THE ELEPHANT IN THE BRAIN

by Kevin Simler & Robin Hanson

Summary & Worksheet

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The Book In Three Or More Sentences:

In The Elephant in the Brain, Kevin Simler and Robin Hanson argue that all of our actions are motivated by selfish motives. By examining different areas of our everyday life, the book aims to uncover the real intentions of our minds compared to the intentions we portray to the outside world – the two are always different. The introduced metaphorical idiom, the elephant in the brain, is used to explain that acknowledging our darker motives is consciously avoided – a taboo topic.

The Core Idea:

There is a hidden (ugly) motive behind even our most altruistic behavior. However, we never admit our selfishness because we never really understand it. This intentional blindness is a strategic self-deception set by the brain – so we can safeguard our persona if someone questions our actions. The reason such deception exists? We don't want to appear egoistic in front of others. We want to position ourselves as caring. This way, others will like us more, and we'll be accepted by the tribe. Deep down, though, we're always guided by dark, narcissistic desires.

Highlights:

- *We're designed to be self-serving and manipulative while also trying to hide these intentions.*
- *There are three social games (sex, social status, politics) we all must play to get ahead in life.*
- *Realizing that everyone holds inner self-serving motives will make you more vigilant when interacting with people.*

6 Key Lessons from The Elephant in the Brain:

- Lesson #1: *Human Behavior is Rarely What it Seems*
- Lesson #2: *Understand Why We Hide Our Motives*
- Lesson #3: *We Follow Social Norms to Ensure Our Survival*
- Lesson #4: *Self-Deception is Unremovable Human Characteristic*
- Lesson #5: *The Motives We Claim to Have Don't Explain our Behavior*
- Lesson #6: *Use The Knowledge About Our Dark Motives in A Good Way*

Lesson #1: Human Behavior is Rarely What it Seems

What's this elephant that's supposedly in our brain?

In short, it's the way the authors pack and explain our dark selfish motives that the brain is trying to hide from us.

The underlying idea here is that, "the less we know of our own ugly motives, the easier it is to hide them from others."

We're designed to act in our best self-interest for a reason: our genes mostly care about propagating in the future. And since acting selfishly won't be properly awarded by our social circle, we camouflage our real desires with acts that appear noble on the outside.

Basically, the tendency for our brain to mask and hide our ugly motives, for us as well, is an evolutionary trait that is observable in all of us.

The single-minded behavior can be spotted in pretty much all of our daily actions. For example, the authors suggest that receiving medical care isn't primarily about the intake of medicine. To get well when we're sick, we're mostly interested in receiving care from others that is clearly visible – for us and for the others around. We pay for expensive medical procedures, and we leave others to take care of us not because a cheaper operation won't do it or because we can't prepare food on our own, but because we want to feel valued.

Another example is involving ourselves in social activities – donating blood, for instance. We're not so interested in helping someone in need, we simply want to signal to others that we're caring and worthy of being considered as a friend or partner. Or in other words, to improve our position in the social competition.

The most interesting aspect of our selfish drive is that we don't talk about it even if we acknowledge it (we usually don't fully comprehend it). We try to hide our motives and never discuss them. It's a taboo topic for a reason – if others spot our real motives, we can be excommunicated from the community. And this can be devastating for our survival.

> "*We, human beings, are a species that's not only capable of acting on hidden motives—we're designed to do it. Our brains are built to act in our self-interest while at the same time trying hard not to appear selfish in front of other people.*" *Kevin Simler & Robin Hanson*

Lesson #2: Understand Why We Hide Our Motives

Primates can effectively groom only half of their bodies. To stay clean and to remove all the dirt from their fur, they rely on help from their friends.

This ritual is called social grooming.

Picture one chimp picking the fur of another. The idea behind this friendly act seem obvious – the groomer is trying to remove all the dirt from his friend's back. The motive is also not so hidden. If chimp A helps his friend (chimp B), chimp B will likely return the favor.

But these facts are only the observable truths.

According to the text, social grooming is more about politics than about hygiene.

Apart from building trust between primates when they groom each other, alliances are also formed. And these connections are later used in the hierarchy-formation of the tribe.

Basically, on the surface, nothing unusual is happening. While in reality though, chimps are building strategic relationships.

