

Chapter 21

Irrationality and “Gut” Reasoning Two Kinds of Truthiness

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I love the truth—it’s facts I’m not a fan of.

Stephen Colbert of *The Colbert Report*

You might wonder what an article about *The Colbert Report* is doing in a book about *The Daily Show*. Well, Stephen was a *Daily Show* correspondent for eight years (1997–2005), and he has since collaborated extensively with Jon Stewart, despite the immense success of his own show. Just consider the Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear in 2010 and Colbert’s handing over his Super PAC to Stewart in 2012. Both are examples of continued collaboration (though in the latter case not coordination!) between *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Furthermore, given Jon Stewart’s continued criticism of the inconsistency and irrationality of the American media, the notion of truthiness has relevance for any fan of *The Daily Show*.

A Little Background

On the very first episode of *The Colbert Report*, Stephen Colbert boldly introduced the word “truthiness”¹ into the American vocabulary:

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I will speak to you in plain, simple English. And that brings us to tonight's word: "truthiness." Now I'm sure some of the "word police," the "word-inistas" over at Webster's, are gonna say, "Hey, that's not a word!" Well, anyone who knows me knows I'm no fan of dictionaries or reference books. They're elitist—constantly telling us what is or isn't true ...

I don't trust books. They're all fact, no heart. And that's exactly what's pulling our country apart today. 'Cause face it, folks: we are a divided nation. Not between Democrats and Republicans, or conservatives and liberals, or tops and bottoms. No, we are divided between those who think with their head, and those who *know* with their *heart*.

Colbert went on to give the audience a few examples:

If you *think* about Harriet Miers, of course her nomination is absurd. But the President didn't say he *thought* about her selection. He said this:

[Clip of President Bush]: "I know her heart."

Notice how he said nothing about her brain? He didn't have to. He *feels* the truth about Harriet Miers.

And what about Iraq? If you *think* about it, maybe there are a few missing pieces to the rationale for war, but doesn't taking Saddam out *feel* like the right thing ... right here [*pointing to stomach*]*—*right here in the gut? (October 17, 2005)

In more recent broadcasts, Colbert has made such claims during his interviews as, "Science *can* be a personal choice," (April 23, 2012) and "I make gut judgments about people. Then later I figure out a mental justification for that gut judgment." (May 2, 2012). There are, then, two closely related notions of "truthiness" implied in these clips: (1) the sense in which one "chooses" to believe something based on what one *prefers* to be the case, as opposed to responding to the facts of the matter, and (2) the sense in which one appeals to an intuition (or a gut feeling) to provide justification for a belief.

The American Dialect Society, which named "truthiness" its 2005 Word of the Year, officially defined it as "the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true."² Of course, "preferring" something one wishes to be true over something "known" to be true does not necessarily mean one *chooses* to believe it, as we stated in (1) above. I will return to this a bit later. Nevertheless, the ADS's definition looks a lot like many of the phenomena we philosophers classify under the category of

*motivated epistemic*³ *irrationality*. Loosely speaking, we are talking about cases of someone's believing something for "bad" reasons simply because one has a personal motivation to do so. Maybe I wishfully believe that I am a good driver (despite having been in several fender-benders) because I don't want to admit to myself and others that I really am a bad driver. Or perhaps my desire to be a competent teacher leads me to unreasonably think that my students understand the incredibly complicated argument I just presented to them. Or maybe my admiration for Barack Obama causes me to overlook certain morally relevant failures of his administration that I would have no problem criticizing the Bush Administration for.⁴ In all these cases, something I care about (for example, my self-image or my respect for another person) motivates me to believe something not supported by the objective facts of the matter. That is, truthy beliefs in this first sense seem to be beliefs that it is epistemically *unreasonable* to believe. But is it really always bad to believe "unreasonably" in this way? After all, the word "reason" is "just one letter away from 'treason'!" (September 16, 2010). What's so bad about believing from the gut? This leads us to the second definition of "truthiness" discussed above.

