

# The hypocritical mind

A talk with the man who understands our two-faced tendencies

BY JULIA CECHVALA  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Why do people say one thing yet do another? Scientist Robert Kurzban believes the reason is all inside your head

It's getting so common for anti-gay-marriage Republicans and conservative Christian preachers to turn out to be gay it's becoming cliché. How can they be such hypocrites?

Cognitive scientist Robert Kurzban has an explanation. He sees evidence that inconsistencies are inherent to how our brains work. What people say and what people do may be directed by entirely separate parts of the brain. This goes way beyond right and left hemispheres. According to Kurzban our brains are made up of many different components or "modules" responsible for different functions. Here's the kicker: Not all of these modules can talk to each other and not all of them can talk at all because they're not connected to the modules that allow us to verbalize.

With all these modules in our brains contributing sometimes contradictory information, even how we think of our "self" becomes problematic. Kurzban explains all of this in his entertaining new

book, "Why Everyone (Else) is a Hypocrite: Evolution and the Modular Mind" (Princeton University Press, \$27.95).

A lot comes up in a discussion about the brain, so when I sat down with Kurzban on his recent Seattle visit, the topics ranged from issues with language, to our similarity with the rest of the animal kingdom, to what's happening when you get a "gut feeling."

**Julia Cechvala:** Ever since I was a kid I've been calling out my dad as a hypocrite and I'm wondering if you would say I should lighten up on him? Stuff like eating at fast food restaurants but not liking factory farms.

**Robert Kurzban:** What I would say is that lightening up on him depends on exactly how you think about it. On the one hand I think it's important to identify potential inconsistencies and you'd have to play this out in the example you just articulated. You have to say "Look, by purchasing these items you are creating demand for them in the supply chain which is therefore endorsing them, and so your behavior is doing something which you oppose." What I would say is that it could very well be that there are also inconsistencies in your own behavior — and I'm not saying there are. But I think that one of the risks with making these sorts of charges is being sensitive to the fact that you might find certain kinds of these inconsistencies difficult to hear.

**J.C.:** That's fair enough. Your whole thesis is based around the modular nature of the mind. Can you explain that?

**R.K.:** Yeah, basically, the very concise

version is that the mind consists of a large number of specialized devices, and that's contrasted with the view that the mind is a big general machine. So the idea is that modularity suggests that we as humans are smart because we've bundled together lots of different kind of dumbish pieces of the mind. And modularity is a commitment to the view that you can identify these little systems, what they're for, how they work, how they interact and so forth.

**J.C.:** How controversial of a view is that in psychology?

**R.K.:** I would characterize it as pretty controversial. I would say it's one of the more controversial ideas in cognitive science. Everyone recognizes modularity to some extent, although not everyone realizes that they do. Everyone recognizes that there's a visual system that has the job of seeing. And my thesis is that this idea of

specialized systems includes many of the mind's, or all of the mind's, systems including social systems that have specialized mechanisms for choosing mates, for making friends, for choosing alliances, for morally condemning other people's behavior. That's pretty controversial.

**J.C.:** Is it just through language, or is there some other reason that we are attached to a unitary sense of self?

**R.K.:** I don't think it's just through language. I think it's that our conscious experiences are unitary. When you go to sleep you feel like you are somebody and you wake up and you're basically the same guy. You don't have the sense immediately of these different systems doing their jobs, but that doesn't mean that they're not. It seems to me that it's not even clear what it would feel like to really have an experience of all these modular systems at the same time. So I think the reason is not just language: It's that for whatever reason we have a very unitary sense of the world.

The danger is that our sense of the world can be very misleading in terms of figuring out what's true. Historically in science, intuitions have often gotten in the way. I was doing an interview with Brian Greene, the physicist, and he talked about how we experience objects as filling space, but that they're mostly empty, they mostly consist of emptiness. We interact with them as though they're solid, but that doesn't necessarily reflect something that's true about the physics of the world. So I think that this is true of many levels of analysis.

**J.C.:** When you say that the modular mind and the inherency of hypocrisy are part of human nature, does it help explain why people vote against their self-interest? I suppose it depends on what's the self-interest?

**R.K.:** Yes, the notion of self-interest turns out to be a little more problematic than some people might want you to believe. I think that there are lots of different systems

