

UNITED WISDOM

Self-Deception and Rationalisation: How We Protect a Convenient Account

Human Nature and Inner World

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Epigraph

> *“man always believes more readily that which he prefers”*

Francis Bacon, Novum Organum, I.49, a short passage from the historical English edition. The Russian version uses an editorial translation.

What this article is about

In an illustrative example, a manager explains a project's failure by the weakness of the team. When someone recalls a late change in the assignment, he agrees: yes, the assignment changed, but good specialists ought to cope. The team may indeed have made mistakes. Yet the explanation's convenience lies elsewhere: whatever new fact appears, the manager's responsibility remains almost zero. His account does more than describe events; it determines in advance which events may be considered.

Self-deception need not look like a deliberate lie. Someone may sincerely defend an explanation that helps preserve a familiar image of themselves. Here, rationalisation means building acceptable arguments for an already desirable decision. This is a working distinction, not a diagnosis. The article proposes examining explanations through their relationship to facts, their capacity to change, and their consequences for choice. Philosophical criticism of prejudice, a psychological review of motivated reasoning, and religious self-examination provide different grounds for this conversation. Their similarities do not erase their differences, and an accusation of self-deception itself needs scrutiny.

I. A Convenient Explanation Can Be True

Convenience does not prove falsehood. If someone is tired and therefore cancels a meeting, their explanation can be both welcome and accurate. If work conditions really are unfair, they can be named without a compulsory search for a hidden personal defect. The opposite mistake is to consider an unpleasant explanation deeper merely because it hurts. Neither comfort nor pain is an independent criterion of truth.

Examination begins with the claim's composition. “I did not do the work” describes an action. “Because I was not given time” proposes a cause. “Anyone in my position would have done the same” adds a generalisation. “Therefore nothing depends on me” proposes a consequence for

future choice. These parts are often spoken in a single sentence but need different grounds. An observable action does not yet confirm one exclusive cause, and a real cause does not always remove the possibility of a next step.

In an illustrative scene, an employee received an assignment late. Messages can establish this. But the date does not show that they could not clarify the scope, warn about the deadline, or decline part of the work. Equally, we cannot insist that they certainly could have done these things: their conditions and authority may have differed. Accuracy emerges through distinguishing what is established, supposed, and still unknown, rather than demanding an admission of guilt.

In Novum Organum, I.46, Francis Bacon considers an accepted proposition's tendency to subordinate later observations. This is a philosophical argument about knowing nature, not a contemporary experiment about our employment. Its editorial use is limited: if an account allows no fact capable of changing it, the construction of the account itself deserves scrutiny. That does not yet mean it must be false.

Preserving the strongest form of one's explanation is useful. If it is retold as an absurd excuse, one can defeat one's own caricature and learn nothing. First formulate why the argument really seems reasonable, which part of the situation it explains, and which information it relies on. Only then examine the missing part. This order allows a weak account to be abandoned without declaring one's earlier self stupid or dishonest.

II. How a Wish Enters Reasoning

A thought can serve the search for an answer and protection of a desirable outcome at the same time. A person can notice real facts and build logical connections while selecting only the facts that preserve the required conclusion. This makes rationalisation persuasive. It need not consist of obvious falsehood. The difficulty sometimes lies in the rules of selection and which alternatives were allowed to appear at all.

In The Case for Motivated Reasoning, 1990, pages 480–483, psychologist Ziva Kunda distinguishes seeking an accurate conclusion from seeking a particular desirable conclusion. This is a review of research and a proposed mechanism, not one new experiment. It does not allow the motive of a particular speaker to be established from their outward confidence. A substantial boundary for this article is that desire does not give people unlimited freedom to believe anything; plausible grounds are usually needed.

Imagine buying an expensive tool. Before buying it, someone promised to use it every week. Afterwards, it turned out to be too complicated. They now say its chief value is a reserve of future possibilities. This new argument may be valid. The transition deserves scrutiny: did that value matter beforehand, which actions support it, and which conditions will make using the

reserve possible? If the argument never connects to a time or action, it may simply shield the purchase from assessment.