When Merriam-Webster voted "truthiness" its 2006 Word of the Year, it defined the term as "truth that comes from the gut, not books."⁵ In this sense, then, truthiness amounts to *intuiting* the truth via some "gut" feeling: "Because that's where the truth comes from, ladies and gentlemen ... the gut."⁶ We may find this notion laughable (or at least laugh-worthy), but we *do* frequently appeal to feelings or intuitions, often in ways we take to be perfectly legitimate. "Something doesn't feel right," we say, or "this action just seems like the wrong thing to do." Indeed, our frequent references to phenomena like "common sense," "women's intuition," "rubbing someone the wrong way," and so on seem to indicate that we do sometimes appeal to this kind of truthiness to justify certain truth claims or actions. So perhaps "truthy" appeals to the gut aren't as irrational as we might have first thought.

In what follows, I want to look a little bit more closely at these two notions of truthiness. Focusing on the first sense, I will draw some parallels between truthiness and paradigm cases of motivated epistemic irrationality like wishful thinking and self-deception. I will then turn to the second sense to see if relying on our guts in the way Colbert suggests might sometimes be rational.

Truthiness and Problems of Irrationality

There are three basic types of cases that philosophers traditionally classify under the term “irrationality.”⁷ The first two cases, wishful thinking and self-deception, have to do with a person believing in an irrational manner and thus fall under the umbrella of *epistemic irrationality*. The third case, weakness of will, is a matter of so-called *practical irrationality* and involves a person undertaking a certain action, despite taking herself to have a *better* reason (all things considered) not to do so. While I think that truthiness might be able to fit the mold of each of these three kinds of irrationality, it applies most directly to cases of wishful thinking and self-deception—and it’s these two types of irrationality that I wish to discuss extensively in the next section. As we will see, there are some troubling philosophical problems that arise regarding irrational behavior (especially self-deception). But perhaps we can use the context of truthiness to help us resolve these “paradoxes of irrationality” without denying the fundamental irrationality of truthiness itself.

Wishful Thinking and Self-Deception: What Are They?

Wishful thinking and self-deception are two very closely related but nonetheless distinct kinds of irrational belief-forming processes. Wishful thinking occurs when someone has a strong desire that something (call it “X”) be true and comes to believe X primarily *because* of that strong desire, but not for any “good” reason that takes the facts of the situation into account. Thus, wishful thinking does not require that the person *knows* the relevant facts of the situation, but merely that she comes to believe X primarily *because she really wants to*. Self-deception, on the other hand, seems to occur when someone comes to hold a belief *in the face of strong evidence to the contrary*.⁸ In this latter case the person is in some sense *aware of* what she herself takes to be the relevant facts (which presumably fly in the face of X), but refuses to acknowledge them because she so strongly desires to believe X. Self-deception, then, appears to be much closer to “choosing to believe” something than wishful thinking. In both cases, however, the subject has a strong desire that X be true—and it is this desire

that motivates affirmation of something not borne out by the fact. The difference lies in the level of awareness the subject has of the counter-evidence and how seriously she takes this awareness.

Let's look at an example to help illustrate this difference. Suppose senior *Daily Show* correspondent Samantha Bee very badly wants her husband and fellow *Daily Show* correspondent, Jason Jones, to be faithful to her. We can imagine that this desire itself might be strong enough to cause her to believe in his fidelity without ever really looking at whether the facts support this.⁹ In this case, Sam would just be a wishful thinker. However, suppose the relevant facts available to her *do* indicate that he is cheating. Maybe he continually comes home late at night with lipstick on his collar, smelling of cheap perfume, and making lame excuses. Perhaps Sam's good friend, Wyatt, even tells her that he has witnessed Jason cavorting around with a younger woman on the set of *The Daily Show*. If she then continues to believe in his fidelity, *despite* being aware of this counter-evidence, then we might think that Sam has gone beyond mere wishful thinking and entered the realm of self-deception.

