What the Soldier Is Protecting

I TRY TO ABIDE by the rule that when you advocate changing something, you should make sure you understand why it is the way it is in the first place.

This rule is known as Chesterton's fence, after G. K. Chesterton, the British writer who proposed it in an essay in 1929.[1] Imagine you discover a road that has a fence built across it for no particular reason you can see. You say to yourself, "Why would someone build a fence here? This seems unnecessary and stupid, let's tear it down." But if you don't understand why the fence is there, Chesterton argued, you can't be confident that it's okay to tear it down.

Long-standing customs or institutions are like those fences, he said. Naive reformers look at them and say, "I don't see the use of this; let's clear it away." But more thoughtful reformers reply, "If you don't see the use of it, I certainly won't let you clear it away. Go away and think. Then, when you can come back and tell me that you do see the use of it, I may allow you to destroy it."[2]

In this book, I'm proposing a kind of reform. I'm arguing that in many, if not all, situations, we would be better off abandoning our default setting of soldier mindset and learning to be in scout mindset instead. And I'd like to be a thoughtful reformer, not a naive one. No matter how strong a case there seems to be for the benefits of scout mindset, the argument is incomplete until we know what soldier mindset is doing there in the first place. Does motivated reasoning benefit us in important ways? What might we lose if we give it up?

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EXPERTS IN MANY fields have explored motivated reasoning in different ways, from psychologists to behavioral economists to evolutionary psychologists to philosophers. By now there's a sprawling body of literature on the question "What function does motivated reasoning serve?" I've broken it down into six

overlapping categories: comfort, self-esteem, morale, persuasion, image, and belonging.

COMFORT: AVOIDING UNPLEASANT EMOTIONS

There was a certain cartoon that was everywhere on the internet in 2016, thanks to the way it seemed to capture the global mood at the time. It depicts a dog wearing a hat and sitting at a desk. All around him, the room is in flames. The dog forces a smile and insists, "This is fine."

Soldier mindset helps us avoid negative emotions like fear, stress, and regret. Sometimes we do that with denial, like the "This is fine" dog. Other times, we reach for comforting narratives about the world, and opt not to scrutinize them too closely. *Everything happens for the best. People get what's coming to them. The darker the night, the brighter the stars.*

In Aesop's fable "The Fox and the Grapes," a fox spots a bunch of juicy grapes, high up on a branch he can't reach, and concludes that the grapes were sour anyway. We use similar "sour grapes" reasoning when we don't get something we want. When someone we had a great first date with doesn't return our calls, we may decide they were a bore anyway. When a job offer slips through our fingers, we conclude, "It's for the best; the hours would have been brutal."

A close cousin to the sour grape is the sweet lemon: when it doesn't seem feasible to fix a problem, we may try to convince ourselves that our "problem" is actually a blessing, and that we wouldn't change it even if we could. Until very recently in human history, excruciating pain was an unavoidable part of childbirth. Since there was nothing we could do about that, many doctors and clergy argued that pain was a *good* thing, because it promoted spiritual growth and strength of character. Labor pains were allotted by God, "and most wisely we cannot doubt," one obstetrician assured people in 1856.[3]

Now that we have access to epidural anesthesia, we no longer insist on the sweetness of that particular lemon. But we still say similar things about aging and death—that they're beautiful, and they give meaning to life. "Perhaps mortality is not simply an evil, perhaps it is even a blessing," argued Leon Kass, who chaired the President's Council on Bioethics under George W. Bush.

Maybe, he suggests, our ability to feel love depends on our awareness of the finitude of our lives.[4]

To add a wrinkle to this story, the comforting thing to believe isn't always optimistic. Sometimes it's the opposite: that there's no hope, so you might as well not worry about it. If you're struggling to keep your head above water in a difficult class, it can be tempting to conclude "This is pointless, I'm never going to do well enough to bring my grade up." The moment of giving up offers a rush of sweet relief. Or you might decide that there's no point in preparing for a potential future disaster like an earthquake or tsunami, so you don't have to think about it. "Most people throw up their hands and say, 'It's fate, it's out of my control,'" says Eric Klinenberg, a professor of sociology at New York University who studies the psychology of disaster preparation.[5]

