationship) is the same, the attribution a person makes can evoke quite different reactions to it.

Hundreds of studies have shown that the attributions that people make tend to be biased in ways that portray them in a positive light. In many of these studies, people take what they believe is a test of intelligence, interpersonal sensitivity, or problem-solving ability, then receive feedback indicating that they performed relatively well or relatively poorly on the test irrespective of how well they actually performed. (In fact, the participants' tests are never actually scored.) Then participants answer questions about why they performed well or poorly on the test.

Virtually without exception, these studies show that people make attributions that are biased in a self-serving direction.¹¹ When they perform well, research participants indicate that they did well because they're smart or skilled. When they perform poorly, however, they tend to say that their performance was due to an unfair or excessively difficult test, distracting testing conditions, or bad luck. In essence, people claim more personal responsibility when they think they performed well than when they think they performed poorly—even though they all took exactly the same test! We all see these kinds of self-serving reactions almost every day, each time somebody makes a lame excuse for doing poorly or claims too much credit for doing well.

Receiving low scores also leads participants to question the validity of the test. Even though all participants took exactly the same test, those

who think they did poorly rate its validity and accuracy lower than those who think they did well.¹² All schoolteachers have observed this pattern of self-serving attributions. When students receive grades on a test, students who get good grades feel smugly satisfied about their performance and think the test was fair, whereas those with lower grades tend to see the test (and by extension, the teacher) as unfair. I've even seen students in class argue among themselves about the fairness of a test, with students who received good grades defending the test to the disgruntled students who did poorly.

People also make self-serving attributions when they behave badly by pointing out that they had little or no choice but to do what they did.¹³ Denying responsibility for or control over one's actions helps to deflect the negative implications of bad behavior. For example, people who get caught cheating often claim that they were led to cheat by the nature of the situation (such as an unfair teacher or the fact that "everybody else does it"), but those who don't cheat boast of their own moral scruples. We don't find many cheaters who say they cheated because they are immoral people, or many noncheaters who say they didn't cheat because the situation pressured them to be honest. Anytime people's behavior leads to negative consequences, they are inclined to assert that they had little or no choice but to do what they did. One is reminded here of the guards in Nazi concentration camps who repeatedly insisted that they were just following orders.

Similar self-serving attributions may be seen when people work together in groups, such as on committees or teams. When the group does well—wins the game, reaches a good decision, makes a profit, successfully completes a task—each group member tends to feel that he or she was more responsible for the group's success than most of the other members were. When the group performs poorly, however, each member feels less responsible for the outcome than the average member.¹⁴ As an old saying goes, "Success has many parents, but failure is an orphan." Everybody wants to claim some of the responsibility for success; no one wants to accept responsibility for failure.

The ironic consequence of this pervasive bias is that both success and failure can lead to conflicts within the group. Understandably, the members of failing groups usually are unhappy, and each tends to think that the failure was mostly other members' fault. If they then learn of one another's attributions, each person will feel that he or she is being unfairly blamed by other group members and that the others are not accepting their rightful responsibility for the fiasco. However, conflicts

may also arise after a group success because each member feels that the others are claiming more responsibility than they deserve while not giving him or her the credit that is due.¹⁵ People sometimes leave successful music groups, athletic teams, and corporations when they believe they are not receiving adequate recognition for their contributions. Yet the self-serving attributional bias virtually assures that most of the members in any group will feel that they are not receiving adequate recognition. It may also help to explain why virtually everyone feels that he or she is underpaid at work. Although we might imagine that a great number of employees are, in fact, not worth what they are paid, nearly everybody thinks that he or she is not receiving his or her due.

Why Peter Piper Picked a Peck of Pickled Peppers

Our tendency to judge ourselves positively extends to objects, symbols, and events that are associated with us. We tend to view things that are somehow connected to us in a more favorable light than things that are not connected to us.

One example of this phenomenon is the mere ownership effect. People evaluate things that they own—their houses, cars, clothes, books, and other possessions—more favorably than things that they don't own. On one level, it is not surprising that people own things they like. However, experimental research suggests that this effect is due to more than just the fact that people own things that they like; people also come to like things that they own.

Researchers in one study asked research participants to rate how much they liked a number of objects such as a candy bar, stapler, comb, and drink insulator. However, before making their ratings, each participant was given one of the objects to keep; some participants randomly received the candy, some got the stapler, and so on. When they then rated all of the objects, the participants tended to evaluate the object that they now owned more positively than the objects that they didn't receive.¹⁶ Those who received staplers rated staplers more highly than those who did not receive staplers, new comb owners rated combs particularly highly, and so on. Interestingly, this effect was even stronger after participants thought that they had failed a test than when they thought they had performed well, supporting the idea that the participants' judgments of the objects were affected by their desire to feel good about themselves.

Of all of the things that we "own," few are more intimately tied to our sense of who we are than our names. This observation suggests that

people may come to like their names, and even the letters in their names, better than other names and letters that are not in their names. As outlandish as this possibility may seem at first, research clearly shows that it is true. People do, in fact, like the letters of the alphabet that appear in their own names much more than they like letters that are not in their names, and the effect is particularly strong for people's first and last initials. This preference for the letters in one's own name has been documented in at least 14 countries.¹⁷

Brett Pelham, a social psychologist, reasoned that, if people feel particularly positively about the letters in their names, this preference might manifest itself in the choices they make in life. Pelham proposed the bold hypothesis that people may prefer occupations and cities that begin with the letter of their name over those that do not! Of course, people's choices of jobs and locations to live are affected by many factors, and we should not be surprised if Mark is a university professor in North Carolina rather than a Mercedes mechanic in Minnesota. Yet Pelham and his colleagues believed that people would gravitate toward occupations and cities that shared the letters of their names at a higher rate than would be expected based on chance.

A series of 11 studies showed that this was the case.¹⁸ The researchers found, for example, that people are overrepresented in states that start with the same letter as their names. Among women, Louises are overrepresented in Louisiana, Marys in Maryland, Michelles in Michigan, and Virginias in (you guessed it) Virginia. Among men, California had more Carys than we would expect on the basis of chance, Delaware had too many Dales, Georgia was overrepresented by Georges, Texas by Teds, and Kentucky by Kenneths.

To examine the possibility that this effect occurs because parents give their children names that resemble the state in which they are born, the researchers also examined the relationship between the first letters of people's last names (which aren't typically chosen) and their state of residence. The letter-preference effect was obtained for last names as well. Furthermore, people whose names matched one of the 35 U.S. cities that begins with "Saint," such as St. Louis and St. Helen, were disproportionately likely to live in a namesake city. So, there are more Louises than one would expect in St. Louis and more Helens than one would expect in St. Helen. To be precise, compared to what one would expect given the frequency of various names in the United States, 44% more women and 14% more men live in cities named for saints who share their names than would be expected on the basis of chance.

Bolstered by their success, Pelham and his colleagues then tested the even bolder hypothesis that people select occupations that resemble their names—that dentists are more likely to be named Denny or Denise, and lawyers are more likely to be named Lawrence or Lauren. Not only was this prediction supported, but a subsequent study showed that roofers are more likely to have first names that start with the letter *R* than people who own hardware stores, whereas hardware store owners are more likely to have names that start with *H*.¹⁹ Now we understand why Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers!

Given Pelham's findings, we can only assume that many other life decisions are affected, albeit subtly, by the name-letter preference effect. Are we unconsciously influenced to choose colleges, products, and romantic partners because they share the letters in our own name? If so, we have a case of an extraneous feature of self-processes—the tendency to overvalue things with which we are associated—entering subtly into important decisions in which it ought to be irrelevant. If we like the letters in our own names better than the other poor letters of the alphabet, is it any wonder that we tend to think that others things that are linked to us—our children, occupation, local sports team, country, and religion, for example, are also particularly special?

Beating Ourselves Up

Although people typically keep their egos well inflated, occasionally the balloon pops, sending self-image into an uncontrolled dive. Even minor failures, setbacks, rejections, and disappointments can prompt harsh self-criticism. "How could I have been so stupid?" "I'll never amount to anything!" "No one likes me!" People self-flagellate for many reasons—for example, to deter criticism from other people ("If I castigate myself severely enough, maybe no one else will"), to elicit compliments and support, to show that the person has insight into his or her deficiencies and weaknesses, or to give one the license to criticize other people.

However, a great deal of unnecessary self-criticism arises from precisely the same source as excessive self-congratulation: the general tendency to perceive ourselves too positively. As we have seen, people like to think of themselves as better than most other people, so when failure or disgrace arrives, their self-image sustains a serious blow. They keep their egos defended as long as possible through various self-serving tactics, but when the walls are finally breached, the ego's defenses temporarily collapse. The fact that people react so strongly to these ego-threatening

events shows that they usually feel pretty good about themselves. If they didn't, they could accept failures and other setbacks in stride. ("Yeah, I got kicked out of college, but so what? I've always known than I'm a loser.") The same egoistic desire to be special that leads to self-inflation also sets people up to be greatly deflated from time to time.

❖ Judging Other People

The same natural tendency to self-enhance that biases our perceptions of ourselves and the things that are associated with us also affects our perceptions of other people. We usually think that we are perceiving and evaluating other people accurately and that our feelings about other people are a reaction to who they are and what they are like, but in fact, the self has again intruded into our view of reality.