It is not difficult to see how appeals to truthiness might sometimes underlie both of these types of irrationality. Remember Colbert's assertion that the President doesn't need to make reference to Harriet Miers' brain or qualifications because he just "*feels* the truth" about her? The wife engaged in wishful thinking may say similar things without even bothering to see if the facts line up with her belief: "I don't need to look at the facts," she might say. "I love my husband, and I just *know* he would never cheat on me," or, "I can *feel in my heart* that he is faithful." And if she stubbornly continues to affirm this belief (both to herself and to others) in the face of strong evidence to the contrary—relying on her supposed "gut feeling" that he is faithful—this "truthy" behavior would likely count as something stronger than mere wishful thinking—something like self-deception.

The Paradoxes of Irrationality

Cases like the one above are all too common in our everyday lives. However, it is surprising how difficult it is to provide a philosophical account of *how* we are actually able to believe in such ways, at least as far as self-deception is concerned. Wishful thinking doesn't seem all

that mysterious. Given the way we human beings are cognitively built, it turns out that we often simply find ourselves believing things we want to be true and doubting things we don't want to be true.¹⁰ We tend to think that we are more intelligent, more attractive, better drivers, better *people* than we actually are. Similarly, we are more willing to give people we love (including ourselves) the “benefit of the doubt”—precisely because we care about them. And this is not necessarily a bad thing, even if it turns out to be epistemically irrational.

People who believe things wishfully are irrational in some sense, since they're not being sensitive to the evidence. But they still somehow seem “more rational” than their self-deceiving counterparts. Most wishful thinkers don't usually realize they are believing wishfully *while* they're in the grip of wishful thinking. Indeed, insofar as they are still rational, we would expect them to be willing to revise their wishful beliefs if they find out (or even suspect) that they are believing wishfully—or at least to check to see whether the facts back up their beliefs. If, on the other hand, they persist in holding onto their false beliefs—if they continue to believe *in the face of* counter-evidence that they recognize *as* counter-evidence—then they seem to be self-deceived, which implies being irrational in a stronger sense, and this is a little trickier to explain.

The difficulty in making sense of self-deception can be made clear by comparing it with its counterpart in the interpersonal realm, namely the deception of other people. Other-deception is relatively straightforward. Suppose Steve Carell wants to deceive Jon Stewart that he's coming back to *The Daily Show*. That is, Steve holds a certain belief “X” (that he intends to return to *The Daily Show*) to be false (he has no such intention). In other words, he believes “not-X” (that he is *not* returning¹¹). Steve then tries to persuade Jon that X is true. If Jon, through Steve's efforts, *does* come to believe X, then Steve has successfully deceived Jon about X.

However, in the case of self-deception, one and the same individual is supposed to play the role of both *deceiver* and *deceived*. The individual engaged in self-deception tries, through her *own* efforts, to become deceived about some fact she does not want to admit. But, unlike the interpersonal case, it is unclear how she could ever succeed. If Jon knows what Steve is up to, he is unlikely to be duped (unless, of course, he is incredibly stupid). But if the self-deceiver is aware of her own intent to deceive herself, then it seems like she could never achieve

her goal! That is, awareness of her intention threatens to undermine the success of her self-deception altogether.¹² Furthermore, it seems that if an agent *could* succeed in deceiving herself, then she must somehow knowingly hold both the belief that not-X (in her role as the deceiver) and the belief that X (in her role as the one deceived) *at the same time*.¹³ Hence, we seem to embroil ourselves in two paradoxes when we attempt to explain how self-deception works—and cases of self-deceptive truthiness will be no different.

So how is self-deception even possible? How can truthiness in this stronger sense even get off the ground? The above paradoxes are quite troubling, and for this reason some philosophers try to explain self-deception away entirely, and say that it's not at all like interpersonal deception. They say self-deception is really just a person's being either in error (for example, about the facts or about the way she formed her belief) or controlled by some external psychological force.¹⁴ But we don't usually think that self-deceivers are merely making a motivated *mistake*. Self-deceivers not only ought to know better; we think they actually *do* know better in some sense.¹⁵ Likewise, we think that there is some relevant difference between the self-deceiver and the person who believes things pathologically (as with, say, obsessive-compulsive or delusional beliefs). Compulsive believers might actually know better, but they can't help believing as they do. So if we think self-deceivers might be responsible for their deceptions, then they must at least be *capable* of revising their beliefs. Thus, we must try to face the paradoxes head-on and see if we can construct a view of self-deception that will allow us not only to understand how self-deceptive truthiness is possible but also to keep a strong notion of the irrationality of self-deception intact. But what might such an account of self-deception look like?

