

ACTING IN YOUR OWN SELVES-INTERESTS

A review of *Why Everyone (Else) is a Hypocrite: Evolution and the Modular Mind*,
by Robert Kurzban. Princeton University Press (2011), 288 pages, £19.95.
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MICHAEL E. PRICE*

In this excellent and entertaining book, Professor Kurzban argues persuasively that human nature is generated by a vast patchwork of functionally specialized mental modules—each designed to solve a particular (set of) adaptive problem(s) that existed in ancestral environments—and that many of these modules execute their function with little communication or coordination with the rest of the mind. Because the mind is composed of many semi-autonomous modules that are often at cross-purposes with one another, individual ‘preferences’ often seem inconsistent across contexts and behaviour often seems hypocritical. For example, you have hunger-producing modules that want you to eat that piece of cake in the refrigerator right now, but these may be at war with modules that want you to maintain your health and attractiveness by forgoing all those extra calories. Or you may have moralistic modules which seek to rein in your sexual competitors by advocating that they remain faithful to their spouses, which conflict hypocritically with your modules that pursue extramarital affairs for yourself. This modular view of the mind can fairly easily explain the individual inconsistencies that seem profoundly puzzling to many social scientists (especially economists) who expect people to behave in accordance with a unitary self-interest that is stable across contexts.

Kurzban also very effectively dispels the illusion that ‘self-deception’ actually involves any deception of a true inner self. He shares Daniel Dennett’s view that your conscious concept of your self is an adaptation designed to manipulate the way in which other people perceive you. As Kurzban writes, “to the extent there’s a ‘you’, it turns out that ‘your’ job is public relations” (p. 62). Your ‘public relations’ (PR) module tends to represent yourself in terms that are as flattering as possible (without straying so far from reality as to seem implausible to your audience). This idea is illustrated in chapter seven when we’re introduced to cancer patient Fred, who requires painful weekly treatments in order to have a chance of surviving more than six months. Fred agrees to undergo these treatments, because some of his modules perceive them as necessary for survival. However, Fred’s PR module in-

* Address for correspondence: MICHAEL E. PRICE, E-mail: michael.price@brunel.ac.uk

sists that the treatments are actually unnecessary, and explains Fred's decision to undergo them in terms of his desire to assuage the fears of a worried relative. The PR module is wrong, but it is "strategically wrong", and it is fulfilling its function of portraying Fred in a positive light: it wants to convince potential reciprocal partners that he is likely to survive, because his survival would make him more useful to (and thus more likely to be chosen by) others as a partner. So different adaptations in Fred's brain hold contradictory beliefs: while some adaptations see the treatments as essential to his survival, his PR module disagrees, and it even concocts an explanation for his treatment participation that has nothing to do with survival. The question of what Fred's 'true self' really believes is a flawed question, because we have no way of judging which part of his brain represents his true self.

Fred's conscious outlook on his prospects for survival (i.e., the output of his PR module) is wrong because it is overly optimistic. This unwarranted optimism is adaptive because it is useful in persuading others that Fred is valuable to them as a cooperative partner, and so it ultimately leads to increased social and material resources for Fred. However, Kurzban is clear that without this social persuasion function, excessive optimism leads to false expectations and self-injurious choices, and is therefore maladaptive: "I can't stress enough that, absent the *social* benefits of being *overly* optimistic, one should be exactly as optimistic as warranted" (p. 118, emphasis his). But while Kurzban makes a convincing case that excessive optimism could have a social persuasion function, I think he may overstate the case by insisting that this is the *only* function that it could have. Such optimism may sometimes function not to control the behaviour of other people, but to control the activity of other adaptations within the same organism. For example if you're locked in mortal combat with a hungry jaguar, you may be highly likely to lose, but this likelihood could itself be affected by your optimism: an overconfident sense that you could win by fighting hard enough could recruit intense self-defense efforts from other mental and physiological adaptations that might actually increase your chances of survival. Excessive optimism may also evolve without social persuasion according to the logic of 'error management theory' or the 'smoke detector principle', that is, when a false negative (e.g., a man failing to detect a woman's sexual interest) is more costly than a false positive (excessive optimism about her degree of interest).

The book's last two chapters (nine and ten) and epilogue focus on morality, and their ultimate message seems to be that much of human—and especially American—morality is hypocritical: many people profess a strong concern for protecting other people's liberty, while simultaneously advocating restrictions on this freedom (e.g. prohibitions against drugs and abortion), without offering any coherent justification for their own moral stance. Kurzban argues persuasively in chapter nine that people are often oblivious about why they hold particular moral beliefs; for instance, although people often consciously justify their pro- or anti-abortion stance in terms of a 'woman's right to privacy' or a 'foetus's right to life', respectively, their views may actually have little to do with these issues and more to do

with how much they approve of female sexual freedom. In chapter ten, Kurzban proposes a general evolutionary theory of morality, arguing that an individual's moral beliefs exist to promote his or her reproductive advantage. For example, polygyny prohibitions should be favoured by low-ranking males (who are least likely to find a wife under polygyny) and monogamously-mated females (who should not welcome competition from co-wives), and disfavoured by high-ranking males (who are most able to attract multiple wives). Kurzban's focus in this chapter is primarily on domain-general reproductive advantage, in contrast to the domain-specific functionality he emphasises in previous chapters. Although he presents some clear specific illustrations of how individuals may increase their own reproduction by espousing moral beliefs that restrict the reproduction of others, the theory of morality he presents may run into problems when applied to some beliefs that he does not discuss. For instance, the theory would seem to predict, inaccurately, that heterosexual men will regard *other* men's homosexuality as particularly virtuous (in an effort to neutralize same-sex competitors), and female homosexuality as particularly depraved (in an effort to increase their number of potential female partners).

I expect that most readers will appreciate the lucid and compelling cases that Kurzban makes when he argues that the mind consists of many semi-autonomous domain-specific modules, that these modules often clash hypocritically with one another, and that the notion of a 'one true self' is in many ways illusory. The book is both illuminating and engaging, and will be valuable both as an antidote to so much flawed thinking about how the mind works, and also as a stimulus to further debates within evolutionary psychology about modularity, the self, morality, and other key topics.