For example, merely sharing the same birthday with another person can influence our evaluations of him or her. In one study, participants read one of two essays about Rasputin, the "mad monk of Russia."²⁰ Rasputin exercised considerable influence over the royal family of Russia in the early part of the 20th century despite the fact that he was widely despised. He was filthy and violent, drank heavily, and sexually assaulted women; moreover, as it turns out, he wasn't even a monk but was married and had three children. Rasputin certainly isn't the sort of person who attracts a great deal of admiration. The two essays that participants read about Rasputin were identical in all respects except that one of the essays listed his birthday as the same as the participant's, whereas the other essay listed a birthday that was different from the participant's. This one, trivial personal connection affected participants' evaluations of Rasputin. Participants who thought that they and Rasputin were born on the same day of the year rated him significantly more favorably than participants who did not think he shared their birthday. Given that our evaluations can be influenced by such a minor, egocentric matter as whether another person shares our birthdate, it should not surprise us to learn that factors even more intimately related to our views of ourselves also influence our judgments of other people.

People's perceptions of other people are affected by their views of themselves in several ways. For example, people overestimate how common their own behaviors, reactions, and attitudes are in the general population. This false consensus effect leads people to believe that they are in the majority even when they are not.²¹ We each assume that other objec-

tive and fair-minded people (like ourselves) will reach the same conclusions as we do. In some ways, using oneself to make assumptions about other people is not unreasonable because one's own response may be a useful indicator of how other people might respond. However, research shows that people over-rely on their own reactions when guessing how most other people will act. Even when presented with information that many of their peers would unanimously react in a way that was different from how the participant would react, participants in one study still concluded that most other people would react as they personally would.²²

More interesting is the fact that the false consensus effect occurs more frequently on characteristics that people view as undesirable than on characteristics that they view as desirable.²³ People tend to think that most other people share their personal weaknesses and shortcomings, and thus overestimate the prevalence of their own negative traits in other people. Along the same lines, people who make mistakes are more likely to assume that other people would make the same bad choices than people who make correct decisions. This bias allows people to feel better about their undesirable characteristics and bad decisions; if almost everybody else shares my bad traits and makes the same stupid decisions as I do, I need not feel too badly about them.

In contrast, people underestimate the prevalence of their positive characteristics in the population, concluding that their strengths and abilities are relatively unusual. This false uniqueness bias allows people to feel particularly good about their desirable characteristics. Thus, the motive to see oneself positively leads to false consensus on negative traits but false uniqueness on positive ones.²⁴

These biases influence people's assumptions about what most other people are like and thereby their reactions to others. When meeting a stranger, for example, your expectations about this person's characteristics may be influenced by your perceptions of yourself, leading to errors in judgment. If you believe that you possess an undesirable attribute such as a hot temper, you will perceive that many other people, possibly including this stranger, also have hot tempers. This ego-driven assumption will undoubtedly affect how you respond to the stranger, leading you to behave differently than if you had not projected your hot temper onto him or her. On the other hand, if you believe that you are compassionate, you may be inclined to see others as less compassionate than you are because false uniqueness occurs on positive traits. But, again, your biased assumption will influence your behavior and increase your chances of reacting inappropriately.

Occasionally, people also project their own positive attributes on other people, but usually only on those whom they perceive favorably. When drawing conclusions about strangers, for example, people are more likely to assume that attractive, desirable individuals possess their positive characteristics than unattractive, undesirable ones.²⁵ Doing so allows people to maintain positive views of themselves. After all, it does not enhance one's ego to conclude that some incompetent or despicable person also possesses some of one's own best qualities.

People tend to perceive friends and romantic partners more positively than they regard other people. Just as most people see themselves as better than average, they also evaluate their friends and relatives more positively than they rate the "average person."²⁶ They make the same sorts of self-serving attributions for intimates that they do for themselves, giving them more credit for success and less blame for failure than they give to other people.²⁷ These kinds of effects can also be seen at the group level. People tend to see their own groups (schools, clubs, occupations, towns, nations, and so on) as better than average, and this effect occurs even in controlled studies where they are assigned to one of two groups at random.²⁸ All of these biases help people feel good about themselves. Our sense of self-worth is enhanced by believing that our friends, lovers, children, and groups are all better than average. However, this tendency creates problems when it leads us to devalue and discriminate against people who are not associated with us in some way.

To top things off, people tend to think that the characteristics that they personally possess are more important and desirable than the characteristics that they do not possess. For example, whether you think it is generally better to be extraverted or introverted depends a great deal on whether you see yourself as an extravert or introvert. Extraverts think that extraversion is better; introverts think that introversion is better. Similarly, the degree to which you value creativity depends on how creative you think you are, the importance you place on physical appearance depends on your own level of attractiveness, whether you think it is good to be ambitious depends on whether you see yourself as ambitious, and so on. Even when researchers tell people that they possess a fictitious trait based on nonsensical criteria, people conclude that possessing the trait is better than not possessing it. Of course, people who believe they don't possess the bogus trait think that it is better not to have it.²⁹

Why do our views of ourselves influence our perceptions of other people? In part, it is because people's judgments of others have implica-

tions for how they evaluate themselves. David Dunning, a psychologist who has investigated how the self relates to our perceptions of other people, put it this way:

When people judge others, they act as though they are also implicitly judging themselves, that the conclusions they reach about other people imply certain conclusions about themselves. As a consequence, they tailor those judgments to ensure that those judgments comment favorably on themselves, making sure that those judgments are symbols that reaffirm positive images of self. They ensure that their pronouncements of others keep faith with the notion that they are wonderful, capable, and lovable human beings. As a consequence, it is inevitable that what they think about themselves becomes entwined in what they believe about others.³⁰

❖ Meta-Biases

We have seen that people perceive themselves and others in self-serving ways. They think they are better than average, make self-serving attributions, judge their possessions (including the letters in their names) unusually favorably, evaluate people close to them unrealistically positively, and think that their personal characteristics are particularly good ones to have. To make matters worse, people are not only biased in all of these egotistical ways but also biased to believe that they are not biased!

I noted earlier that far more people believe that they are better than average than is statistically possible. Typically, research shows that between 70 and 80% of people think that they are better than average on any particular trait.³¹ But do they have any idea that their self-perceptions might be biased in a positive direction? A study by Emily Pronin, Daniel Lin, and Lee Ross suggested that most people do not.³² In their study, 87% of the participants rated themselves better than the average student at their own university, demonstrating the typical better-than-average effect. However, when the researchers carefully explained the better-than-average bias to the participants and asked whether they thought that their self-ratings might have been influenced by this tendency for people to see themselves too favorably, only one-fourth of the participants who had rated themselves higher than average conceded that their ratings might be biased. The vast majority of the participants did not recognize

that their ratings were biased even though they had just fallen prey to the better-than-average effect.

People are relatively blind to their own biases, but they see other people's biases much more clearly. Research on this bias blind spot shows that people tend to think that they are less susceptible to biases of all kinds than other people are. Pronin and her colleagues asked research participants to indicate how much they personally showed eight specific biases in perception and judgment, including the self-serving attributional bias and better-than-average effect described earlier. In addition, participants indicated how much the "average American" shows each bias. Results showed that participants indicated that they were affected less by all eight biases than the average American. To be certain that this effect was not due to the participants assuming that, as university students, they were less biased than other uneducated people, a second study asked participants to rate the degree to which they and their university classmates showed these biases. Again, participants thought that they were less biased than their peers, although the magnitude of the difference was smaller than when they compared themselves to the average American. In a similar study using a noncollege sample, people waiting for flights at the San Francisco airport rated themselves as significantly less biased compared to how they rated other travelers who were passing through the airport at the time!³³

Perhaps the meta-bias to see oneself as unbiased shown in these studies is due to people's having a faulty memory for their own biases. If we asked participants about their biases immediately after they showed one, maybe they would see the bias clearly. To test this possibility, pairs of participants in another study took a difficult test, and each participant obtained feedback indicating that he or she had performed well or poorly on it. As found in other research, participants who did poorly rated the test as significantly less valid than those who did well, presumably to feel better about their performance. However, when asked whether their and the other person's ratings of the test's validity might have been affected by the scores they had obtained on it, participants indicated that the other person's rating of the test was more likely to have been influenced by the score they received than their own rating had been. Again, participants were more likely to see other people's self-serving biases than their own even right after they exhibited one.³⁴

The implications of these findings are staggering. We each tend to think that our view of the world is the correct one and that other reason-

able, fair-minded people will (or at least should) see things the same way we do. When other people disagree with us, we naturally assume that they are deluded, ignorant, or biased. As Ichheiser put it: "We tend to resolve our perplexity arising out of the experience that other people see the world differently than we see it ourselves by declaring that these others, in consequence of some basic intellectual or moral defect, are unable to see things 'as they really are' and to react to them 'in a normal way.' We thus imply, of course, that things are in fact as we see them, and that our ways are the normal ways."³⁵

In fact, our biases lead us to conclude that our perceptions of ourselves and other people are more accurate than other people's perceptions of us and themselves. Somehow, we believe that we have special and objective insights into our own and other people's psyches that most other people do not have. People think that they understand other people better than other people understand them, and people assume that they understand themselves better than other people understand themselves. Furthermore, people expect others to be less objective and fair than they themselves are. Not only do these assumptions lead us to think that we have an inside track to accuracy and that other people's interpretations are wrong, but it leads us to underestimate what we might learn from other people and overestimate what they might learn from us. Perhaps this explains why most people offer advice much more freely than they accept it from others.