One Solution: Divide the Mind

One way that philosophers have attempted to resolve the paradoxes mentioned above is simply to divide the mind into independent structures that can deceive each other like one person deceives another. Perhaps, like famed psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), we can simply postulate that there is some sort of subconscious mind that acts to deceive my conscious mind.¹⁶ (Imagine Steve Carell and

Jon Stewart in our above example occupying the space of just one person! Or just think of Stephen Colbert versus Stephen Colbert in *The Colbert Report*'s regular "Formidable Opponent" segment.) Of course, on the Freudian picture, we have two independent sub-agents (think: "mini-persons"), who "team up," so to speak, to deceive the ego. Let's go back to our example of Sam and Jason. Suppose Sam wants it to be the case that Jason is a faithful husband. She very likely believes that he *ought* not be cheating on her. Perhaps she also believes it would be inappropriate to accuse her husband of infidelity. Now imagine that "deep down" in her subconscious Sam believes that Jason is likely cheating on her. However, her subconscious tricks her conscious mind into thinking he is actually faithful! And since she is unconscious of her belief that Jason is unfaithful (and perhaps also of her strong desire to believe in his fidelity), she is easily duped by her subconscious into believing that Jason is faithful. In this way, we don't have to worry about the static paradox, since although Sam-as-a-whole believes both X and not-X at the same time, one belief is on the level of the conscious mind, the other on that of the unconscious. Likewise, since the subconscious and conscious parts of the mind act independently, we don't have to worry about the dynamic paradox either. So far, so good.

But there are some significant problems with this view.¹⁷ This first is that we suddenly have a problem locating the *person herself* (here, Samantha Bee). It looks as if each mental substructure has person-like qualities. Each part can weigh possibilities, have beliefs and desires, interact with and independently act *on* other parts of the mind, and so on. If this is the case, and the interaction between the parts of the mind works like interpersonal interaction, it appears that we have multiple agents instead of just one!¹⁸ Who is the adjudicator on this view? Where is *Sam the person*? If we want to be able to hold *Sam* responsible for her self-deception, who should we blame? Is it her conscious mind's fault that it got hoodwinked? (Think about the example of interpersonal deception: We wouldn't normally hold Jon responsible for believing Steve's lie, would we?) But if we instead blame Sam's unconscious, are we really blaming *Sam*? What would it mean to blame just her unconscious? Could we even find it?

This leads to a further concern. On the kind of view sketched above, we have a really hard time explaining *why* Sam's belief that Jason is likely cheating on her is unconscious in the first place. If she never

consciously acknowledged that the evidence strongly supports the belief that he's cheating, then it seems rather mysterious as to how this belief just "ended up" in her subconscious. Instead, one is more likely to claim that Sam *does* at some point consciously acknowledge that the evidence supports the belief that Jason is unfaithful, and then she *represses* this information. She pushes it deep down into her subconscious where it becomes free to do its deceptive work. But now it looks like her *conscious mind* is doing all the heavy self-deceptive lifting, not her subconscious. To keep out the undesirable belief, the conscious mind has to somehow actively "push it down" into the subconscious. And here the dynamic paradox reemerges. How can Sam successfully repress undesirable information if she knows what she's up to? Maybe the subconscious mind has certain defense mechanisms that "kick in" when threatening information comes into consciousness and automatically relegate that information to the unconscious. Yet then we have the worry that Sam's self-deception is something largely out of her control—the result of a compulsive defense mechanism, as it were. But it was precisely this view that we wanted to avoid. Thus, in the end, divided mind views seem to create more problems than they solve. So how can we understand self-deception without literally dividing the mind?