SELF-ESTEEM: FEELING GOOD ABOUT OURSELVES

In the movie *Election*, the character Tracy Flick is ambitious and hardworking, but struggles to make friends. "That's okay," she tells herself. "I've come to accept that very few people are truly destined to be special, and we're solo fliers . . . if you're gonna be great, you've got to be lonely."[6] Like Tracy, we often use soldier mindset to protect our egos by finding flattering narratives for unflattering facts. *I may not be wealthy, but that's because I have integrity. The reason I don't have a lot of friends is because people are intimidated by me.*

All sorts of beliefs can get drafted into service defending our egos because they relate in some way to our strengths or weaknesses. If your desk is constantly covered in piles of books and papers, you might be especially receptive to the claim "Messiness is a sign of creativity." If you have the time and disposable income to travel a lot, you might believe "You can't be a truly well-rounded person without having seen the world." If you did poorly on the SATs, you might be especially sympathetic to arguments like, "Standardized tests don't measure how smart you are, only how good you are at taking tests."

Over time, our beliefs about the world adjust to accommodate our track record. One study in the late 1990s followed students throughout four years of college, tracking the GPA they expected to achieve, the GPA they actually achieved, and their beliefs about the importance of grades. Students who

consistently underperformed their own expectations increasingly began to conclude that "Grades aren't that important after all."[7]

Your self-image shapes even your most fundamental beliefs about how the world works. Poorer people are more likely to believe that luck plays a big role in life, while wealthier people tend to credit hard work and talent alone. When economist Robert Frank wrote in a *New York Times* column that luck was an important (though not sufficient) ingredient in success, Fox business commentator Stuart Varney bristled. "Do you know how insulting that was, when I read that?" he asked Frank. "I came to America with nothing thirty-five years ago. I've made something of myself, I think through hard work, talent, and risk-taking, and you're going to write in the *New York Times* that this is luck."[8]

Again, there's a wrinkle in this story: Motivated reasoning for the sake of self-esteem doesn't always mean believing that you're brilliant and talented and everyone likes you. Psychologists make a distinction between *self-enhancement,* which means boosting your ego with positive beliefs, and *self-protection,* which means avoiding blows to your ego. For the sake of self-protection, you might err on the side of assuming the worst about yourself. In a popular video, YouTuber Natalie Wynn calls it "masochistic epistemology"—*whatever hurts is true*. The term resonated with a lot of people. As one viewer commented, "It feels safer to assume that people think I'm unattractive rather than getting my hopes up that someone thinks I'm pretty when they really don't."[9]

MORALE: MOTIVATING OURSELVES TO DO HARD THINGS

I wrote this book while living in San Francisco, the city where everyone and their Uber driver has a vision for the next billion-dollar tech company. Out here, it's common wisdom that irrational optimism is a good thing—it's what motivates you to launch yourself into daunting challenges, ignore the naysayers, and persevere when things get tough. Small wonder then that in one survey of entrepreneurs, almost everyone estimated their company's probability of success to be at least 7 out of 10, with a third giving themselves an eyebrow-raising 10 out of 10 chance, despite the fact that the baseline rate of start-up success is closer to 1 in 10.[10]

One strategy we use to justify such high confidence is downplaying the relevance of the baseline odds and telling ourselves that success is purely a

matter of trying hard enough. As one motivational blogger promised, "[You] have 100% chance of being successful at doing what you love if you commit yourself to it and get off your ass and do it every day."[11]

Another mental move is to selectively focus on the features of a situation that justify optimism, while ignoring those that justify pessimism. When I was starting an organization, I was aware that most organizations fail, but I reassured myself with the thought, "We're in a better position than most because we already have a network of backers." This was true, and a reason for optimism. But I could instead have observed, "Our organization is in a worse position than most because all of us are young and inexperienced," which was also true.