Things are similar in the human world. We play different social games for one main reason: to ensure our survival. Understanding these schemes can help us comprehend why our motives are so carefully masked.

- **Sex**: Avoiding death is just part of the job. The endgame of every individual is reproducing. After all, life won't be possible without

the continuation of the species.
- **Social status**: Your position in society is not only important for your attractiveness, but also for your survival. The higher you are on the scoreboard, the greater the chances of receiving support from others.
- **Politics**: Being strong won't be enough to successfully maneuver through life. Your ability to win allies is far more important than the size of your biceps. As stated in the book, "coalitions are what makes politics so political."

These three are all competitive games.

Wining and ensuring your survival has a lot to do with participating in all of them. To be successful, of course, excludes loudly expressing your real incentives – to get ahead of others. You need to focus on attracting partners and mates by showing that you care for others, while deep down you actually care only about yourself.

> *"The other important similarity is that each game requires two complementary skill sets: the ability to evaluate potential partners and the ability to attract good partners. In sex, the partners we're looking for are mates. In social status, we're looking for friends and associates. And in politics, we're looking for allies, people to team up with." Kevin Simler & Robin Hanson*

Lesson #3: We Follow Social Norms to Ensure Our Survival

For our ancestors, to be left out, without being part of a clan, was equal to a death sentence.

Even if you were the strongest in the explored area, your chances for survival were slim if you weren't getting help from the band.

This realization set the scene for collaboration and mutual help. Everyone was expected to contribute to the clan by providing food, protecting others, and sharing his skills.

But how to ensure that everyone in the group will help each other out?

The solution was quite simple: set norms that everyone should follow.

Even nowadays, we have and we follow strict rules. These are set to ensure that people won't sabotage other people for their best self-interest. We have police, courts, prisons, etc. These institutions are used

only when things get really rough though. Most people don't need to receive a remark from the police to behave. The mere thought of being expelled by the local group is enough to keep you from acting violently.

For example, if you want to do something (wrong) to John, you're not only worried about how he will react. You're mostly concerned about how others, the local group, will respond to your actions. Sanctions from the community, like exile, are far worse than getting a punch in the face. That's why we follow the norms set by society – to belong. To be a part of a group and to receive help when we need it.

Nowadays, a wide variety of norms exist to enforce good behavior. Most of them are obvious: norms against theft, murder, rape, and so on. But there is another type of norm that's not so obvious: meta-norms. Basically, these are norms that punish people who are not "punishing" others. That's why you can be sentenced for telling lies in court (perjury). Or remarked by society when you don't act when you see wrongdoings.

In the book, the authors beautifully describe the essence of norms in the following passage:

> "*If you refrain from hitting people because you're afraid they'll hit you back, that's not a norm… But if you're worried that your neighbors might disapprove and even coordinate to punish you, then you're most likely dealing with a norm. It's this third-party, collective enforcement that's unique to humans.*" *Kevin Simler & Robin Hanson*

Lesson #4: Self-Deception is Unremovable Human Characteristic

We constantly deceive ourselves. Most of the time, for a good cause: to feel good and to motive ourselves to keep pursuing a certain goal.

For example, athletes, during a race will constantly feed their brain with internal "you can do it" monologue. A lot of times this positive self-talk is the difference between winning and losing.

Another good example is our tendency to push negative thoughts or acts that happened in the past – a lot of time not quite favorable for us – deep down in our memory black whole. This act of burying negative memories can help us preserve our self-esteem.

But the above are inward type of deception. During most of our time,

we focus on doing outward-facing and manipulative-type of deception – unintentionally a lot of the times.

We strategically forget, or ignore, bits of information to ensure our survival. For example, you can hide, or not include, certain losses to present your company as better for your investors. And if for example the information is later exposed, you can simply say that you didn't' know about this (lie in other words).

We do these things for one main reason: lying is hard and cognitively demanding. Our brains need to constantly keep two different stories in our heads. That's why we decide to prioritize the story that best suits our desires and remove the other one. As stated in the book, "often the best way to convince others that we believe something is to actually believe it."