An Alternative Account

There is another way we can account for self-deception that might be less problematic. First, instead of viewing self-deception as a *state*, achieved when one somehow causes oneself to hold contradictory beliefs, I think we would do better to approach it as a *process*, a sort of "project," in which an agent actively engages. And I think we can explain this process without having to refer to unconscious sub-agents within the person. Now generally when a rational person holds a belief, and she recognizes that the evidence to the contrary greatly outweighs the evidence in support of her belief, she will revise her belief accordingly. However, in cases of self-deception, this does not occur because the agent has a strong motivation to retain her (unwarranted) belief. Instead, she *commits herself* to maintaining her belief in the face of the evidence, likely employing several strategies to do so. Of course, she doesn't have to ever commit herself *explicitly*.

My point is merely that the way she behaves indicates her having such a practical commitment.

Let's return once again to our example of Sam and Jason to see how this might work. On my account of self-deception, Sam is *aware* that the facts support the belief that Jason is cheating on her, and she is likewise *aware* of her desire to believe he is faithful. But she diverts her attention from these two facts and focuses instead on the belief she wishes to cultivate, namely that Jason is faithful. There are several techniques she can employ in the service of this project. Perhaps she selectively pays more attention to positive instead of negative evidence. Or she avoids situations where she might encounter negative evidence. When Wyatt points out that Sam's belief is unwarranted, Sam might rationalize in order to keep her belief intact (e.g., "Wyatt's just jealous of our great relationship!"). In these ways, she can push all the negative evidence to the "margins" of her awareness by ignoring criticism, or even stubbornly repeating to herself "He loves me" over and over again until she fails to be swayed by reasons to believe the contrary.

Note that none of this requires that her self-deceptive activity be on some sub-personal, unconscious level. Rather, we should merely see Sam's activity as a kind of active *attention-directing*, which is something we do all the time, without thereby becoming completely unaware of the former object of our attention. Surely Jon Stewart can turn to Camera 3 and yet still be aware of Camera 1 (in his peripheral vision, say). He is not *paying attention* to Camera 1, yet he is still *aware* of it—and if he wants to, he can turn back to it. Similarly, one of the main ways the self-deceivers try to maintain their favored beliefs is by basically turning their attention away from the negative evidence and focusing instead on positive evidence—but this doesn't mean the negative evidence is simply gone. It's still available for reflection, if the agent decides to turn her attention to it. This is why self-deceivers tend to exhibit a lot of cognitive tension—because they are in some respect aware of the counter-evidence that's out there, and it's *hard* to willfully direct one's attention in cases where the counter-evidence is strong.

But if this is right, what about the dynamic paradox? If the self-deceiver is this complicit in her deceptive project, how could she ever convince herself, assuming she has an idea of what she's up to? Here,

it's important to note that human beings are creatures of habit, and even though it might be hard for Sam to ignore negative evidence at first, the more she engages in self-deceptive strategies, the better she is likely to get at maintaining her belief. Thus, although the self-deceiver might experience lots of cognitive tension at the outset of her self-deceptive project, the more she habituates herself to directing her attention, the easier maintaining her belief will become and the less cognitive dissonance she will experience. And I want to claim that this *entire process* of waffling back and forth between the belief one wants to maintain and the force of reality is what we should refer to when we talk about "self-deception." Of course, if Sam finally habituates herself so well and convinces herself completely that Jason is faithful, where *nothing* counts to her as evidence against this belief, then I would say she is no longer self-deceived but rather more like an ignorant or even *delusional* person. If this happens, she no longer "knows better"—that is, she now believes for what she takes to be *good* reasons—but the process by which she arrived at this point is both irrational and criticizable.

On this account of self-deception, then, the entire process is dynamic, with the agent fluctuating back and forth between stubbornly affirming the desired belief and having to deal with evidence to the contrary. The dynamic paradox becomes a moot point, since we don't have to say that Sam *must* succeed in truly convincing herself. All that matters is that she *tries* to undermine her rational standards by means of the strategies described above. And there is no static paradox because she never has to simultaneously hold inconsistent beliefs.

Truthiness and Self-Deception

I think it is fairly obvious that the first definition we gave above of "truthiness" (in which one chooses to believe something based on what one prefers to believe, as opposed to the supposed facts) can fit this model of self-deception to a tee. We sometimes prefer concepts we wish to be true, instead of what the facts tell us, even when we're aware that these facts don't support our belief. But Colbert's introduction to truthiness does even more than this. In a way, it ups the

ante on self-deception, since Colbert attempts to use truthiness to establish the truth of truthiness!