Research has also revealed a tendency to believe that we have a greater ability to respond rationally than most other people do. For example, people think that they are personally less affected by advertising, propaganda, and other calculated efforts to change their behavior than other people are. We often conclude that other people are reacting irrationally, but how often have you concluded that you were personally behaving irrationally?

Underestimating our own biases leads to a good deal of conflict with other people. Many disagreements center on people's interpretations of events—why things happened, who was responsible, whose perspective is correct.³⁶ To the extent that each person sees him- or herself as a relatively objective arbiter of the truth, any disagreement will be attributed to the biases of other people. Although we each see the world through ego-colored glasses, we think that our glasses have clear lenses (if we even stop to wonder whether we are wearing glasses at all), but that other people look through cloudy lenses that are warped by egoistic imperfec-

tions. When we then accuse others of being biased, we fuel disagreement and mistrust and exacerbate the conflict further.

Of course, no reasonable person would claim that he or she is never biased and, in fact, most people are willing to concede that they have their preferences and biases, some of which may be unfounded. Yet these admissions of personal bias are typically made in the abstract rather than with respect to a particular situation. I may agree that I do not always act rationally, but I am unlikely to agree that I am behaving irrationally right now.

None of us can step completely outside the blinders of our own self-interest. Perhaps the best we can do is to practice attributional charity by assuming that other people are generally just as accurate and honest as we are (though not necessarily more so) and that our perceptions are as likely to be distorted as theirs. In this way, we can live more easily with the fact that we may disagree with other people in our interpretations of events without necessarily assuming that we are right and they are wrong.

❖ The Costs of Self-Generated Distortion

Psychologists and other behavioral researchers have debated for several years whether the kinds of self-serving distortions of reality described in this chapter are generally beneficial or detrimental to the individual's well-being. Some theorists have made the case that a certain amount of self-serving distortion is advantageous both for the individual and for his or her relationships with other people. Other theorists have argued that, although misperceiving reality can sometimes make people feel good, it is rarely helpful in the long run.

Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown championed the view that certain self-serving illusions contribute to mental health and general well-being.³⁷ Taylor and Brown pointed out that having positive illusions about one's characteristics, overestimating the amount of personal control one has over events in life, and holding unrealistically optimistic views of the future provide several benefits for people. Most obviously, these illusions reduce negative emotions. After all, acknowledging that one possesses negative personal characteristics, has minimal control over life events, and will encounter occasional disappointments, setbacks, and tragedies in the future is understandably sobering, if not downright depressing. Maintaining an unrealistic, rosy view of one's characteris-

tics, control, and future reduces many concerns and promotes a positive mood. It is instructive that people who show the least evidence of self-serving illusions also tend to be the most depressed and that people who show the greatest biases in self-enhancement are most happy.

Furthermore, Taylor and Brown suggested that having a positive view of oneself may enhance motivation and persistence, increasing people's overall likelihood of success in life. Having positive views of oneself is associated with working harder and longer on difficult tasks, possibly because the individual feels more certain of eventual success.³⁸ Research also suggests that people who feel good about themselves are more benevolent and helpful in their relations with other people than people who are down on themselves. Thus, biases that enhance our own self-satisfaction may have positive effects on how we relate to other people.

Self-serving illusions can also help our closest relationships. Sandra Murray and John Holmes have studied how positive illusions influence romantic relationships. Their studies suggest that people who view their romantic partners in overly positive ways and who overestimate how much their partners care about them are more satisfied with their relationships than people who perceive their partners and their commitment more accurately.³⁹ Believing that one's partner is a wonderful, devoted person enhances relationship satisfaction even if the belief is partly illusory.

Altogether, it would seem that holding excessively positive views of oneself and the important people in one's life is a blessing rather than a curse. However, this tells only part of the story. There seems little doubt that positive self-illusions have precisely the effects that have been described: they make us feel better, and they may lead to both greater motivation and a more sociable and caring style of relating to others. Furthermore, holding illusions about our intimate partners appears to make us more satisfied with our relationships. Even so, I question whether it is beneficial in the long run to feel good about oneself and one's life if these positive feelings come at the expense of perceiving oneself and other people inaccurately. Perhaps seeing the unpleasant reality about ourselves and our lives is actually more beneficial in the long run because, despite occasional pangs of unhappiness and uncertainty, we will make better decisions based on accurate information that is untainted by self-serving illusions.

My inclination is to assume that all organisms fare better in the long run when they have an accurate perception of reality. Only through an

accurate understanding of both their personal characteristics and the challenges they face can any animal, human beings included, deal effectively with the opportunities and threats they confront in life. Consistently overestimating oneself and one's capabilities may have short-term benefits but will come to little good in the long haul. Without denying that self-serving illusions can provide temporary benefits, let's take a look at some of the problems that they create.⁴⁰

Holding an overly flattering view of one's personality, abilities, and other attributes is often a recipe for personal disaster. Success in life comes largely from matching one's abilities, interests, and inclinations to appropriate situations, jobs, and relationships. To the extent that they misperceive who or what they are really like, people are more likely to make bad decisions. How many people are in jobs, relationships, and lives for which they are unsuited simply because they perceived themselves inaccurately?

Furthermore, when self-serving illusions blind people to their shortcomings and weaknesses, they are unlikely to try to improve. The person who blames an uncontrollable temper on everyone else, poor school performance on unfair teachers, or a long string of romantic failures on other people's inability to handle intimacy will not do what is needed for positive change. The most important step in improving oneself and one's life is to discern where the problems lie. Similarly, people who convince themselves that their partners are wonderful and their relationships were made in heaven may fool themselves into staying in relationships that are not actually serving them as well as they might.

Although seeing oneself through ego-colored glasses may help to ward off negative emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and shame, biased self-perceptions may create unpleasant feelings of their own. Carl Rogers, one of the founders of humanistic psychology, discussed what happens when people distort reality to make it congruent with their views of themselves. He suggested that holding a view of reality that is at variance with the truth creates anxiety and unhappiness. The person may not be able to grasp what is wrong yet has a vague sense of tension and discontent.⁴¹ On the surface, things may appear to be going well, but on another level, something is clearly amiss. A round peg trying to fit in a square hole does not fit even if the peg believes it is square.

This is why virtually every theory of mental health assumes that having an accurate view of reality is a hallmark of psychological adjustment. Denying or distorting reality to ward off anxiety and other unpleasant

emotions is uniformly regarded as a sign of instability or disorder. According to most views, adjusted individuals are able to nondefensively accept their weaknesses alongside their strengths. Abraham Maslow, who spent much of his career studying people who functioned unusually well in life, observed that such individuals “can take the frailties and sins, weaknesses and evils of human nature in the same unquestioning spirit that one takes or accepts the characteristics of nature.”⁴²

Some researchers have suggested that the self-serving biases described in this chapter are culture-bound and not universal to all people. They note, for example, that people in certain other cultures, such as Japan, do not self-aggrandize or show the same egotistical tendencies as Americans. In fact, the Japanese not only seem to bend over backwards to be modest, but they also do not seek positive feedback to the same degree.⁴³ However, it is possible that either self-effacement or self-aggrandizement can make a person feel good about him- or herself depending on what the person’s culture values. In most Western societies, characteristics such as confidence, individualism, autonomy, and superiority are valued, so people want to see themselves in these ways. In other societies, greater value may be placed on modesty, collectivism, and interdependency so that people prefer to possess these kinds of characteristics. The Japanese individual who downplays his or her positive traits may, in fact, be just as self-serving (and feel as good about him- or herself) as the American who exaggerates them. In both cases, the individual’s perceptions and actions are biased in ways that protect his or her ego and foster positive feelings.

❖ Why Do Self-Serving Biases Exist?

Given the many ways in which egotistical biases can be problematic, why do people distort the truth about themselves as they do? It seems unlikely that a general tendency toward self-serving distortion is a product of evolution. Biological and psychological systems seem generally designed to provide accurate information regarding the state of the organism and the state of the world. Animals need to know when opportunities and threats are present, and it is difficult to imagine how a system that diminished the perceived seriousness of threats could have ever evolved. As noted psychologist Leon Festinger observed, “inaccurate appraisals of one’s abilities can be punishing or even fatal in many

situations.”⁴⁴ If anything, evolution seems to have favored animals that were threat-sensitive because underestimating threats is more likely to be disastrous than overestimating them. A species that chronically overestimated its ability and degree of control over its environment would make potentially fatal miscalculations at every turn. Yet this is precisely what the ego appears to do.

In fact, it is often advantageous to experience negative emotions, such as anxiety and sadness, because they signal to us that all is not well with our world. As unpleasant as they may feel, negative emotions are inherently functional in warning us of problems and motivating us to take action to remove the bad feeling.⁴⁵ Feeling afraid, for example, focuses our attention on a potential threat to our well-being and motivates us to protect ourselves by avoiding or confronting the threat. Similarly, the negative feelings associated with low self-esteem serve to alert us to problems with how we are being perceived and evaluated by other people.⁴⁶ We will see later that the self can create and prolong unpleasant emotions artificially, leading to other problems, but negative emotions are fundamentally adaptive. So, I cannot imagine that the self evolved in such a way to lead us to see ourselves and the world in an artificially rosy fashion simply to assuage our fears. Then why do self-serving tendencies exist that artificially make us feel better? The answer to this question is by no means clear, but let me suggest one possibility.