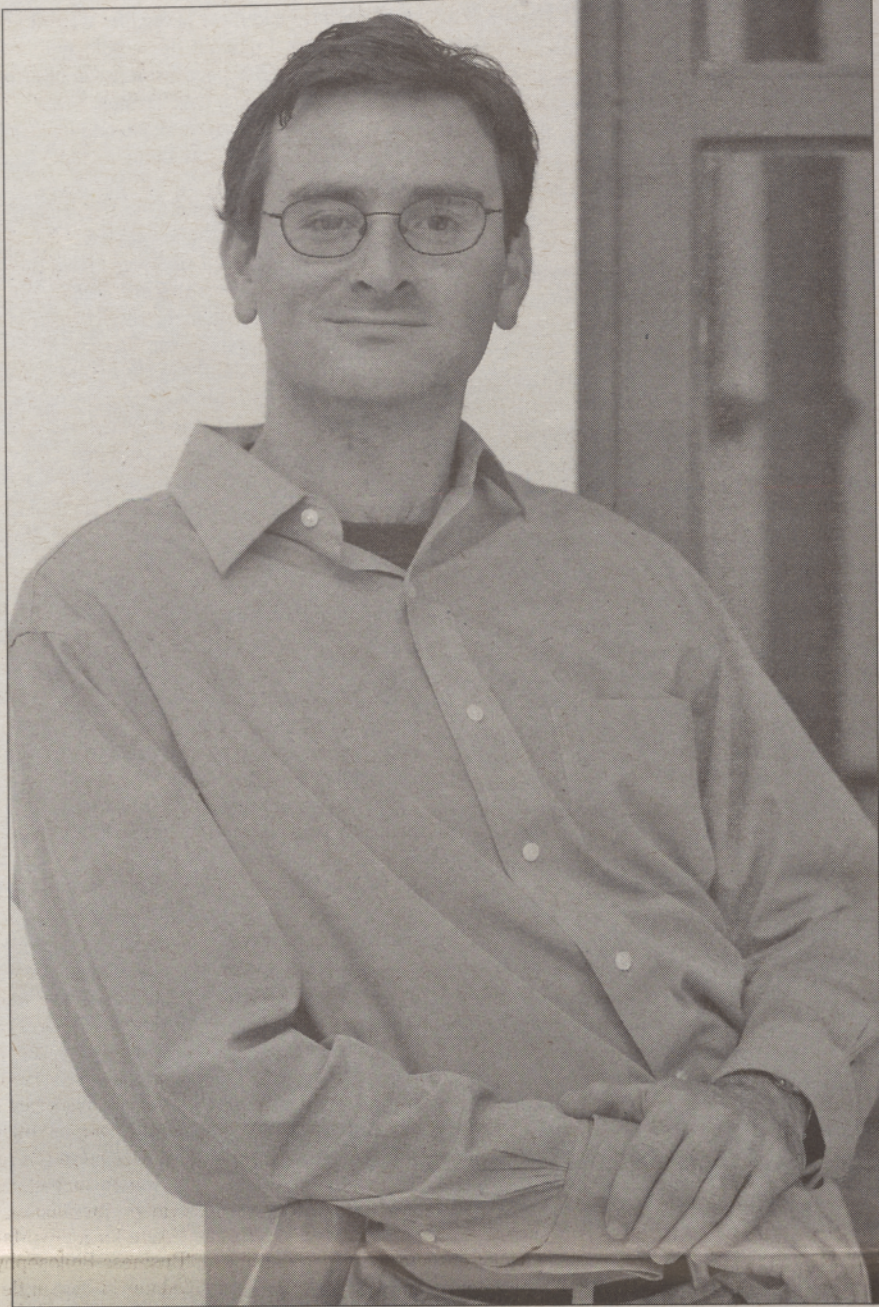


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in your head and those systems are designed to bring about certain states of affairs. Sometimes those things are consistent with each other and sometimes they're not. There are systems designed to keep you healthy and there are systems designed to cause you to take in high calorie foods, and those two things are in conflict.

And so when you talk about self-interest particularly in the context of policy, especially in a representative democracy as we have, at the end of the day you have to vote for a candidate who is for a basket of policies. It's possible to talk about economic self-interest, but even then it's problematic, because any set of policies are going to have multiple implications and it depends on what happens. So this notion of voting for or against your self-interest, in my view, this is a way that some people have used to persuade other people about how to change their votes. I think that this is part of the language of persuasion that's used in the political process.

**J.C.:** In your book it seems like humans are a very deceptive species both in deceiving ourselves and trying to get others to believe good things about us. What do you think that says about us as a species?

**R.K.:** I think it says that we're not that different from other species. If you look at the nonhuman animal kingdom and the nonhuman plant world there's all kinds of trickery all over the place. Everywhere. Organisms are continuously led to their death by fake offers of food or what have you. In that sense we're in good company.

It's not surprising to find individuals within any given species engaged in deceptive practices because deceptions will mitigate advantage, and natural selection punishes organisms that don't use all possible means to gain advantage. In some sense it would be shocking to find that humans weren't deceptive. And language exacerbates us, because language allows you

to say anything you want for a very cheap price — the cost of a breath of air.

What's amazing in some sense about humans is how honest we are, that often many of the things we say are basically true. From a biological perspective the only time you see true advertising is when being truthful benefits the signaler. If I'm a big ox and other ox aren't going to bug me if they see that I'm big, it pays for me to advertise that fact. If I'm poisonous it pays to advertise the poison so that people don't try to eat my body parts. Honesty typically in the biological world is seen only when it's advantageous, making humans look, in some sense, striking in the other direction.

**J.C.:** I want to get back to humans as a deceptive species and how that's really more like the rest of the animal world. So then where do the morals come in — trying to inhibit that?

**R.K.:** So if you think it's true, as I do, that morality is in part a system that each of us has to constrain other people's behavior, then each of us is wandering around the world trying not to trip over these morality traps that other people have laid for us. So we agree what we're all going to punish, and we then have a good reason to not do these things that are "morally wrong," because those are the things for which we will be punished, sometimes by the law, sometimes by social censure, exclusion and so on.

One way to think about morality is that the moral rules make us afraid to do a certain set of things. Now some of those things it's good that we're afraid of, right? You shouldn't take other people's stuff, and you shouldn't harm them intentionally. We shouldn't break contracts. So it's good that we punish those things. Other behaviors, it's less clear. At least in my opinion, it's less clear how we should feel about them.

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