The same transition can also be an honest reconsideration. After choosing, we learn more about things than we knew beforehand. Not every new reason is an after-the-event justification of the old one. Openness makes the difference: is the original expectation preserved, is its unfulfilled part acknowledged, and is selling the tool or using it differently allowed? An explanation becomes more reliable when new meaning does not erase an earlier history that can be checked.

A wish is worth naming separately from proof. “I want the purchase to turn out to have been reasonable” honestly describes an interest. It does not make someone incapable of reasoning. “The purchase is reasonable because it matters to me to believe that” already joins different grounds. Ordinary life does not require dispassion. It requires a possibility of seeing where preference participates in selecting information and not treating that preference alone as evidence.

III. Sincerity and Intention Do Not Cancel Consequences

A person can sincerely want to help and still cause inconvenience. They can have no wish to offend and still say something another person experiences as humiliating. Consequences do not automatically establish bad intention. Good intention does not establish an absence of consequences. Holding both distinctions together makes conversation possible without a compulsory trial of someone's essential character.

In an illustrative example, a friend gives unsolicited advice after hearing a difficult account. The speaker falls silent. The adviser explains: “I wanted to support you.” This may be true. But intention does not answer the question of which support was needed. A useful next step is to clarify what happened and listen to the reply. If intention becomes a final justification, the other's unpleasant reaction is declared mistaken before any conversation. A convenient account then protects our role as a good person at the cost of making someone else's experience disappear.

The reverse can also be abused: any inconvenient outcome is declared proof of guilt even when the person lacked relevant information or possibilities. Responsibility is therefore worth distinguishing. What was known beforehand? What could reasonably have been anticipated? What became known only afterwards? Which action is possible now? Responsibility for making a correction is sometimes possible without acknowledging that the original action was consciously malicious.

In Confessions, X.3–5, Augustine reflects on limits to human self-knowledge before God. This is a Christian religious position about confession and grace; it is not a psychological model of

hidden motives. A narrow comparison is permissible here: confidence in our own account does not exhaust the question about ourselves. Augustine's theological ground remains his own ground, not an obligatory belief for the reader.

The practical distinction can be expressed without pressure to confess: “I wanted one thing, something else happened, and now I know more.” This preserves intention, outcome, and the possibility of updating. Hidden malice need not be invented in the name of honesty. Yet good intentions should not become a document forbidding consideration of everything else. Human dignity is compatible with acknowledging limits when an error has a particular scale and possible work, rather than becoming a permanent verdict.

Acknowledging a consequence is especially difficult when the earlier decision was costly. Reconsideration seems likely to devalue years of work or require explanations to people who were promised success. It helps to distinguish a cost already incurred from the future cost of continuing. Past expenses will not disappear with a new account, but the next expense is still a separate decision. An organiser need not declare an entire educational project meaningless to cancel a module that does not work. They can retain useful parts, honestly name one part's failure, and change the agreement with participants. This decision is harder than a beautiful general justification: it requires particular actions and may cause frustration. Yet its specificity allows the whole not to be destroyed for the sake of admitting an error, and the whole not to be protected at the cost of endlessly repeating an erroneous part.

IV. When an Exception Rescues Every Account

Any explanation can have exceptions. The world is more complex than one rule, and an event sometimes has several causes. The problem arises when an exception appears only after each inconvenient fact and never receives independent scrutiny. The account becomes invulnerable. It explains success through our merits, failure through others' shortcomings, others' success through luck, and others' failure as confirmation of the rule. Every road leads to the predetermined answer.

Imagine someone convinced that their ideas are always rejected out of envy. One idea is accepted; they call that an exception. They are asked to clarify another; they consider it a concealed refusal. A third is accepted after revision; they consider that appropriation of credit. Every event may genuinely involve difficulties. But if the explanation remains the same under opposite results, a question arises: which observation could change it at all? Without an answer, this account cannot be compared with alternatives.

An alternative need be neither nicer nor harsher. The idea may have been insufficiently clear; the recipient may have lacked resources; the assessment may have been biased; the way of conveying it may have been unsuitable. Several grounds sometimes operate together.