Human beings, like all other animals, possess various systems that monitor the state of their inner and outer worlds. Many of these systems monitor internal biological processes, such as blood sugar level or heart rate, and others monitor aspects of the external world, including both the physical and social environment. These systems evolved to maintain internal and external environments within certain optimal limits in which the animal can survive, function, and ultimately reproduce. Detecting conditions that constitute a possible threat to the animal elicit either physiological reactions to restore homeostasis (such as increasing heart rate when muscles need more oxygen) or behavioral reactions to promote the animal’s well-being (as when hunger prompts the animal to seek food or fear elicits running).

Most of the internal states that signal a threat to an animal are experientially unpleasant. Hunger is certainly aversive, as are fear and disappointment. Indeed, the aversiveness of emotions is part of their value because the unpleasant feelings shift the animal’s attention to the threat and provide an incentive to do something to eliminate it.⁴⁷

Moreover, most of the systems that monitor the animal's well-being are designed to ensure that they do not overlook potential threats. As a result, most of these monitoring systems are more likely to detect false positives—events that are initially treated as threats but in fact are not dangerous—than false negatives, or true threats that are registered as benign.⁴⁸ For example, both human and nonhuman animals are more likely to react fearfully to stimuli that later turn out not to be dangerous than to be calm in the face of stimuli that pose a true threat. A deer is more likely to bolt at a small and harmless sound than to remain calm in the face of loud noises or clear danger. This bias in the detection of problems and threats is a very reasonable evolutionary adaptation. Animals that occasionally overreacted to false alarms were more likely to survive and reproduce than those that disregarded real threats. Evolution seems to have strongly endorsed the motto "It's better to be safe than sorry."

So, where does the self come in? When prehistoric human beings developed the ability to think consciously about themselves, they acquired the capacity to override many of their natural reactions to events. In most ways, this new ability was very beneficial. Being able to think carefully about potential opportunities and threats, rather than always reacting automatically to them, was clearly advantageous. By virtue of their ability to talk to themselves, people could decide, within limits, how to respond instead of always reacting automatically.

Yet one by-product of selfhood was that human beings could change how they felt about events by deliberately changing how they thought about them. Although this, too, was sometimes useful, it allowed people to reduce negative emotions through thought rather than through action. The rabbit that hunkers down under a bush at the sight of a wolf can reduce its fear only by finding safety. In contrast, the human being who confronts a possible threat can reduce his or her fear by either seeking safety or by cognitively reinterpreting the situation in a less threatening way. This is essentially what people are doing when they think about themselves, other people, and the world in biased, self-serving ways.

The tendency for people to perceive themselves and the world in self-serving ways reflects a method of reducing anxiety, uncertainty, and other unpleasant feelings by a back door route. In the short run, doing so undoubtedly makes us feel better about ourselves and our plight, and, as we have seen, it may have other beneficial consequences as well. But, in the long run, these illusions may compromise our ability to deal effectively with the challenges of life.

❖ The Case for Ego-Skepticism

As we have seen, each of us is equipped with a mental apparatus that, despite our best intentions, biases our perceptions of ourselves and our worlds in self-serving ways. Knowing that our views are sometimes distorted in this way should lead us to develop an attitude of ego-skepticism. Anytime our beliefs about ourselves or other people are consequential, we should caution ourselves that those beliefs just might be biased in our favor. Rarely do they actually seem biased, of course, and deep down we probably think that our perceptions of reality are more or less on target. Yet just knowing that we are prone to think that we are more competent, correct, and in control than we really are ought to caution us to be more tentative in our conclusions. Recognizing that we are probably overestimating our responsibility for good things and underestimating our culpability for bad ones should temper our confidence in our attributions. Realizing that we overvalue those things and people who are associated with us should make us strive to be more objective.

Of everything that I learned in college, the lesson with the greatest impact was not to trust my perceptions of reality. This lesson was driven home to me on two fronts. First, my courses in psychology convinced me that people take great liberties in how they construe events. With no final arbiter of the “truth,” people have great latitude to interpret (and misinterpret) events in ways that are to their liking. The fact that participants in countless psychological studies had been shown to interpret events in biased ways convinced me that my own judgments were more fallible than I had ever imagined. Knowing that I could not avoid making such errors nor know when my views were and were not accurate made me committed not to take my own perceptions of reality too seriously.

Second, while in college, I read Carlos Castaneda’s books about his apprenticeship with a Yacqui shaman named Don Juan. (Castaneda’s writings were later challenged as a hoax, but they nonetheless contained provocative insights.) I was particularly struck by one question that Don Juan asked Castaneda: “Why should the world be only as you think it is? Who gave you the authority to say so?”⁴⁹ Don Juan could have easily been addressing me. I realized that there was no reason whatsoever why the world should be only as I thought it was, and that I had no inside route to the truth. Clearly, the certainty with which I held my views of myself and the world was unwarranted.

A person who understands that his or her experiences are filtered through the lens of the ego can never look at the world in quite the same

way again. Or, more precisely, the world may look the same, but the person doesn't trust his or her perceptions as much as before. Knowing that the possibility of misperceptions is always present, the person clings less strongly to his or her interpretation of reality. The person cannot give up all beliefs about him- or herself and the world because they are essential in order for the person to function in day-to-day life. Even so, it is worth striving to hold those beliefs more tentatively.

4 ❖

Making Ourselves Miserable

My life has been filled with many tragedies, most of which never occurred.

— MARK TWAIN

The Wizard of Oz, released in 1939, remains one of the most popular films of all time. In the movie, Dorothy and her three companions travel to Oz, seeking something that each of them believes will make them happy and complete. The scarecrow is troubled by his lack of a brain, the tin woodsman sadly claims that he doesn't have a heart, the cowardly lion is ashamed by his lack of courage, and the whole adventure begins when Dorothy and Toto run away from home in search of a place where there "isn't any trouble," far away from wicked Almira Gulch, who wants to take Toto away.

Dorothy, the scarecrow, the tin man, and the lion are each dissatisfied with some aspect of their lives, believing that they lack some essential ingredient for a full and happy life. Telling themselves that they are deficient in some way, they undertake a long and dangerous journey in search of the wizard whom they assume can fill their needs. When they finally find the great and powerful Oz, Dorothy and her companions learn not only that he is not really much of a wizard but also that they already possess what they had been seeking all along. After the wizard gives the scarecrow a diploma, the tin woodsman a large heart-shaped watch, and the lion a medal for valor, they are transformed by his gifts, but, in fact, nothing has changed except how they view themselves. Dorothy herself understands this important lesson at the end of the movie when she concludes, "If I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own backyard. Because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with!"

Like the characters in *The Wizard of Oz*, most people are dissatisfied with some aspect of their lives. Much like Dorothy and her friends, their lives are tainted by an undercurrent of dissatisfaction, unhappiness, anxiety, envy, or other unpleasant emotions that arise because they think that things are not as they should be. And, as in the movie, people go to great lengths to find someone or something that will help them fix their problems. However, most people have not learned the lesson that Dorothy learned—that the problems for which they seek solutions are often in their heads, fueled by troublesome beliefs about themselves and about how life should be.

Undoubtedly, some personal problems are real ones that truly need to be fixed. Negative emotions are sometimes direct and automatic responses to an undesirable state of the world. However, viewing emotions as natural reactions to real events overlooks the fact that people's emotions are often affected by how they talk to themselves, if not created entirely by the self. Part of the curse of having a self is that, like Dorothy and her companions in *Oz*, we create a great deal of misery in our own minds without realizing that we are reacting to our self-generated thoughts.

❖ Emotions Without a Self

Animals clearly do not need a self in order to experience emotion. Although we cannot know for sure what other animals feel, their behavior suggests that they experience a wide array of emotions, including fear, sadness, joy, and rage.¹

Animals experience natural, innate emotional reactions to certain stimuli. For example, most species react naturally with fear to certain cues, such as when the silhouette of a hawk in flight elicits fear in ducklings, or the threatening gesture of a dominant member of the group causes fear in apes. Human beings may also be innately prepared to experience fear in response to certain stimuli. For example, the rapid approach of looming objects automatically creates fear, as does a sudden loss of physical support (as when one begins to fall down the stairs or an elevator lurches suddenly). Stimuli such as snakes, bared fangs, and darkness appear to naturally create fear in many animals, including human beings. These reactions likely evolved because animals in an earlier era who experienced fear in the presence of these stimuli survived and reproduced at a higher rate than animals for whom these stimuli evoked no response or, worse, a pleasant feeling.

In addition, animals may be conditioned to experience emotions in response to previously neutral stimuli through the process of classical conditioning. In classical conditioning, animals learn to respond with a negative emotion to a previously neutral stimulus that has been paired with aversive events, or respond with positive emotions to a neutral stimulus that has been associated with rewarding events. An early example of classical conditioning of human emotions was provided by John Watson, the founder of behaviorism, who conditioned fear in a young boy known as “Little Albert.”² After demonstrating that Little Albert was not initially afraid of certain animals and inanimate objects, Watson and his colleagues banged loudly on a steel bar behind Albert’s back each time Albert tried to touch a white rat. After several pairings of the rat and the clanging of the steel bar, Albert began to react fearfully whenever the rat was present, and continued to be afraid of the rat even after Watson stopped banging on the bar. Albert also showed signs of being afraid of objects that resembled the rat, such as cotton and a rabbit, a process known as stimulus generalization. In the same way, each of us has come to dislike or fear certain people, objects, and events because they are associated with past aversive experiences.

