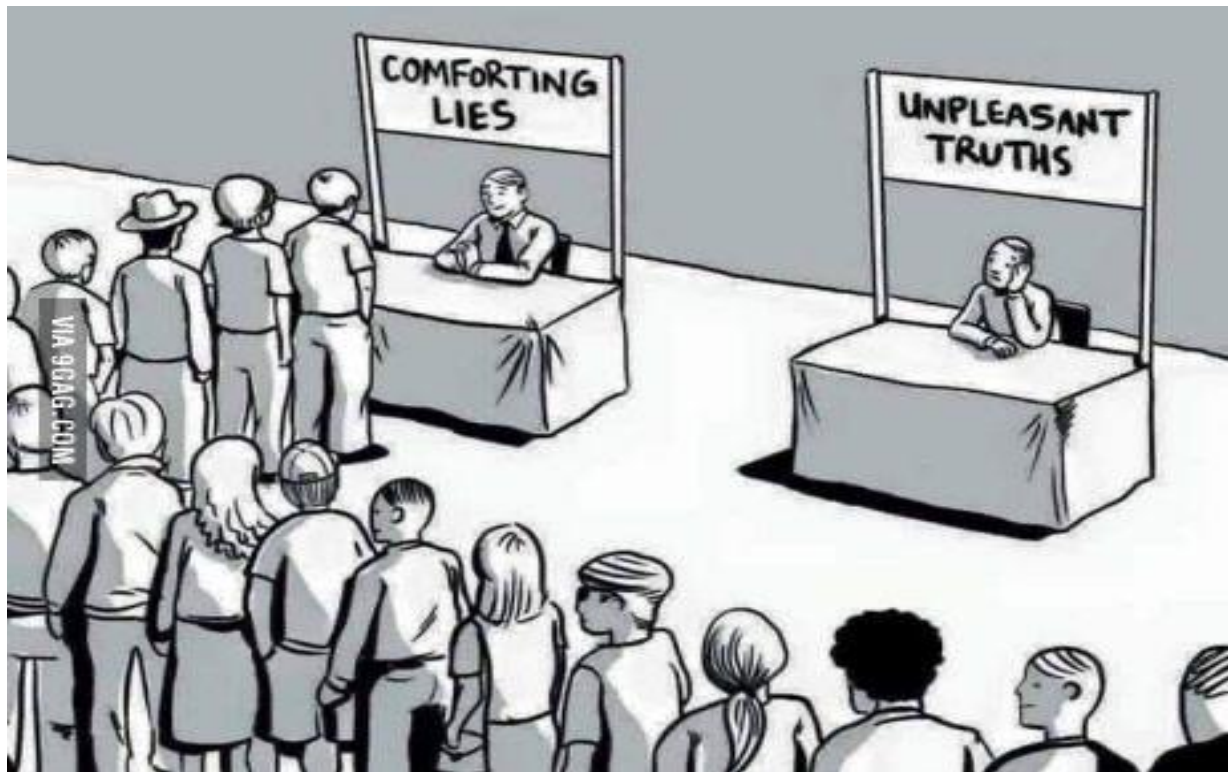


Rationalising the irrational

Cognitive Dissonance

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What is it?

Cognition is a process by which we perceive and interpret the world around us, which if we look holistically, is too big a picture to grasp. Then how do we gain a complete view of things?

Our brain had an innate tendency to interpret fragments as wholes, by plugging in the ungrasped information, with such beautiful transition that it often passes by unknown, of how this new information came into being. Based mostly on common sense, we come to believe these interpretations as facts, the narrations to be based on true stories, unaware of the modifications that have taken place since the last interpretation or narrative of the same. But “common sense is based on hindsight” meaning in this case it is quite unreliable.

Thus we need to look past this in built glitch while diving in the research.

Humans are strange creatures; our mind and body strives on and longs for harmony, a resolved set of instructions and beliefs, even though we may not live in such conditions. Thus the simplest of unresolved contradiction in our mind to our own thoughts, in conscious awareness leads to discomfort, mental and sometimes bodily, until a perfect orientation is achieved.

The social psychology theory developed by American psychologist **Leon Festinger**, Cognitive Dissonance is defined as the mental discomfort experienced by a person who has conflicts or contradictions between ideas, values, behavior and/or information at the same time. The theory suggests that humans have an inner drive to hold our attitudes and behavior in harmony and avoid disharmony (or dissonance). This is known as **the principle of cognitive consistency**.

Cognitive Dissonance is not just a condition bringing discomfort but one which shapes and reforms our ideas on issues that debate in our mind, until one comes prevalent. The strive for resolution from these incompatible thoughts is the way to refute from this state of limbo.

In Everyday Life

“Every single day the world seems like it is on the brink of falling apart. But then I look outside my window, and things look about the same as they did a week ago. It’s almost a form of cognitive dissonance”~ Moby

We live today in a world in which ideas and thoughts have been liberalised from the long struggle against conservatism, a world which is more so becoming accepting of ideas. But contrary to this, several people still struggle to accept ideas which go far against their beliefs, to explore, **to delve**.

The fact of the matter remains that everyone has opinions and their own ideology, which one forms and adopts through the instances and conditions specific to oneself, and hence going against one’s own beliefs feels like going against their existence, their history, their learnings.