Specifics help distinguish them: who said what, which part was discussed, which criterion was named, and what changed after revision? A general story about an envious world may conceal precisely the information that could improve action or help select another environment.

The question of examinability must not become a demand for one decisive fact for every position in life, however. Trust, love, and religious faith are structured differently from a laboratory hypothesis. We are discussing explanations of events and grounds for a decision, not establishing a universal standard for all human life. Still less can someone be required to refute accounts of violence or injustice with one test convenient to the listener.

Bacon's criticism of preferring confirmations is useful here as a philosophical prompt, not proof of guilt. Examination starts with our rules for handling information: are confirmation and objection considered equally, is an inconvenient detail retained, and can new information change a particular conclusion? The account may withstand examination. It may become narrower. It may separate into several explanations. None of these outcomes requires calling the person a deceiver beforehand.

V. Exchanging Roles Reveals Different Criteria

One way to examine an explanation is to mentally exchange the participants' positions. If a colleague caused the same delay, would we consider it acceptable? If a loved one offered this argument, would we accept it? The question does not prove the other side right. It reveals whether similar actions are evaluated by the same criteria. Our own inner history is usually more familiar than someone else's, so symmetry calls for caution.

In an illustrative couple, one person explains their own sharpness by fatigue and the other's by disrespect. The situations may really differ. But the difference needs naming: what exactly was different, which words were spoken, which agreement was broken, and what happened before the conversation? If the sole ground is “I know I had a reason,” the other may also have a reason unknown to us. This does not yet make sharpness acceptable, but limits certainty about someone else's motive.

Exchanging roles must not erase differences in power. A manager and an employee can say the same words with different consequences. Someone who controls money and someone who depends on it have different opportunities to refuse. Fair comparison accounts for this asymmetry. Equal criteria of dignity do not always mean identical demands concerning available actions. Comparing the words alongside authority, risk, and the cost of a decision is therefore useful.

In the Analects, XVI.1, Confucius criticises a political justification concealing desire. This is a particular moral and political context, not a universal instruction to suspect everyone. The comparison with present conversation is limited to a question: can a wish be named directly

without disguising it as impersonal necessity? Wanting something does not cancel discussion of its acceptability and cost.

An honest wish sometimes sounds simpler than the whole system of arguments: “I want to retain this decision,” “I dislike yielding,” or “I'm not prepared to spend money on this.” The conversation only begins after such a statement. The other may disagree; obligations and agreements may exist. But the participants at least know what to discuss. Rationalisation makes negotiation harder when personal preference is continually presented as the only objectively possible arrangement.

VI. Examining Yourself Without an Accusatory Interrogation

Self-examination becomes unproductive when its aim is finally to expose oneself. A person seeks the darkest motive, rejects every good explanation as a cover, and stops trusting their decisions. This is also selective consideration: the accusatory answer has now become convenient. An unpleasant sense of depth can accompany an inaccurate account just as pleasant relief can accompany an excuse.

Limiting the subject is more useful. Not “where have I deceived myself all my life?” but “how did I explain yesterday's refusal, and which parts of that explanation are established?” Words, events, and guesses can be separated here. Fatigue, irritation, a real shortage of time, and unwillingness to meet can appear together. A mixed motive does not require choosing one pure ground. Sometimes someone states a convenient part of the truth and leaves an inconvenient part unsaid. That differs from a completely invented explanation.

Encountering the inconvenient need not happen publicly. One can first write down an alternative privately, discuss it with a trusted person, or examine an action on a small scale. But if the explanation has already affected someone else, inner understanding does not always complete the external work. A promise may need correcting, new information communicating, money returning, or an error acknowledging. Self-examination has consequences when it actually changes a decision rather than only the image of honesty.

Augustine addresses God; Bacon addresses disciplined inquiry; Kunda addresses psychological mechanisms of reasoning. These sources do not provide a single tribunal over a person. Their differences help preserve several questions: how reliable is the information, how are arguments selected, and in what relationship do we want to live with others? Editorially joining these questions does not turn religious confession into a scientific method or a scientific review into proof of moral guilt.