Both of these emotional processes—one involving automatic reactions and the other involving classical conditioning—can occur without conscious self-awareness. We do not need to think anything at all to respond to a natural fear-evoking stimulus or a classically conditioned event. However, the capacity for self-relevant thought renders human beings’ emotional lives far more extensive and complex than those of self-less animals. Specifically, having a self permits people to evoke emotions in themselves by imagining events that affect them, perceiving threats to their egos, thinking about other people who are significant to them, worrying about how they are perceived by other people, and contemplating the causes of their emotional experiences. This chapter will deal with these five ways in which self-talk contributes to human emotion.

❖ Self-Imaginings

Although we do not know for certain, it is plausible that nonhuman animals may experience emotions when they remember past events. Charles Darwin thought so, asking whether we can be sure “that an old dog with an excellent memory and some power of imagination . . . never

reflects on his past pleasures in the chase."³ However, although animals without a self might experience emotions when they remember actual experiences they have had, they would presumably not be able to think about what might happen to them in the future nor imagine having experiences that have no basis in reality whatsoever. Without the ability to create the analogue-I in their minds, they could not imagine themselves in situations they had not actually encountered.

In contrast, people often become quite emotional simply from imagining themselves in various situations and may even work themselves into an emotional frenzy by doing so. Many emotional experiences occur not because anything good or bad is happening but only because the person imagines it. People can experience strong emotions by reliving past experiences in their own minds, thinking about things that may happen in the future, and even imagining events that have neither happened in the past nor have much likelihood of occurring later. The past, anticipated, and fantasized experiences of the analogue-I often have emotional power similar to that of real events. Although most emotions can be triggered purely by self-thoughts, I will focus here on the one that is perhaps the most common.

Worry

Without a self that allows them to imagine what might or might not happen in the future, people would not worry. Nonhuman animals experience fear in the presence of real threats or stimuli that have become associated with aversive events, but one does not get the impression that they worry about what might happen to them tomorrow or next week. All worry about future events is the result of self-relevant thought and, thus, requires a self.

Anticipating future threats is sometimes adaptive because it allows people to take steps to avoid danger.⁴ Anticipating the risks of driving on worn-out, treadless tires may prompt us to replace our tires before a long trip, and considering the possible negative consequences of risky behavior may lead people to stop smoking or to practice safe sex. Even when avoiding danger is not possible, thinking in advance about a potential problem or threat sometimes helps people prepare to confront or cope with it. A person can plan ahead about how to deal with a difficult situation at work or how to handle an unpleasant medical procedure. Without the ability to imagine themselves in the future, people could not deliberately behave in the present in ways that may promote their well-being

in the future. This ability to anticipate the future is perhaps the greatest benefit of having a self.

If people worried only about things that had some reasonable probability of occurring, and if worrying always helped them deal more effectively with future events, the ability to worry would be a great gift. But the fact is that most worry is unnecessary. Many, perhaps most, of the things that people worry about never materialize and, even when they do occur, worrying about them in advance is rarely beneficial. In retrospect, people are far more likely to conclude that “there wasn’t any reason for me to be so worried” than “I wish I had worried more!”

When it motivates precautionary behavior, worry is well worth the unpleasantness it brings, but worry serves no noticeable good when nothing can be done to thwart the danger. The airplane passenger who worries during a flight about an accident cannot reduce the likelihood of a plane crash by worrying. Parents worried about a new teenage driver who hasn’t returned home on time with the family car don’t increase their child’s safety. The person who has a suspicious, potentially malignant mole removed for biopsy can’t change his or her prospect of skin cancer by worrying while waiting for the results. Worrying about such events is, of course, absolutely natural, and almost everybody does it. My point is not that worrying about such things is abnormal or a sign of weakness, but rather that, from an objective point of view, a great deal of worry serves no good purpose and may even cause harm. Yet most people cannot stop the inner self-talk that keeps the worry-machine churning.

Some people believe that even when it doesn’t help them to avoid danger, worrying prepares them to cope with misfortune once it arrives.⁵ Anticipatory worry is viewed as a down payment on future trauma. Evidence does not support this positive view of worry, however. Not only does much of our worry not prevent a disaster (as in the case of the white-knuckled airplane passenger or the worried parent waiting for the teenager to come home), but worrying now about a potential tragedy does not seem to inoculate us against being upset if it actually takes place. It seems unlikely that worrying about one’s child being killed in a car accident buffers one against the trauma of learning that an accident has, in fact, occurred. This is not to say that a realistic appraisal of possible outcomes, both good and bad, is not appropriate, but rather that anticipatory worry is not likely to steel the person against disaster once it arrives.

As Mark Twain’s quip that opened this chapter suggests, our self fills our lives with many tragedies, most of which never really occur.

But, although imaginary, these tragedies take their toll. People who are in the grasp of worry are miserably anxious, preoccupied, and distracted. They often have trouble functioning efficiently, react distractedly and irritably to other people, and may have difficulty sleeping. People who worry a great deal tend to be more depressed, report more physical symptoms, and have higher blood pressure than people who worry less.

Why Do We Worry So Much?

If worry is so often useless or maladaptive, then why are people so prone to worry? Although we may concede that a certain amount of appropriate worry is beneficial, why are people plagued by anxiety when it is not useful or is even detrimental? Why does our self inflict so much unnecessary distress on us?

Social psychologist Leonard Martin has provided an intriguing answer to this question.⁶ Martin speculates that self-generated worry about the future became prevalent and problematic only with the emergence of agriculture around 10,000 years ago. As we saw in chapter 1, people probably possessed a modern degree of self-awareness before this time (at least by 40,000–60,000 years ago), but the hunting-gathering lifestyle of human beings prior to the advent of agriculture did not evoke a great deal of rumination about the future. Life was lived mostly day to day, with no long-term goals to accumulate possessions, succeed, or improve one's lot in life, and, thus, few distal events to worry about. People's attention was focused primarily on what needed to be done today, and tomorrow was left largely to take care of itself.

With the emergence of agriculture, however, people moved from an immediate-return environment (in which they could see the results of their behavior on an ongoing basis) to a delayed-return environment in which important outcomes, both good and bad, often lay weeks or months in the future. People who rely on agriculture think about the future a great deal. Farmers must plan for planting, as well as for how their crops will be tended, harvested, and stored. Because so many things can ruin their yield, they fret a great deal about the weather, pests, and whether their crops will grow, and then about protecting whatever is produced from thieves, rodents, and rot. As the growing season progresses, feedback regarding progress toward their goal of producing sufficient food for the coming year is sporadic and uncertain. No matter

how good one's prospects for a bountiful yield at the moment, a drought, infestation, storm, stampede, fire, or marauding horde could undo one's hard work in the blink of an eye, leaving one's family to starve. A farmer can never feel really secure about his or her future even when everything seems to be going well at the moment.

Along with agriculture came a change from nomadic clans to sedentary communities. With communities came houses and property ownership, and thus worries about protecting one's belongings. For the first time people had to be vigilant about protecting what they owned. Furthermore, agriculture brought a division of labor and social roles, so that people began to worry not only about their personal futures but also about the well-being of the other people on whom they depended. If I plan to trade some of my corn for one of your cows, I will worry not only about my own corn crop but about your herd and your health as well.

If Martin is correct, agriculture brought with it a new set of psychological stresses because it moved people from a hunting-gathering lifestyle that was characterized by day-to-day living and immediately available returns to a lifestyle in which people invested their efforts today for uncertain outcomes in the often distant future. And, because human beings and their ancestors had spent millions of years in an immediate-return environment, they were ill-prepared to deal with the anxiety of living for the future.

Modern society is a profoundly delayed-return environment. People spend much of their time thinking about, planning for, working toward, and worrying about future goals. Many such goals (such as one's paycheck or vacation) lie days or weeks ahead, whereas others (such as educational degrees, job promotions, new houses, and retirement) may be years in the future. Unlike prehistoric hunter-gatherers, people today rarely receive ongoing feedback about their progress toward these important goals. Our prehistoric ancestors knew day-to-day whether they were achieving the important outcomes that dominated their lives (particularly obtaining food and avoiding danger), whereas much of our lives focuses on distal, uncertain events. No matter how hard I work today, I have no assurance that my long-term goals will be met. Martin's analysis suggests that anxiety is much more pervasive in contemporary society than it was before the agricultural revolution because modern human beings spend far more of their time engaged in self-focused thought about the future.

To make matters worse, the psychological systems that monitor the world for potential threats are biased toward false positives.⁷ All animals are far more likely to react to a benign stimulus as if it is a threat than to react to a threat as if it is benign. From an evolutionary standpoint, a bias toward false positives makes adaptive sense. Animals who overreact to false alarms are more likely to survive and reproduce than animals who fail to react (even once) to a real threat. Thus, all animals, including human beings, generally read more danger into events than is warranted.

For animals without a self, the emotional effects of a false alarm are short-lived. The deer, rabbit, or cat that startles and runs when it hears a sudden noise returns to normal soon afterwards. No real harm is done if many of the noises that scare the animal are, in reality, false alarms. But with their ability to dwell on future events in their minds, people can conjure up and dwell for long periods of time on bad things that might happen in the future. (I saw an advertisement recently suggesting that it was not too soon for parents of newborns to start worrying about their child's college education and their own retirement.) Many, perhaps most, of the things we worry about may turn out to be false alarms, but in the meantime, the self imposes a heavy price in the form of anxiety and preoccupation as it dwells incessantly on them.