There are four different forms of self-deception that we use depending on the situation:

- **The Madman**: When we are fully committed to a cause, and we don't see any other option we act like crazy people. The motto of this type of self-deception is, "I'm doing this no matter what!"
- **The Loyalist**: We believe others because they are our friends or simply because we want to be part of a group. You can say something like, "I believe in what you're saying" to demonstrate trust and commitment. Of course, you may not always believe it. You just say you do.
- **The Cheerleader**: We broadcast certain beliefs to convince others of something or to shield our ego. For example, if you're a startup founder, you'll have to radiate confidence to make others believe in your vision. In this example, you'll tell others, "I know this is going to work out!" Inwards, your intentions can be described as follows: "I believe in this! Come, join me and believe it with me!"
- **The Cheater**: We can successfully deceive others only if we deceive ourselves first. And getting caught is hard when you're not admitting your wrongdoings. In this state, we can say something like, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

> *"In deceiving ourselves, then, we're often acting to deceive and manipulate others." Kevin Simler & Robin Hanson*

Lesson #5: The Motives We Claim to Have Don't Explain our Behavior

The first half of the book aims to explain why humans are devoted to a selfish lifestyle mixed with competitive behavior.

The second part of the book focuses on investigating real life situations in the most common areas of our habitat.

Overall, the message the authors want to convey is how the motives we claim to have don't fully support our behavior. We do everything possible to highlight our best side by advertising "good" intentions while masking our real selfish motives and desires.

Here's a summary of all the chapters in part 2 of the book:

The Hidden Motives in Everyday Life

- **Body language**: We are intentionally unaware of the message our body transmits. The reason? Unspoken words are hard to be translated and used against us. Our body language can express boredom (by rolling our eyes) but we can verbally say that we're enjoying the presentation. All of this, done to pursue selfish purposes.
- **Laughter**: If you want to camouflage a discussion about an important topic and make it less horrible for the other party you'll undoubtedly use humor. Humor allows us to say offending stuff without being suspected of betrayal. Or in other words, we joke around if we want to tell the truth.
- **Conversation**: The real purpose of exchanging verbal messages with others is not sharing information, it's something more subtle. We want our voice to be heard to impress our audience. We're eager to express what we know not only to present ourselves as smart and prestigious but also to find potential mates and allies. That's the subtext of any spoken word.
- **Consumption**: We rarely buy products just for what they can do for us. Internally, we buy items for the message they convey to the outside world. After all, our selfish nature is designed to signal that we are better than others. That's why we're stuck in a rat race.
- **Art**: On the surface, the purpose of art looks like a total waste of time and energy. Why spend months painting while you can search for more food? Well, the real function of art, as mentioned in the book, is to advertise the inner qualities of the artist. To position ourselves as vigorous and sophisticated. Hence, find more allies.
- **Charity**: The act of giving to others is rarely 100% altruistic. That's why anonymous donations are exceptions, not the norm. We don't want simply to be generous, we want to appear as generous. Charity is one of the best ways to advertise our noble spirit.
- **Education**: When given the option to choose between getting an education without a degree, or a degree without an education, most students picked the degree. Why? Because the certificate you're so eager to get is something physical you can share with others. You can use your degree to advertise your qualities. In contrast, education is something only you know you have. And in a world where appearance is far more important than the actual skills you have, it's best to have a way to signal the "possession" of knowledge.

- **Medicine**: When we're ill is far more important to receive physical and psychological support than pharmaceutical. We want our friends to nurture us and to hold our hands. Also, when we're down we're not satisfied by taking an average prescription from the local doctor. We want "experts" to tell us what we need to do. This makes us feel more valuable.
- **Religion**: The reason we participate in a religious movement is not very different from the reason we take part in other groups – we want to socialize. As the authors mention in the book, "The value of holding certain beliefs comes not from acting on them, but from convincing others that you believe them."
- **Politics**: Similar to religion, we are eager to associate ourselves with a certain coalition because we want to express ourselves. And when we vote and support a cause, we do it with the intention to show ourselves, advertise our smartness and interests to the world.

> *"In deceiving ourselves, then, we're often acting to deceive and manipulate others." Kevin Simler & Robin Hanson*

Lesson #6: Use The Knowledge About Our Dark Motives in A Good Way

Knowing that we mask our dark motives with virtues is not enough, you also need to do something with this information. Otherwise, learning about the elephant in the brain is just a waste of time.

That's why, after revealing all of our dark motives that we so carefully facade with noble deeds (what was mentioned in Lesson #5), the authors present a couple of practical tactics.