If self-analysis intensifies prolonged severe distress and becomes an endless repetition of accusations, this article does not demand that it continue at any cost. One can stop and seek support in a suitable format. No treatment is proposed and no cause of such a condition

established here. The right to pause remains. The most honest present conclusion is sometimes “I cannot yet consider this calmly,” retaining the question and the particular obligations that do not disappear when inner clarity is absent.

VII. Another Person Can Help Without Seeing Through Us

Another person can notice what we miss. They remember a promise, see a recurring transition, or draw attention to a mismatch between words and actions. But their account also has interests, limited information, and possible errors. “You are deceiving yourself” does not become true through confidence or psychological terminology. It needs the same treatment of facts as our original explanation.

In an illustrative conversation, a friend observes: “You say the project doesn't matter, but you return to it every evening.” This is a specific observation that can be checked and discussed. “You're simply afraid of success” adds a cause not yet established. The person may fear risk, regret invested time, feel interest, or be occupied with an obligation. Good help preserves the observation and allows several explanations. It does not need to win the other person's inner story beforehand.

A response to an observation can also be precise. “Yes, I return to it; I don't yet know why” is not surrender. “No, for the past three evenings I've been correcting a document I promised” adds information. “I don't want to discuss it now” establishes a boundary but does not refute the observation. Different responses serve different functions. When every disagreement is declared further confirmation of self-deception, the conversation becomes a closed system in which the person has no permissible answer left.

Choosing someone to talk with is worth basing on how they converse, not only closeness. Can they ask questions, preserve uncertainty, hear a correction, and acknowledge their own error? Do they later use openness as a weapon? These questions concern the conditions of self-examination. A difficult conversation sometimes needs professional help, sometimes only an attentive person, and sometimes facts should be collected first. No single obligatory format is proposed.

Preserving autonomy does not mean every explanation is equally good. If a document establishes one date, another cannot replace it merely because the first is unpleasant. If a promise was made, the other party has a right to discuss its breach. But factual responsibility differs from a right to declare a hidden motive definitively known. Joint scrutiny can be strict about events and cautious about explanations. This combination helps correct what is real without producing new coercion in the name of truth.

VIII. A New Account Should Change Available Choice

Reconsidering an explanation is useful when it clarifies an action or boundary. The manager in the opening scene may see both that the team made mistakes and that he changed the assignment late. These parts do not cancel each other. Several lines of work now appear: correct a particular skill, change how assignments are set, reconsider the deadline, or decline unsuitable collaboration. A more accurate account expands choice through information rather than a pleasant self-image.

Yet a new account can itself become rationalisation. Someone learns to say “I acknowledge my part” and says it without changing the work. The acknowledgement receives social reward, but the next situation repeats the previous sequence. This does not prove insincerity: change may be difficult and opportunities insufficient. Nevertheless, words about maturity do not replace observation. What is now different in the particular conditions deserves scrutiny.

A reasonable outcome is sometimes to retain several competing explanations. “I may have postponed because of fatigue; I may have postponed because of an unpleasant conversation; both causes may contribute.” A step useful under both accounts can be chosen: restore one's strength and schedule a limited discussion. Action does not always require a final determination of the inner cause. But the unknown should remain unknown when it has not yet been examined, rather than being closed with the most attractive story.

Examination has a limit. A necessary decision cannot be postponed endlessly until full self-knowledge arrives. Sufficient information, acceptable risk, and a time for reconsideration can be defined. This matters especially when waiting itself causes harm. A convenient account sometimes says “I'll understand everything first,” while every new analysis simply postpones action. That explanation should be examined in the same way: which uncertainty truly still needs resolving, and what can already be done without it?

Reaction to a new account is not final proof either. Irritation may mean defence, but also fatigue, an inaccurate accusation, or an unpleasant manner of conversation. Immediate agreement may mean recognition, but also a wish to end pressure quickly. The outcome therefore cannot be assessed from one emotion. Returning to the substance after an appropriate interval is more useful: were the facts retained, can an alternative be named, and has a choice appeared that was previously excluded? Calm consideration sometimes lies ahead while a particular correction is already possible. Confident agreement sometimes involves neither understanding nor work. These distinctions require observing a sequence rather than treating a reaction as a transparent window into a hidden motive.