The Ultimate Worry

For most people, death is the ultimate anxiety-evoking event. Some surveys show that people rate speaking in front of large groups as more anxiety-arousing than death, but this finding is probably due to the perceived remoteness of death for most people. I suspect that most of us would feel somewhat more anxious if we learned that we were going to die tomorrow than if we discovered that we had to give a speech.

Anticipatory anxiety about death seems to be a uniquely human characteristic, another by-product of our ability to self-reflect. Only because we are able to imagine ourselves in the future can we worry about death at all. Other animals may show fear when their lives are actually at stake, but they don't appear to worry about death in the absence of threatening situations or stimuli. And they certainly don't worry about what will happen to them after they die, whereas human beings find the afterlife both fascinating and frightening.

Many people expend a good deal of emotional energy worrying about death. The white-knuckled passenger on a turbulent plane flight, the person who has a suspicious symptom of a deadly disease, and the individual whose family must live in unsafe housing all think about the possibility of dying. These self-generated thoughts about death can be anxiety-arousing to the point of panic. When Shakespeare's Julius Caesar observed that "cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once," he was noting that the imagined deaths of the analogue-I in one's mind can be nearly as traumatic as the real thing.

As with worry about other dangers, a certain degree of anxiety about death serves an important function. If we weren't concerned about death, we might not protect ourselves and the people we care about. Because we can worry, we buckle our seat belts, discard tainted food, practice safe sex, and install smoke alarms. However, again, the active imagination of our self often causes us to worry about dying even when the worry doesn't serve any useful purpose and is probably misplaced to begin with.

The self is involved in our fears about death in yet another intriguing way. Most of the time when we think about ourselves in the future, we imagine not our self (in the sense of the psychological system that is the focus of this book) but rather about ourselves as living human beings. Thus, our worry about the future centers on what may happen to us as people and not as mental selves. A person who contemplates going to court next week for a traffic violation is thinking about him- or herself as a flesh-and-blood person and not about him- or herself as a psychological self. Any worry that arises from imagining the court appearance involves concerns about the person and not the self.

However, when people think about their death, their reactions appear to arise not only from the fact that they will no longer function as a living organism but also that they will cease to exist as a mental self.⁸ As I noted in chapter 1, most people experience the self as an organic, conscious "thing" inside their head that registers their experiences and thinks their thoughts. When many people think about death, they think about the fact that this conscious thing—the self that seems most central to their existence—will no longer exist. After all, people do still exist as a physical body (for a while) after they die, and the atoms of which they are composed will presumably last indefinitely. What does not exist after death is the experiencing "self" that people imagine exists inside them. One of the most disturbing aspects of death for many people is the idea that this flame of consciousness will be snuffed out when they die.

❖ The Undesired Present

We have seen that people often create negative emotions for themselves when their self becomes a time machine that allows them to travel to the past or the future. For this reason, it has often been suggested that people should make an effort to keep their attention anchored in the present as much as possible. This is excellent advice, but it comes with a caveat. People may be focused on the present moment yet still conjure up a good deal of unhappiness by wishing that, at this moment, they were somewhere else. I know of no research that has examined how often people wish they were somewhere else, doing something different from whatever they are currently doing, but I suspect that it's quite often. Many employees spend their working days wishing they were not at work, students spend a good deal of time wishing they were not in class, parents sometimes wish their children will fall asleep so that they can do something else, and virtually everyone has sat alone at home on a weekend night wishing he or she had somewhere else to be. Imagining a more ideal version of the present moment can create a good deal of unhappiness and frustration.

In fact, people may become unhappy even when current circumstances are pleasant if they think that being somewhere else would be even better. I may really be enjoying my steak at dinner yet feel vaguely dissatisfied because the shrimp on the menu might have been better. I like my job a great deal, but perhaps I could find one I like even more. I'm having a good time during my vacation in the mountains, but perhaps going to the beach would have been more fun. Because their selves can always imagine better circumstances than the one they're actually in, people often suspect that they're not getting the most out of life and thus live with simmering discontent.

The solution to this particular curse of the self is to fully accept whatever situation one is in at the moment. This does not mean that people should not try to change or leave an undesirable situation, if that is possible. However, if the situation cannot be changed or escaped (at least for now), one should recognize the absurdity of feeding one's own unhappiness by dwelling on the fact that one does not wish to be there or that being somewhere else would be better. This is, of course, easier said than done because self-reflection often involves comparing the present situation to alternatives. But just because our spontaneous self-chatter is often like a runaway train to unhappiness does not mean that we have to jump on board.

❖ Threats to the Ego

The story is told of a Chinese prime minister during the Tang Dynasty who considered himself a devout and humble Buddhist. One day, during his visit to the temple, the prime minister asked the master to explain Buddhism's perspective on egotism. The master's expression turned grim and his eyes glared as he asked in a condescending and insulting tone, "What kind of a stupid question is that?" Understandably, the prime minister became angry and defensive. "How dare you speak to me that way!" he shouted. The master then sat back and smiled. "That, your excellency, is egotism."

When nonhuman animals become angry or enraged, they are typically responding to one of four kinds of threats. Most anger among other animals stems from either physical attacks upon themselves or other animals to which they are genetically or socially related (particularly their offspring), competition for food, competition over mates, or for animals that are territorial, encroachments by other animals upon their territory. Animals often respond quickly and violently to these kinds of situations, then calm down just as quickly once the threat has dissipated.

Human beings also become angry in response to these sorts of events. Physical attacks upon themselves or their loved ones, theft of property (including food), competition for mates, and territorial violations all cause people to become angry and, often, aggressive. However, the vast majority of things that make people angry do not involve these kinds of fundamental threats to their well-being. Of all of the situations that have ever made you angry, how many have involved your physical well-being, food, mating rights, or territory?

Human beings expend much of their anger on symbolic events that "threaten" something abstract that they hold dear, such as their ideas, opinions, and particularly their egos. Most people become upset when they fail, feel belittled, or are criticized; and suggestions that they are incompetent, unlikable, or undesirable can send them into the depths of despair or a surge of blind rage.⁹ We react with anger, anxiety, or deflation to all kinds of events that, in one way or another, challenge our mental images of ourselves.

If we step back and look at this common reaction objectively, it begins to appear quite peculiar: we defend our mental ideas about ourselves with almost as much vigor as we defend ourselves against real physical attacks. As long as our cherished ideas about ourselves are confirmed by our own behavior and by other people's reactions to us, all

is well. Events that stroke our egos generally produce positive feelings such as pride, happiness, and satisfaction. But when events threaten our egos, and particularly when other people call our competence or goodness into question, we experience negative emotions such as anxiety, despondency, frustration, shame, and anger. By virtue of having a self, we become invested in our thoughts about ourselves, forgetting that we are often reacting to ideas about ourselves rather than to consequential events. Failure, criticism, ridicule, and other threats to the ego can upset us even when nothing tangible is really at stake.

In addition to having beliefs regarding who they are and what they are like, people have goals for how they would and would not like to be in the future—what psychologists call future or possible selves.¹⁰ A person may desire to be an attractive, successful, happily married businessperson (all desired future selves) but fear being overweight, unemployed, and alone (undesired future selves). These future selves serve as guides for people's decisions and behaviors. People's choices in life are often affected by their ideas about what they do and do not want to become.

People compare themselves to these imagined future selves and experience various emotions depending on whether they believe they are moving toward or away from them. Progress toward desired future selves evokes positive emotions, whereas lack of progress (and particularly movement toward undesired future selves) evokes negative emotions. People's emotions are not simply reactions to the current state of their lives, but rather the result of believing that their lives are or are not moving toward their desired future selves.¹¹ One woman wrote to me: "I am currently applying to graduate schools. I sometimes imagine getting into the school of my choice and feeling a great sense of happiness and excitement. But at other times, I imagine not getting into any school and feeling like a complete failure. When I think about not getting into graduate school, I begin to worry and feel depressed. I realize that it is just a thought that has not happened, but I still get real emotional. I don't want to think about the negative side, that I might not get into grad school, but I can't help myself." The self can curse people by conjuring up visions about what they might become in the future, thereby creating unhappiness even when everything is going well at present.

People also judge what happens to them in comparison to other outcomes that might have occurred.¹² The ability to think about one's analogue-I allows people to consider how things might have turned out differently. Thus, people may feel good or bad about their lot depending on whether they think the alternatives that could have happened are bet-

ter or worse than what actually transpired. People's reactions to events are as much a function of the alternatives that they imagine as of what ever actually happened.

Would you be happier to win second or third place in a competition in which three winners would be recognized (the Olympics, for example)? Most people insist that they'd be happier coming in second than third, but research by Medvec, Madey, and Gilovich suggests that this is not the case. The reason lies in the alternatives that people imagine could have happened to them. In a study of the reactions of silver and bronze medal winners in the Olympics, these researchers found that bronze medal winners (i.e., third-place finishers) are actually happier about the outcome of the competition than silver medal winners (i.e., second-place finishers).¹³ Presumably, this is because bronze medalists compare finishing third to the imagined alternative of not winning a medal at all, whereas silver medalists compare their second-place finish to the possibility that, with just a bit more effort or luck, they might have won the gold. Differences in how they construe alternative outcomes lead to different emotional reactions. In some ways, finishing second is more of a threat to one's ego (I'm not the best) than finishing third (Wow, I won a medal).

❖ Imagining Significant Others

William James, the first psychologist to write extensively about the self, observed that a person's sense of identity involves not only the person him- or herself but also his or her house, romantic partner, children, friends, prized belongings, and accomplishments.¹⁴ To see that this is so, we need only observe the strength of people's emotional reactions to the fortunes of their possessions, partners, reputations, families, friends, and bank accounts.