Here's how you can make good use of the knowledge of our strategic self-deception:

- **Better situational awareness**: Knowing that everyone has hidden motives allows you to better navigate in the social arena. When someone mentions "I'm here to help," you'll immediately look for his secret desires. When someone tries to persuade you by telling you that, "you should totally visit Egypt," or that, "you should own the newest model X laptop," you'll sense that this person is suggesting these things for his own benefit, not for your benefit.
- **Understand yourself**: The biggest benefit of knowing about our hidden desires is the ability to understand our own motives. For example, the real reasons we buy expensive clothes, share stuff on social media, or try to dominate every conversation will uncover. We'll understand why we act the way we do. Why we spend all of our money on stupid gadgets that won't matter after a week.

Thanks to this realization, we can sense what is actually missing in our lives, what we want to feel. Therefore, we can substitute our bad habits with better ones – donate money instead of wasting everything on clothes.

- **Behave better**: Once you realize that everything you do is to stimulate your own ego, you can take a moment of your life and regroup. Of course, ensuring your survival is important. You certainly have to do a lot of selfish things to thrive. Yet, not everything is acceptable. For example, you shouldn't mistreat others for your own well-being. So, instead of sabotaging others, you can use your selfish motives to become the best surgeon, or the best accountant, for example. Others will be careless of your desires, but they can surely benefit from them, and you as well.
- **Enlightened self-interest**: For some, understanding our darker motives can give them an advantage in terms of influencing others for their best self-interest. Of course, the authors didn't write this book to help folks become thug lords, they did it with good intentions. If you still don't know how to act, you can follow the proposed philosophy of the "enlightened self-interest." Basically, to focus on doing good things for you that can be also good for others. Starting a company and becoming your own boss is surely inspired by selfish desires. But later, when you hire people, you're helping them earn a living.
- **Design institutions**: Organizations can benefit a lot from understanding the hidden motives of people. When you identify the below-the-surface motives of any group or organization, you can make the needed arrangements to achieve better outcomes for society. If you're in a leading team, you can ask yourself the following question when approaching a certain reform or simply when thinking about a new project: "What are the hidden functions of this project/group, and how important are they?"

Regardless of your efforts, you'll undoubtedly remain selfish and overly preoccupied with your own thoughts. It's hard to change years of evolution by just reading a book after all.

What you can do though, to turn things around in a positive matter, is to change your perspective. To focus your efforts on deeds that are (yes!) selfish, but still remarkably beneficial for the rest of the human race.

> *"Each bird works its tail feathers off to provide food and protection for the group, not from the goodness of its heart but largely out of self-interest… In light of this, we absolutely need ideals—not just as personal goals to strive for, but also as yardsticks by which to judge others and to let ourselves be judged in return."*
> *Kevin Simler & Robin Hanson*

Actionable Notes:

- **We become what we believe**: At some point, self-deception becomes reality. Metaphorically, the mask we wear in front of others blends in and becomes our real face. That's why the role you play and the narrative your mind spins is so important to acknowledge. If you still don't know, take a moment to observe what type of story you feed your brain with. What do you believe in? What type of person do you want to be? If you convince your mind to believe in good things you'll become a good person and vice versa. Of course, it's good to focus on believing in virtuous things not only for society but for yourself as well.
- **How news consumption influences us:** Absorbing news is often justified with our desire to understand what are the hot topics of the day. But that's what we think. Underneath this superficial desire, we consume news like crazy to have more topics for discussion with others and also to present ourselves as knowledgeable and impressive. That's also the reason we're obsessed with news related to famous or prestigious people – usually not the same type of people. By reading and later sharing what new we know about these stars, we unconsciously associate ourselves with them, and we want others to do the same association. If you want to adopt good habits in your daily life a good start will be to read sections where noble deeds are shared. This will motivate you to take on a dignified path.
- **Understand the properties of art**: There are two properties that are worth understanding to realize how we view any form of art: intrinsic and extrinsic properties. Intrinsic properties are what is visible: the colors, the textures, the frame, where the painting is positioned in a museum. Extrinsic properties are qualities that people can't directly see. These include the techniques the artist used, how many hours the project took to be completed, the materials, etc. The only way we can create a beautiful end product with high-quality intrinsic properties is by focusing on the extrinsic properties. Meaning that we shouldn't focus on the possible appreciation we might get from others when a project is done (the intrinsic properties). We should focus on mastering our skills (the extrinsic properties). Mastering what is not visible by others to produce something worth seeing.
- **Befriend yourself**: We are strangers to ourselves. We think we know why we do certain things but we're usually mistaking. Even further, we do all sorts of things to prove to ourselves that what we're doing is fine – hide our intentions with positive self-talk. For example, we might cancel a meeting by telling ourselves something like "I'm not feeling well today" as an excuse to avoid social interactions. Or, if people label us bad we can remind ourselves of the times we donated funds to charities to feel better. Every time you do something "strange," ask yourself: "Why am I doing this?