Let us return to the conversation about the project. The manager need not call himself a bad person. He needs to see which rules of his account made his own contribution invisible, retain

what is established about the team, and change the next agreement. Self-deception diminishes through more than finding the harshest explanation. A more reliable account allows an inconvenient fact, preserves the scale of responsibility, and permits choice to be updated. Honesty here resembles a working ability to return to information rather than a certificate of inner transparency received once and for all.

What this means in practice

Take one explanation of a recent decision that you are willing to consider voluntarily. Write down its strongest form: what it explains, which facts support it, and what you wish to preserve through this account. Keep the wish on a separate line. It may be reasonable and humanly understandable; the exercise does not require condemning it beforehand.

Separate the note into an event, a possible cause, and a conclusion for the future. For each claim, note the information source: a document, your observation, another's words, a memory, or a guess. If recalling someone else's motive, record that this is your account. An elaborate protocol is unnecessary; it is enough not to confuse the fact of a meeting with the explanation of why it happened.

Formulate at least one alternative explaining a substantial part of the events. Then ask which observation would change the initial account and whether it can be obtained without unagreed risk or crossing someone else's boundaries. If nothing can change the account, check whether it has become a way of shielding yourself from every answer. If it withstands objections, it can be retained within clear limits.

Mentally exchange the participants while keeping real differences in authority and conditions. Would you evaluate a similar action by the same rules? Which differences really matter? When speaking with another person, start from a particular observation rather than declaring their hidden motive. Allow them to clarify the event and disagree with the interpretation.

Choose one consequence of reconsideration: change a promise, clarify an assignment, correct an action, collect information, or retain a pause with a return date. Later assess what actually changed. The exercise guarantees no relief, replaces no professional support, and requires no public confession. Its purpose is to make an explanation open to updating. A convenient account sometimes remains true; an examinable account becomes more useful regardless of how pleasant it is to hear.

Key quotation

> *“I want such and such a thing”*

Confucius, Analects, XVI.1, James Legge: proposed direct speech, not Confucius' wish. Verified edition. The short fragment does not attribute the article author's wish to Confucius.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Similarity	Difference
Bacon ↔ Kunda	Preference can influence selection of grounds	Philosophical criticism of knowledge and a scientific review differ in method
Augustine ↔ examining an account of oneself	Self-knowledge has limits	Christian grace differs from a psychological mechanism
Analects XVI.1 ↔ a conversation about a decision	Editorial question: which decision needs discussion?	Political ethics does not establish an ordinary speaker's motive
Inquiry ↔ responsibility	Inconvenient information can change action	Truth and moral judgement need different grounds
Self-examination ↔ dialogue	Another perspective expands available information	Another person does not gain infallible access to our motives

This is an editorial map of limited motifs, without a claim of doctrinal unity or established effectiveness of the exercise.

Sources

1. Ziva Kunda. The Case for Motivated Reasoning. Psychological Bulletin, 108(3), 1990, 480–498. DOI 10.1037/0033-2909.108.3.480. The introduction and distinctions on pages 480–483 were read; neither the full review nor all cited studies were read.

2. Francis Bacon. Novum Organum, English edition in Project Gutenberg #45988, 2014. I.46–49 were read; the accessible page does not identify this English version's translator. The quotation was checked against this version; the entire treatise was not read.

3. Augustine. Confessions, Book X, translated by J. G. Pilkington, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, volume 1, 1887; New Advent. X.3–5 and selected fragments of X.14 and X.31 were read. A religious position and self-observation, not a clinical model.

4. Confucius. The Analects, James Legge, Project Gutenberg #3330, updated 2021. The political conversation XVI.1 was read; a historical tradition, not an experiment on rationalisation.

Tags

self-deception, rationalisation, explanation, motivated reasoning, fact, account, preference, intention, consequences, responsibility, self-knowledge, Bacon, Kunda, Augustine, Confucius, argument, examination, criterion, alternative, uncertainty, dialogue, dignity, boundary, choice, promise, error, reconsideration, honesty

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