Let's see how this works: Someone may wish a certain fact were true (say, that the Panama Canal was built in 1941), but all the books tell us that this is false (since the Panama Canal was, "in fact," built in 1914). Colbert, of course, maintains that it's his "right" to believe the former claim. However, as we have seen, to do so would be to embark on a process of self-deception, resulting in the claim that believing what one wants trumps believing what one is rationally required to believe. Yet Colbert obviously still acknowledges the importance of reasoning—he is, after all, making an argument and appealing to reasons—so we can see that he hasn't abandoned his commitment to rationality altogether. But he is struggling to *use reason* to make a case for *undermining reason*. This is almost "meta-self-deception," in the sense that what Colbert wants to believe is that we can "know" the truth with our hearts or "feel" it with our guts, and that the standards of what normally counts as evidence for rational belief (namely, the *facts*) are not the correct standards of rationality. And how does he know? He checked his gut!

In a recent segment of "Who's Honoring Me Now?" Colbert makes this idea very explicit. He cites a scientific study looking for evidence of truthiness in action. After discussing the results of the study, he notes: "Now my only problem ... with this scientific study is that it was a scientific study. You see, truthiness and empirical evidence don't mix." Here, we again have reference to the above sense of truthiness, involving a distrust or disavowal of the facts of the matter. But Colbert goes on: "Folks, you can't *prove* truthiness with *information*. You prove truthiness with *more truthiness*—a process called 'truthinessiness'."¹⁹ This harks back to 2006 when the AP challenged Colbert's claim to have coined the word himself. Colbert shot back: "The fact that they looked it up in [*The Oxford English Dictionary*] just shows that they don't get the idea of truthiness at all ... You don't look up truthiness in a book, you look it up in your gut."²⁰

What's especially funny about this move isn't just that it's circular (trying to use truthiness to validate itself). It's also that the claim, "the gut is a more accurate standard for truth than facts," is itself an empirical matter, one which can be settled by looking at the facts! So Colbert is implicitly appealing to the facts, in order to establish that facts are unreliable. It's the irrationality of this (first circular, then

self-defeating) argument that makes us laugh. But it also raises some very interesting and important questions about the connection between rationality and irrationality.²¹

Feeling the Truth: Can Our Guts Get Us Justified Belief?

Leaving Colbert's circular/self-defeating move aside, the question still remains: Can we legitimately appeal to our guts for justification? Indeed, we often refer to getting a "bad feeling" about a certain person or place; and sometimes when asked why we dislike someone, we respond that he or she just "rubs me the wrong way." Likewise, phenomena like "hunches" and "women's intuition" are supposed to account for how some people appear to instinctively know certain truths. Does this mean that reference to our guts can provide us with good justification for truth claims?

Without going into this question in too much detail, I just wish to briefly discuss this second sense of "truthiness." While it seems that we often legitimately appeal to gut feelings to justify certain claims or beliefs, I think that what we are implicitly doing is referring to other, more objectively relevant facts about the situation, about which we merely fail to be explicit.²² Take the example of a young voter who refuses to vote for a certain politician, merely because of her gut feeling. "I just don't have a good feeling about that guy," she might say. "He just rubs me the wrong way," or even, "He creeps me out." Now in some cases—as when a woman refuses a stranger's come-on for precisely the same reasons—we might just accept this type of justification and move on. However, if we pressed her for more information ("What rubbed you the wrong way about him?"), she might say something about his shifty glances, his fake smile, or his poor choice of words. But now we have an appeal to *facts* about the situation itself, not just about someone's gut feeling! Indeed, "truthy" claims like "taking Saddam out *feels* like the right thing to do" might actually serve as implicit references not just to the desire to depose Saddam Hussein, but also to facts about his character or past actions that make us feel good about removing him from power.