So in this case what can be done?

The need to expand one’s scope remains primary, to be able to perceive more notions not just to empathise and connect better with fellow humans but also to evolve oneself and one’s own interpretation.

In everyday life, each one of us face several crossways in life, to discern between two beliefs upon the interaction of penetrating ideas on the wall of old beliefs. We face several challenges and are subjected to several situations fuelled by past experience and immediate reaction. But

this theory of Cognitive Dissonance doesn't merely exist in the society in such a quaint manner, but is rather dissolved in it's spheres.



Political Presence

Sometimes our ability to judge gets blinded by personal bias and the way we perceive our various identities ranging from political to religious, ethnic, cultural, economic and social. Disharmony of beliefs and problem in acceptance of ideas may further be raised, and here explained by the political term “**Partisanship**” .

Partisanship means the strong bias or prejudice we have towards any cause. In the recent years, partisanship and political conception has been a huge determinant in how we perceive ideas introduced to us.

Cognitive Dissonance here may further be explained by introducing the basic idea of another famous principle proposed in a political novel: **Doublethink**.

In **George Orwell**'s dystopian classic 1984, doublethink is the act of holding simultaneously, two opposite, individually exclusive ideas or opinions and believing in both simultaneously and

absolutely. Doublethink requires logic against logic or suspending disbelief in the contradiction.

We can easily discern by now how this might lead to cognitive dissonance, as we can perceive a notion contradicting to one what we believe to be positive, but we cannot simultaneously agree on two opposites without conflict of opinions.

Coming back in partisanship, in the society a major determinant of what people believe as we have stated earlier is what identity they associate themselves with and the group in which it fits. Humans are social animals and hence sometimes people seem to do action which is socially acceptable by the strata they belong to.

Studies show that partisan beliefs have existed throughout many previous centuries which would explain the behavior of subjects towards rulers. Allegiance to rulers was considered the primary and most important service in the society, and pleading the powerful by going against one's sense of belief hints dissonance, but the way it must have been resolved could vary.

Data and analysis have hinted on the fact of how **Partisan Polarization** has exponentially increased throughout the decades and this imposes a problem.

The need of the hour remains that we must not let any identity become overpowering on ourselves and look at the world with an open, but able to filter, scope.

Resolving in mind

As we have already deduced, that for our mind to withstand ideas, harmony is required. So in case a person is faced with cognitive dissonance what does he or she do?

As we have previously stated, that the mind specialises in transition of ideas, about the same happens in this case as well. There are 4 ways this could take place:-

- 1) **Modification:** The mind can change the original idea in such a manner that it modifies the contradiction or inconsistency. For example consider someone consuming fast food on a regular basis, with the knowledge that it would have serious health implications on the body. This raises a conflict of ideas. Here the mind can modify this by stating that "Yes, fast food is not healthy but I don't consume fast food that much, to cause any serious health implications." Hence it gives the ideas a relief by modifying it subtly.

- 2) **Trivialisation:** The mind can trivialise the contradiction by all together removing some or all importance it holds. In the example take before, trivialisation might take place in the manner that “There is no strong evidence that fast food has serious health implications.” Hence here the mind overlooks the statement or contradiction by deducing there is no strong evidence for the same.
- 3) **Addition:** The mind can add or place cognitions in between in the attempt to come to terms with the inconsistency. In the example it can take place as follows; “I know that fast food is unhealthy but I regularly exercise to keep a check on my health, and hence it does not matter that much.” Hence here the mind strays away from the contradiction by placing its own reasons in attempt to justify it.
- 4) **Denial:** The mind can deny the contradiction all together. In the example it can take place as follows: “I don’t believe that fast food has any health implications at all.”.

Hence the mind comforts the discomfort by rationalising the irrational.



Addiction Behavior

Addiction is perhaps one of the most deeply rooted in this psychological theory. Addictive behavior is fuelled by surges of pleasure and bursts of ecstatic emotions. In order to restore **Consonance** (opposite of dissonance), the mind changes the outlook of reality of the abuser.

Substance Abuse is a result of a vicious cycle of increasing the drugs repeatedly to procure the same amount of pleasure which the user once received and is anxious to receive. At some level every abuser realises how harmful these drugs are for them but the idea of continuing it seems at the moment more appealing and easier, than breaking bonds with the substance, which unknowingly intoxicates the body and makes it dependent on it to retain bodily functions.

People are said to lose themselves thus in this downward spiral and getting back up is no easier task than to move a mountain. What one must realise here from the very start what they'd be sacrificing in the long term by enjoying in the short term.

The abuser in his mind creates a wall of lies and obfuscation (trivialising, making the severity unintelligible) where this self destructive behavior is justified. Hence the person ends up creating a maze for oneself closed by the lies (self deception), denial and trivialisation of facts just to enter a distorted world of pleasure prone to come crashing down.

Need to Delve

Every person, including us, have sometime or the other been infuriated or critical of an idea at the very first glance, because we plainly recognise it to be wrong.

Don't get me wrong here, **Skepticism** is and will remain a very important ideology, but we must realise that there is never a time when we cannot expand our horizons further by increasing our scope and acceptance to ideas.

We need to remain **stoic** of ideas, looking at them with not just emotion but also reason, and delve further.