Why it's important/unimportant for me?" The answers will give you a better understanding of your inner motives.

- **Signal well-being**: This sentence beautifully describes all of our actions and hidden motives: "people can't reward us for what they can't see." Since our genes are primarily focused on survival, all of our actions are aimed towards showcasing our best qualities. You can be a good person, a master artisan, but without demonstrating what you can do to the local tribe it's like you don't have/know anything - all of your qualities will be worthless. Most folks take this to the ugly extreme. They show wealth without actually having wealth. And here I mean wealth in terms of knowledge and expertise. The best course of action will be to *really* have the qualities you advertise. To master a subject but also spend enough time signaling to others your talent. If you fail in the last-mentioned, it's like you don't have anything. Sadly, or not, this is how our world works.

Commentary and My Personal Takeaway

The Elephant in the Brain is a provocative book that a lot of people will surely reject. After all, as mentioned inside, we strategically hide our real motives and it's a common human trait to act hostile against people trying to bring these dark motives to light. Yet, I believe it's worth checking even if you feel threatened.

The main argument is quite simple: We always behave selfishly. However, we don't realize we do so. We self-deceive ourselves, and we cover this egoistic behavior, for us as well for others, with a good narrative about ourselves.

Sometimes we might sense that others are doing things just for their own good, but we can't directly prove that. Why? First, because it's often nicely covered by seemingly noble deeds. And secondly, because we also do it and calling out on their narcissistic intentions will make others observe our own intentions under a loop.

The book is separated into two parts. In part 1, the authors uncover why this narcissistic behavior exists in our brains and why we're all victims of self-deception. In part 2, the authors portray our selfish behavior in our day to day life – in various situations.

Personally, I find the work done by Kevin Simler & Robin Hanson enlightening. You'll not only understand how our society works. But also equip yourself with the right tools to get ahead in the competitive environment.

That's why reading The Elephant in the Brain should be a must. Not

only because you'll better sense what others are up to. But also because you'll better understand your own desires and motives. This will give you a 360-degree view of yourself and of your interest. Thus, help you mold an image worthy of respect and admiration.

The key takeaway:

Use your selfish desires to do good things. We all want to attract attention even if we don't always admit it. Sadly, a lot of times we focus too much on ourselves without acknowledging the needs of the group. The best way to gain recognition and therefore feed your ego is by using your skills for the public good.

Notable Quotes:

"*We may be competitive social animals, self-interested and self-deceived, but we cooperated our way to the god-damned moon.*" *Kevin Simler & Robin Hanson*

"*But taken together, they suggest that we are less interested in "health at any cost," and more interested in treatments that third parties will appreciate.*" *Kevin Simler & Robin Hanson*

"*What feels, to each of you, overwhelmingly "right" and undeniably "true" is often suspiciously self-serving, and if nothing else, it can be useful to take a step back and reflect on your brain's willingness to distort things for your benefit.*" *Kevin Simler & Robin Hanson*

What to read next:

- *The Selfish Gene by Richard Dawkins [Summary]*
- *René Girard's Mimetic Theory by Wolfgang Palaver [Summary]*
- *Thinking in Bets by Annie Duke [Summary]*

INTERACTIVE SHEET FOR NOTE-TAKING

Reading alone won't help you understand the actionable notes. You need to engage with the content. Answer the question below (just type inside the boxes) to outline your future steps:

1. *What's the difference between the person inside and the person you present?*

2. *What type of content you regularly consume? Why are you so interested in this?*

3. *What are you doing to improve in the extrinsic properties of the art you create?*

4. *Why are you really doing what you're doing?*

5. *How can you better signal your talents?*

Don't forget to save your changes.