However, we should be careful to avoid saying that such feelings, by themselves, are what *make* a belief justified. They are merely one

way of being *responsive* to the relevant facts. But they are not always the best way. Indigestion ought not to serve as rational justification for why I didn't vote for a certain politician, but perhaps a bad feeling grounded in certain "shady" behavioral cues given off by the politician in question, can.²³ However, in the latter circumstance it is not the feeling itself that justifies my action; rather, it is the fact that such behavioral cues have, in the past, been exhibited by persons of less than reputable moral character. And this is an important distinction to make, since in cases such as these, my feelings don't make a certain claim true or false, whereas facts about the world *do* appear to accomplish this task. Thus, when forming important beliefs like whom to vote for, we ought to subject our gut feelings to rigorous questioning, in order to see whether we can actually come up with good epistemic reasons to ground these feelings. Indeed, although gut feelings might sometimes be a way of responding to the facts, they are often unreliable and may often conflict with the facts. This is what motivates Colbert to lead "a crusade against facts"—since, according to him, they too often "upset the truth that's in your gut."²⁴ But in this sense truthiness remains epistemically suspect, unless it's clear that one can appeal to legitimate reasons which appeal to the facts of the situation to ground one's gut feelings.

A Tip of the Hat

In conclusion, I would like to commend Stephen Colbert for coining a word that captures both the essence of motivated epistemic irrationality and the difficulty we have in trying to overcome it by rational means. Although some instances of irrational beliefs may be harmless, Colbert shows us the amusing—and potentially dangerous—consequences of forming opinions and making decisions by going "straight from the gut." In fact, I propose that from now on we call claims that appeal solely to the gut instances of "the fallacy of *argumentum Colberti ad ventrem*."²⁵ The inclusion of this fallacy among other, better-known informal fallacies (like the *argumentum ad hominem* or, my personal favorite, the *argumentum ad baculum*) would be a welcome addition to logic textbooks everywhere, which often ignore the kind of fallacious reasoning involved in appealing to one's gut when attempting to make cogent arguments. To further ignore a phenomenon that both reflects what human beings

often do and exposes certain irrational tendencies in human reasoning would be to do a disservice to philosophy.

And that's the truthiness.

Notes

1. For a discussion by the TCR writers of Colbert's coining of the term "truthiness," see www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvnHf3MQtAk, accessed February 11, 2013.
2. "Truthiness Voted 2005 Word of the Year," The American Dialect Society (January 6, 2006), www.americandialect.org/truthiness_voted_2005_word_of_the_year, accessed February 11, 2013.
3. By "epistemic" I mean having to do with beliefs, knowledge, cognition, or other relevant terms in the philosophical branch of *epistemology*, in which philosophers ask questions related to what knowledge is and how we come to know things. Here, the irrationality in question is epistemic because the person is irrational in *believing* (or believing to know) something. This might be contrasted with *practical* irrationality, in which a person's *behavior* itself is irrational (and not just because of something she believes irrationally). I discuss this distinction briefly at the beginning of the next section.
4. The application of a double standard is very common in cases of motivated epistemic irrationality. We will see more examples below.
5. "Previous Words of the Year," Merriam-Webster Online, www.merriam-webster.com/info/07/words_prev.htm, accessed February 11, 2013.
6. Episode 1 (October 17, 2005).
7. There are other important kinds of irrational reasoning and behavior, but the three kinds of cases mentioned above tend to be the ones most focused on by philosophers. I think the reason for this is that these phenomena occur very frequently in human beings, and yet it is very difficult to explain philosophically (or psychologically) how they are even possible in the first place!
8. German philosophers Christoph Michel and Albert Newen make the notion that self-deceivers believe "in the face of strong evidence to the contrary" a criterion of any satisfactory definition of self-deception. See "Self-Deception as Pseudo-Rational Regulation of Belief," *Consciousness and Cognition* 19 (3) (2010), 734. However, this distinction between wishful thinking and self-deception goes at least as far back as Béla Szabados, "Wishful Thinking and Self-Deception," *Analysis* 33 (6) (1973), 201–205.