Animals without a self may react emotionally when events have direct and observable implications for their offspring or territory, but we see little evidence that they mentally conjure up thoughts of individuals or things that affect their extended, mental sense of self. It seems doubtful, for example, that other animals worry about the security of their nests or burrows while they are away from home, feel happy thinking about their "loved ones" when they are not physically present, or worry about their offspring once they strike out on their own. In contrast, human beings regularly experience various emotions when they think about these psychological appendages of themselves. Because people construe other

individuals and inanimate objects as aspects of their identities, imagining events that involve individuals or belongings that are parts of one's identity can evoke emotions.

Jealousy

Jealousy is a particularly potent emotion that can be caused by imagining people in whom one is personally invested. It is certainly understandable that overt evidence that a relationship is threatened would make people feel jealous, but people may suffer painful bouts of jealousy simply from imagining that the loved one is interested in or spending time with someone else, whether or not that fantasy has any basis in reality.¹⁵ A young woman wrote poignantly about how her self-talk creates jealousy about her boyfriend:

When Jay tells me about a girl he talked to or played a sport with or had any kind of fun with, I immediately create an image of an extremely beautiful girl with a perfect body and a great personality. I tell myself that Jay was having more fun with this girl than he does with me and that he is attracted to her more than he is to me. I tell myself that I am not fun enough for Jay and that he deserves a prettier girl. Even though I know that none of these insecurities are true, my self can't leave me alone and let me enjoy hearing about Jay's day without getting jealous.

Jealousy sometimes lingers for a very long time because the self can sustain it even in the absence of confirming evidence. The self ruminates and ruminates, even imagining in vivid detail where the loved one might be and what he or she might be doing. Fueled entirely by the self, jealousy may build to the point where the individual reacts as if his or her suspicions were true. Nonhuman animals sometimes show a response that resembles jealousy but only in the immediate presence of the rival. I know of no case in which any other animal went berserk simply from imagining its mate's dalliances.

Pride and Shame in Other People

People also feel good or bad because of the fortunes of other people with whom they are associated. People feel good when those with whom they identify are successful but feel badly when those with whom they identify fail or are disgraced. When we have a relationship with another

person, that person's successes and failures often affect us. We want our loved ones to succeed and be happy, so we experience empathic pleasure when our friends, children, and family members succeed, and feel unhappy for them when they fail.

But the picture is more complicated than this. People often react emotionally to other people's successes and failures even when they do not have a personal relationship with them and in no way should feel responsible for their behavior. So, for example, people may be elated or devastated depending on whether their favorite sports team wins or loses.¹⁶ Similarly, people feel good when an alumnus of their high school or college, or a resident of their hometown, becomes famous or is recognized for an achievement, even though they don't know the person personally. They may also feel badly when such an individual is revealed to be a mass murderer, child molester, or terrorist, or is otherwise disgraced. Many citizens of Dallas, Texas, felt ashamed of their city for many years after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, even though there was no sense in which Dallas or its citizens were responsible for what happened.¹⁷ (Lee Harvey Oswald, the assassin, was from New Orleans.)

These kinds of reactions stem from the fact that people incorporate entities such as organizations, teams, cities, and other individuals into their personal sense of self. Once people have included someone or something in their identity, they react emotionally to what happens to these extensions of themselves. So, for example, sports fans incorporate the team in their identity and treat the team's fortunes as their own. Likewise, residents of a particular city derive part of their identity from where they live, leading them to feel good or bad about what happens to their town. If not for the self, people would not take other people's accomplishments and failures personally.

A second complication arises from the fact that, although they might not want to admit it, people do not always want those with whom they are associated to do well. Abraham Tesser and his colleagues have investigated the ways in which people deal with the successes and failures of people who are close to them. When people close to us succeed in areas in which we have no pretensions, we are happy for them and may even experience a boost in our own self-esteem to be associated with such successful people. However, when people who are close to us succeed in an area that is important to our own identity, we may be threatened by their success and try to reduce its threat to our own ego.¹⁸ For example, we may change the importance we place on the domain in which others outper-

form us, such as when the less athletically skilled of two brothers decides that sports are not important and puts his energy into other things.¹⁹ More disturbingly, research suggests that we may also reduce the closeness of our relationships with people who outperform us in areas that are important to our identity because another person's successes are less threatening to us the less close our relationship is with them.²⁰ I will return later to ways in which efforts to maintain one's own self-esteem can affect our relationships with other people. For now, the important point is that our emotional reactions to other people are affected by the ways in which their actions reflect on our images of ourselves.

❖ Evaluations by Other People

Some emotions—such as fear, joy, disgust, and surprise—can be observed within the first few weeks or months of life. Other emotions—such as social anxiety, embarrassment, shame, envy, pride, and guilt—do not appear until somewhat later. These so-called self-conscious emotions do not emerge until later because they cannot occur until children acquire the ability to think about what other people are thinking and, specifically, to think about what other people might be thinking about them.

As we have seen, the ability to put oneself in the minds of other people is a feature of the self. Once children begin to develop self-awareness, usually by two years of age, they begin to think about how other people regard them.²¹ At first, they are concerned primarily with their parents' and caregivers' reactions, but later the perceptions of teachers, peers, and others become important. Not only do children start to think about how other people see them, but they also begin to feel good or bad about others' judgments of them. Believing that other people view them favorably results in positive feelings, whereas believing that others view them unfavorably results in negative feelings. From then on, people's emotions are affected by how they think other people regard them, and their concerns with others' evaluations exert a strong influence on how they feel throughout their lives.

Perhaps the most common emotional reaction to imagining how one is perceived by others is social anxiety. Social anxiety involves those familiar feelings of nervousness and awkwardness that sometimes trouble people before and during interpersonal interactions.²² People may feel socially anxious in job interviews, on first dates, when speaking in front of audiences, or even in casual conversations with strangers. People

experience social anxiety when they think that they are unable to make the kinds of impressions on other people that they would like to make.²³ When an actor on stage, an adolescent on a date, or a job applicant in an interview feels nervous, his or her anxiety is fueled by thoughts that others will not perceive and evaluate them as he or she desires. An organism without a self cannot feel socially anxious because it cannot imagine that it is being perceived in a particular way by others, much less worry about the kind of impression it is making.

Similarly, embarrassment requires a self. People become embarrassed when they believe that other people have already formed an undesired impression of them.²⁴ To feel embarrassed, people must be able to take the perspective of others and imagine the impressions others have formed of them. As with social anxiety, the first signs of embarrassment emerge in young children at about the same age as self-awareness. Like other negative emotions, embarrassment serves a useful function by alerting us when our social image may have sustained damage and motivating us to try to repair it.²⁵ Yet the ability to think about how one is perceived by others leads people to experience acute pangs of embarrassment and to worry more about their social images than necessary. Because of the bias toward false alarms, people tend to be embarrassed more often than is really warranted. Furthermore, many people agonize over embarrassing events even long after they are over. As one individual told me: "Later, I torture myself thinking about what a fool I made of myself. I think about how I could have acted cooler or smarter or said something wittier and not so humiliating. I beat myself up thinking that everyone else is thinking the same way about what happened when, in reality, they have probably forgotten about it and moved on." When the self replays these kinds of incidents in our minds, we may re-experience the unpleasant feelings.

Like many of their perceptions of the world, people's assumptions about how other people regard them are affected by their own self-images. People who do not view themselves favorably are likely to assume that other people also do not find them desirable. Those with a positive self-image take for granted that others like and accept them unless specific events occur to suggest otherwise. As a result, people who have low self-esteem are more prone to experience emotions such as social anxiety and embarrassment than people with high self-esteem because they are more likely to conclude that others form undesired impressions of them.²⁶ These reactions are caused not only by what actually happens in social interaction but also by people's own views of themselves.

❖ Attributions and Emotion

Thus far, we have seen that people contribute to their own emotional lives by imagining things that may happen to them, interpreting events as threats to their egos, thinking about their relationships with other people, and worrying about how other people perceive them. Once emotions arise, the self contributes to emotional experience in yet another way.

People often analyze their emotional experiences, trying to understand both why they feel certain emotions (Why did I become so angry? Why am I so afraid of applying for a new job?) and why emotion-inducing events occurred in the first place (Why did I do so poorly on this examination? Why did my partner leave me?). One of the most important psychological discoveries of the 1970s was that the attributions that people make for emotion-producing events have a profound effect on their reactions to those events.²⁷ Contrary to the layperson's view that emotions are caused directly by certain situations and stimuli in the real world, research shows that people's interpretations and attributions play an important role. The same situation can cause two dramatically different emotional reactions depending on how the person interprets it. Concluding, for example, that I wasn't hired for a job because I'm incompetent will create different emotions from concluding that I wasn't hired because the employer was threatened by my high degree of competence and charisma. Our ability to talk to ourselves about what happens to us plays an important role in our emotional lives.

Depression

Much of the evidence of the role that self-attributions play in emotion comes from research on depression. Depression has many causes, some of which are clearly biological, yet the self is often implicated in its onset and progression. How people think about themselves and their lives has a strong influence on whether they will become depressed and, if so, how much difficulty they will have pulling out of it.

Researchers have identified a *depressogenic* way of thinking about bad events that seems to predispose people to depression.²⁸ People with a depressogenic explanatory style generally believe that bad things that happen to them are their fault and that they consistently behave in ways that create problems for themselves. A typical depressogenic response to a negative event is "I always mess everything up." It is easy to see why a

person who thinks about his or her life in this way would be susceptible to depression. This pattern involves not only a pessimistic view of the future but also the belief that one is personally responsible for the bad things that happen.