We need morale to make tough decisions and act on them with conviction. That's why decision-makers often avoid considering alternative plans or downsides to their current plan. A sociologist named Nils Brunsson spent time embedded in a Swedish company in the 1970s and observed that when they held meetings to "decide" on a project to work on, they actually spent very little time comparing options. Instead, they quickly anchored on one option and spent most of the meeting raising points in favor of it. "This helped them to build up enthusiasm for projects—an enthusiasm that they deemed necessary to overcome difficulties," Brunsson concluded.[12]

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Comfort, self-esteem, and morale are *emotional* benefits, meaning that the ultimate target of our deception is ourselves. The next three benefits of soldier mindset are a little different. Persuasion, image, and belonging are *social* benefits—in these cases, the ultimate target of our deception is other people, by way of ourselves.[13]

PERSUASION: CONVINCING OURSELVES SO WE CAN CONVINCE OTHERS

When Lyndon B. Johnson was a senator, he had a ritual his friends and aides called "working up." When he needed to be able to convince people of something, he would practice arguing that position, with passion, over and over, willing himself to believe it. Eventually he would be able to defend it with utter certainty—because by that point, he *was* certain, regardless of what his views

had been at the start. "It was not an act," said George Reedy, Johnson's press secretary. "He had a fantastic capacity to persuade himself that the 'truth' which was convenient for the present was the truth and anything that conflicted with it was the prevarication of enemies."[14]

Johnson's capacity for intentional self-deception was unusual. But we all do this to some extent, just less intentionally: When we need to persuade other people of something, we become motivated to believe it ourselves, and seek out arguments and evidence we could use in its defense.

When law students prepare to argue for either the plaintiff or defendant in a moot court, they come to believe that their side of the case is both morally and legally in the right—even when the sides were randomly assigned.[15] As an entrepreneur, if you can talk with sincere enthusiasm about how your company is "totally killing it right now," other people might believe it, too. Lobbyists, salespeople, and fund-raisers might play up the strengths and play down the flaws in their cause or product to make it easier for them to sell it to other people.

A professor might convince herself that her theory is more original than it really is so that she can claim as much in her public speaking and writing. Even if a few people who are closely familiar with her field realize she's overstating her case, she may still be able to get away with the exaggeration with most people. This often requires her to "accidentally" misunderstand other people's theses and fail to notice that she's attacking a straw man argument no one is actually making.

Even those of us who aren't professional persuaders have plenty of things we might like our friends, family, and coworkers to believe: *I'm a good person. I deserve your sympathy. I'm trying my hardest. I'm a valuable employee. My career is really taking off.* The more we can get ourselves to genuinely believe those claims, and the more evidence and arguments we can collect to support them, the easier it will be for us to persuade other people of them (or so the logic goes).

As Johnson used to say: "What convinces is conviction."[16]

IMAGE: CHOOSING BELIEFS THAT MAKE US LOOK GOOD

When we're picking out clothing to wear, deciding between suits or jeans, leather or hemp, high heels or high-tops, we implicitly ask ourselves: "What kind of person would wear this? Someone sophisticated, free-spirited, unconventional, down to earth? Is that how I want other people to see me?"

We choose beliefs in a similar way.* Psychologists call it impression management, and evolutionary psychologists call it signaling: When considering a claim, we implicitly ask ourselves, "What kind of person would believe a claim like this, and is that how I want other people to see me?"

Different people like to present themselves differently with their clothing, and the same is true with beliefs. One person might be drawn to nihilism because it makes him seem edgy, while another might be drawn to optimism because it makes him likeable. Still another might gravitate toward moderate positions on controversial issues in order to seem mature. Note that the goal here isn't to get other people to share your beliefs, the way it is in the case of "Persuasion." The nihilist isn't trying to get other people to believe in nihilism. He's trying to get them to believe that *he* believes in nihilism.

Just as there are fashions in clothing, so, too, are there fashions in ideas. When an idea like "socialism is better than capitalism" or "machine learning is going to change the world" begins to gain currency in your social circles, you might be motivated to adopt it as well in order to remain fashionable. That is, unless being contrarian is part of your image, in which case an idea's growing popularity might make you *less* receptive to it, not more.

Despite all the variety, some preferences about self-presentation are near universal. Almost no one prefers to go around in dirty or stained clothing. Analogously, almost no one wants to hold beliefs that make them look crazy or selfish. So for the sake of our image, we reach for defensible explanations for our behavior, such as "The reason I'm opposed to new construction in my neighborhood is because I'm worried about its impact on the environment. It's certainly not because I want to keep my own property values high!"

Here again, the inability to understand something can be helpful. I remember sitting with a group of classmates in high school, discussing how someone we knew was bitter about their friend's recent success. A girl in our group named Dana expressed puzzlement: "Why would someone be jealous of a friend?"

"Aww . . . Dana is so pure she can't even comprehend the concept of jealousy!" someone said fondly.