9. In *I Know I Am, But What Are You?* (New York: Gallery Books, 2010), Samantha Bee writes: “When I rack my brain, I can’t think of a *single* adult, other than myself, in my immediate or extended family who has not been painfully divorced at least once, usually twice—even the gay ones. This inspires tremendous confidence in my husband” (3). If she were speaking seriously here, we could imagine that this “confidence” in her husband might be primarily motivated by a desire for a successful marriage, not by an objective assessment of whether or not such confidence is warranted.
10. See, for example, the groundbreaking chapter on cognitive and motivational biases by Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross in chapter 10 of *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980). For a fascinating contemporary discussion of the various ways that human beings process information, see also: Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).
11. Or: “it is not the case that he is returning.”
12. Philosopher Alfred Mele calls this the “dynamic paradox” of self-deception. See, for example: Alfred Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 8.
13. Mele calls this the “static paradox” (*Self-Deception Unmasked*, 7).
14. I think deflationary accounts like Mele’s (see notes 12 and 13 above), which reduce self-deception to a kind of motivated bias, belong in the former category. That is, I think they end up reducing self-deception to a kind of “motivated mistake,” on which the self-deceiver ought (in some sense of the word “ought”) to know better, but does not in fact know better. And as I say above, I think that self-deception involves something more than just a mistake. The reader should note, however, that there is an entire tradition of philosophers that would deny the distinction between wishful thinking and self-deception I have made above and who would count wishful thinking (which does seem to be a kind of motivated mistake) as just another kind of self-deception. For more on this and other debates in the self-deception literature, see Mele’s article “Real Self-Deception,” and the ensuing peer commentary and responses in *Brain and Behavioral Sciences* 20 (1) (1997), 91–134.
15. See Dion Scott-Kakures, “Self-Deception and Internal Irrationality,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56 (1) (1996), 31–56.
16. Philosopher Donald Davidson (1917–2003) was also a stark proponent of the divided-mind view, although he resisted using straightforwardly Freudian terms to talk about partitions in the mind. See Donald Davidson, “Paradoxes of Irrationality,” in *Philosophical Essays on*

- Freud*, ed. R. Wohlheim and J. Hopkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 289–305.
17. The version of the divided-mind theory that I have presented here is admittedly a much more simplified version of the theories put forward by Freud, Davidson, and other partitioned-mind theorists. A full and fair consideration of these views requires much more space and nuance than I can provide here. Nevertheless, I still think they fail for reasons similar to those I mention here.
 18. While multiple personality disorder and mental compartmentalization might be real psychological phenomena, they are surely not as common as self-deception.
 19. Episode 941 (August 9, 2012).
 20. Quoted in Jake Coyle, "Colbert: AP the Biggest Threat to America," Associated Press (October 5, 2006).
 21. My own view is that self-deception is a kind of "pseudo-rational" process, in which people try to *generate* reasons to believe what they want to believe in the face of evidence to the contrary. Thus, self-deceivers don't cease to believe for reasons, but the reasons they generate are not the right kinds of reasons to justify their beliefs. For more on pseudo-rationality, see Michel and Newen, "Self-Deception as Pseudo-Rational Regulation of Belief" (2010).
 22. It is also possible that we might be incapable of being explicit about these facts. However, in my experience, this is not usually the case. Most people, when pushed on why they have a certain gut feeling, can (and will) explicitly elaborate on particular, relevant features of the situation that give rise to that feeling. For a similar point regarding truthiness and gut feelings, see Matthew F. Pierlott's "Truth, Truthiness, and Bullshit for the American Voter," in *Stephen Colbert and Philosophy: I Am Philosophy (And So Can You!)*, ed. Aaron Allen Schiller (Chicago, IL: Open Court Press, 2009), 80–81.
 23. In fact, it has been suggested that certain snap-fire decisions (or "rapid cognition") are often more accurate than deliberative, explicitly reasoned-out decisions. This does not undermine the claim that when one makes such snap-fire decisions, one is completely unaware of the relevant facts at hand. It merely implies that sometimes over-reflection on the facts can get in our way. But all this shows in relation to truthiness is that sometimes reflecting too heavily on our gut feelings might get in the way of our pursuit of truth, not that relying on our guts is always justified. For more on this, see Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2005).
 24. Episode 194 (January 8, 2007).
 25. Or, "the Colbertian appeal to the stomach."