Many studies have demonstrated a relationship between having a depressogenic explanatory style and depression. People who make these kinds of personal attributions for negative events are more likely to become depressed when undesirable events occur, take longer to pull out of depressive episodes, and are more likely to relapse in the future. For example, students become more depressed after doing poorly on exams if they have a general tendency to attribute bad events to themselves.²⁹ Other studies using children, prisoners, and women after childbirth likewise show that people's explanations for negative events are related to whether they cope well with negative events or become depressed.³⁰

Even when people do not have a chronically depressogenic view of life, the self-attributions that they make for specific events may promote depression in particular instances. Following a failure, trauma, or other undesirable event, people may engage in *behavioral self-blame*, in which they attribute the event to a behavioral mistake or miscalculation on their part, they may engage in *characterological self-blame* in which they attribute the event to some relatively unchangeable aspect of themselves, or they may blame external factors such as other people or society at large. For example, a woman who was raped on a date might conclude that she made an unwise decision to go out with this particular man (an attribution to her behavior); that she is an undiscerning, stupid person who chronically makes bad decisions (an attribution to her character), or that the man or society is principally to blame (an external attribution).

Research shows that the kinds of attributions that people make for bad events predict how they react to those events. One study showed, for example, that people who engage in characterological self-blame for negative events tend to become more depressed afterwards than people who engage in behavioral self-blame.³¹ It is often more upsetting to think that a negative event was the result of some unchangeable aspect of one's personality than to conclude that it was an isolated event brought on by a one-time behavioral miscalculation. Other research has shown that, although the degree to which a person blames him- or herself (either characterologically or behaviorally) may predict depression following a negative event, the degree to which a person blames society does not.³² Clearly, how people think about their role in their problems affects how they cope with them.

Guilt and Shame

People's attributions also determine how they feel about harmful and immoral things that they do. If I attribute accidentally running over your dog to the fact that it darted into the street too quickly for me to stop my car, I may be quite sorry but feel little self-recrimination. If, on the other hand, I think that I hit your dog because I was not being sufficiently careful or I was driving too fast or I am simply an incompetent driver, I may feel very bad about it. The same harmful event may produce different emotional reactions depending on how people talk to themselves about what they have done.

The emotions of guilt and shame have been the center of a great deal of controversy and confusion among psychologists for many years. Writers have disagreed regarding the differences between guilt and shame, and some have argued that they are two labels for the same emotional experience. Recently, however, June Tangney and her colleagues have offered compelling evidence showing that the primary difference between guilt and shame is whether the individual focuses on the negative action or on what it says about him or her as a person.³³ In guilt, the person evaluates a particular action negatively, feels badly for the harm that he or she has caused, and experiences primarily regret. In shame, the person evaluates him- or herself negatively for having done the bad deed and feels primarily ashamed rather than remorseful. In essence, behavioral self-blame for a harmful or immoral action leads to guilt, whereas characterological self-blame for a harmful or immoral action leads to shame. Again, how people talk to themselves about their behavior makes a difference. The same action (for example, cheating on a test) may evoke either guilt or shame depending on whether the person focuses on the behavior (I did a bad thing) or on his or her character (I am a bad person).

This is not a minor distinction because the emotional and behavioral effects of guilt and shame differ greatly. Tangney's research shows that when people feel guilty, they are remorseful and try to undo the damage they have caused by apologizing or reparation.³⁴ Their focus is on those they have hurt and on constructive solutions to the problem they have created. When people feel shame, however, they feel dejected and worthless, and focus on their own negative feelings and personal predicament rather than the harm they have caused. Their high level of self-focus interferes with feeling empathic toward those they have hurt, and they typically want to shrink away and feel better about themselves rather

than come forward to repair the harm they have done. The difference in these two reactions to doing harm depends critically on how people talk to themselves about what has happened.

Making Matters Worse

People make attributions to explain not only the events that cause their emotions but also their reactions to those events. That is, they ask not only why the event occurred but also why they reacted to it as they did. Imagine two people who experience the same emotional reaction to the same traumatic situation. One individual views his or her reaction as a normal response to such a devastating experience, but the other person thinks that his or her reaction indicates a poor ability to cope with stressful events. The second individual's interpretation of the emotion may fuel other emotional reactions such as frustration (What's wrong with me that I can't cope better than this?) or shame (I'm a loser who's incapable of dealing with life). This secondary emotional reaction is caused solely by how the person talks to him- or herself about his or her primary emotional reaction to the situation.

Perhaps the clearest case of this effect occurs when people make a characterological attribution for being anxious (I feel nervous because I'm a neurotic, anxiety-prone person), which may lead them to worry about their "anxiety problem" and cause even more anxiety. In the same way, people can become increasingly depressed about being depressed, angry about always losing their temper, or even happy about being a joyful person. These are not automatic responses to particular events but rather the result of how people think about themselves and the reasons for their reactions.

The fact that people may react emotionally to their emotions means that problems that are fueled by those emotions may get worse depending on how people think about them.³⁵ When people have problems that are exacerbated by emotions, certain attributions may intensify or prolong the problem because they increase those emotions even further. A good example involves insomnia. We discussed earlier (chapter 2) that insomnia is often caused by intrusive self-rumination. Whatever its cause in a specific instance, one of the best ways to make insomnia worse is to worry about not being able to sleep. Worry brings with it anxious arousal that interferes with sleep even further. Making certain attributions for insomnia may create anxiety (I'm a neurotic mess! I'm so frustrated

about being an insomniac! What's wrong with me? Am I going insane?), thereby making it even less likely that the person will fall asleep.

Given that insomnia can be prolonged by this route when people attribute sleeplessness to personal problems or weaknesses, we might be able to reduce it by getting insomniacs to think about their sleeplessness in less upsetting ways. In a study that tested this possibility, researchers randomly assigned chronic insomniacs to one of three experimental conditions.³⁶ One group received a pill—actually an inert placebo—that they were told would increase their physiological arousal and, thus, make it difficult for them to fall asleep that night. The researchers hoped that, by giving them a nonthreatening explanation for being unable to sleep (It's the pill, not my insomnia problem), participants in this group would not work themselves into an aroused state fretting about their sleeplessness and, thus, would fall asleep more quickly. The participants in a second experimental condition were told that, although their arousal levels were somewhat higher than average, they didn't need to worry because they were still within the normal range. Researchers suspected that this information would also reduce the degree to which participants would ruminate about their sleeplessness, lower their anxiety, and allow them to sleep. The third condition in the study consisted of a control group of participants who simply went to bed as usual with no new attribution or information about their sleeplessness. As expected, participants in the first two conditions fell asleep significantly faster than those in the control condition. Modifying people's self-attributions, either by getting them to attribute their problem to a nonthreatening cause (the pill) or by assuring them that they are normal, reduced anxious arousal and the degree to which insomniacs' self-ruminations kept them awake.

Any problem that is exacerbated by arousal may be fueled by self-attributions that increase the person's anxiety. Stuttering, for example, increases when people are anxious. Most people speak less fluently when they are nervous or upset than they do otherwise. Imagine, however, what might happen if a person begins to worry a great deal about stuttering. The anxiety may, in fact, increase stuttering, creating greater anxiety and even more stuttering in an escalating cycle. Even people who do not normally stutter begin to speak less fluently after they are told that they seem to display an unusual number of speech disfluencies.³⁷ When people attribute their stuttering to a chronic personal problem, their attributions may create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Likewise, sexual impotence is often created by anxiety, fueled by the man's fears that he will not perform adequately in bed. If, after an episode of impotence, a man begins to question his sexual ability and worry about it happening again, he may increase the likelihood that he will be impotent the next time he is in a sexual encounter.³⁸ Again, the problem is self-created by how he thinks to himself about his "problem."

❖ Changing the Self, Changing Emotion

The idea that the self can create, maintain, and exacerbate unpleasant emotions is not at all new. In fact, the crux of this idea can be traced to philosophers in India and China over 2,000 years ago. Taoist and Buddhist sages realized that a great deal of human suffering could be traced directly to the self.³⁹ What is new is the depth of our understanding about the relationship between self-talk and emotion. Many of the advances in the science of emotion in the past few decades have involved identifying the nature of the self-thoughts that create and sustain emotion.

Along with greater understanding of how the self creates emotions have come psychological treatments and programs designed to change how people think about themselves. For the past 40 years, clinical and counseling psychologists have explored ways of reducing problematic emotions by helping clients modify their self-thoughts. There is now a wide array of effective treatments that focus on restructuring people's attributions and self-beliefs.⁴⁰ All of these approaches are based on the idea that most emotions are generated and maintained by how people talk to themselves, and that by modifying people's self-talk we can change their emotions. Even without therapy, people can learn that their unpleasant emotions—their anger, depression, anxiety, envy, jealousy, and shame, for example—are largely the result of how they talk to themselves.

Of course, sometimes it is neither possible nor desirable to change one's thoughts in ways that promote more pleasant emotions. Presumably, a person experiencing normal grief after the death of a loved one would not wish to try to convince himself, even if he could, that he really doesn't care that the loved one has died. However, when people's emotions are based on faulty or catastrophic thinking, particularly troublesome, or overly prolonged, the best strategy is often to challenge the self-thoughts that are keeping the emotion in place.