"You guys, I really don't get it!" Dana protested over the chorus of *awwww*s. "Why wouldn't you be happy that your friend is happy?"

BELONGING: FITTING IN TO YOUR SOCIAL GROUPS

In some religious communities, losing your faith can mean losing your marriage, family, and entire social support system along with it. That's an extreme case, but all social groups have some beliefs and values that members are implicitly expected to share, such as "Climate change is a serious problem," or "Republicans are better than Democrats," or "Our group is fighting for a worthy cause," or "Children are a blessing." Dissent may not get you literally kicked out of the group, but it can still alienate you from the other members.

To be clear, deferring to a consensus isn't inherently a sign of soldier mindset. In the web comic *XKCD*, a parent asks their child that age-old rhetorical question: "If all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you jump, too?" The correct answer is presumed to be a grudging "No, of course not." But the child replies, "Probably," because after all, which is more likely—that his friends all went crazy at the same time or that the bridge is on fire?[17] The kid's got a point. Deferring to the consensus is often a wise heuristic, since you can't investigate everything for yourself, and other people know things you don't.

What makes it motivated reasoning is when you wouldn't even want to find out if the consensus was wrong. A friend of mine named Katja grew up in what she describes as a small "hippie" town where everyone held strong environmentalist views, including her. But once she got to high school, Katja began to encounter arguments online or in her economics textbooks that some environmentalist policies are ineffective and that logging companies aren't as harmful as people think.

She would hunt for flaws in the logic. But sometimes, to her alarm, the arguments just seemed . . . correct. In those moments, her stomach would drop. "I just felt sick when I got the 'wrong answer,'" she told me, "like when there was some argument for forestry that I didn't immediately have a good counterargument to."

Fitting in isn't only about conforming to the group consensus. It also means demonstrating your loyalty to the group by rejecting any evidence that threatens its figurative honor. People who identify strongly as "gamers" (i.e., they endorse statements like "When somebody criticizes gamers, it feels like a personal insult") are more skeptical of studies that show violent video games are harmful.[18] People who identify strongly as Catholics (i.e., they endorse statements like "I feel solidarity with Catholic people") are more skeptical when a Catholic priest is accused of sexual abuse.[19]

And in some groups, fitting in comes with restrictions on what you're allowed to want or to believe about yourself. It's been called tall poppy syndrome: anyone who seems like they're trying to be a "tall poppy," showing too much self-regard or ambition, is cut down to size. If you want to fit in to such a culture, you might acquire the habit of downplaying your achievements and goals—even in the privacy of your own mind.

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WHEN YOU THINK about all of the things we use soldier mindset for, it becomes obvious why the frequently proposed fixes for it are futile. Such fixes typically involve words like "teaching" or "training," as in:

> *We need to teach students about cognitive biases.*
> *We need to train people in critical thinking.*
> *We need to educate people in reason and logic.*

None of these approaches have shown much promise in changing people's thinking in the long run or outside of the classroom. And that should not surprise us. We use motivated reasoning not because we don't know any better, but because we're trying to protect things that are vitally important to us—our ability to feel good about our lives and ourselves, our motivation to try hard things and stick with them, our ability to look good and persuade, and our acceptance in our communities.

However, the fact that soldier mindset is often our default strategy for getting what we want doesn't necessarily mean it's a *good* strategy. For one thing, it can backfire. In "Persuasion," we saw that law students who are randomly assigned to one side of a moot court case become confident, after reading the case materials, that their side is morally and legally in the right. But that confidence doesn't help them persuade the judge. On the contrary, law students who are more confident in the merits of their own side are significantly *less* likely to win the case—perhaps because they fail to consider and prepare for the rebuttals to their arguments.[20]

Even when soldier mindset doesn't completely backfire, it's still not obvious that it's our best option. Rather than boosting your self-esteem by denying your flaws, you could instead boost your self-esteem by noticing and fixing those flaws. Rather than pursuing social acceptance by suppressing your disagreements with your community, you could instead decide to leave and find a different community you fit in to better.

This chapter began with the question of Chesterton's fence: What purpose is soldier mindset meant to serve, and can we be confident that it's okay to tear it down? So far, we've addressed the first half of that question. To answer the second, we need to determine whether we can get the things we value just as effectively, or even more so, without soldier mindset. That's what the next chapter is about.