

## Introduction

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HR seems to not only have recycled a lot of the abandoned ‘theories’ of the once very unscientific field of psychology, but to also have embraced sheer nonsense. How else could you explain that fabrications dating back sometimes more than 100 years are still very popular in HR, like fads that just won’t die.<sup>12</sup> Some proponents of models like the DiSC profile proudly refer to alleged authority figures like William Moulton Marston, who proclaimed theories<sup>13</sup> of emotion in 1928 that have long since been abandoned, while others refer to obscure figures like George Ivanovitsj Gurdjieff (1870?-1949), a self-declared Armenian spiritual teacher who believed that human souls would maintain, help, or nourish the moon (like a kind of fertilizer), because the moon is one of the newest buds in the galaxy and needs all the energy it can get in order to become like the earth (I am not on drugs—it is what Gurdjieff actually believed and wrote about<sup>14</sup>). The enneagram is (partly) based on these fabrications.

I argue that it is high time for HR to professionalize. HR has the moral duty to turn into a professional, evidence-based and, why not, even science-based practice. HR has largely fouled its own nest by embracing so much nonsense—it is of course the main reason why top management and the vast majority of employees don’t take many HR people seriously.

I have already warned the reader that this book sometimes uses a bantering tone—a style I like but that also prevents me from becoming outright mad at so much nonsense and public deception. I predict that some people will feel offended and angry as they learn that some theories or models are actually myths or are useless. If this is the case, you will probably try to rationalize your choice. Psychologists call this **motivated reasoning**—the tendency to direct an argument toward a favored conclusion, rather than where it would lead to. Evolution did not ‘prewire’ us to seek out the truth, but to engage in a competition for reputation, social status, to be an accepted in-group member, etc., thus resulting in our ability to argue, persuade, and manipulate. We are not after the truth, but after arguments to win other people over to our views.<sup>15</sup> So, we are all prewired to develop **confirmation bias**—a tendency to only select information that confirms our a priori beliefs and wishes and to deselect the information we dislike. The Skeptic’s Dictionary defines rationalization (or motivated reasoning) as confirmation bias taken to the next level, because in this case people (even smart people) develop elaborate explanations or rationalizations to justify beliefs that have been proven wrong or illogical. Motivated reasoning is a bad case of self-

<sup>12</sup> This is an allegory to an article by Harvard psychology professor Tony Grant: “Goodbye to MBTI: the fad that won’t die.” Published on September 18, 2013 on [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com).

<sup>13</sup> Regrettably, theory is often ill defined. Some (lay) people say: “it’s only a theory,” by which they mean that it is a kind of hypothesis, hunch or idea. In science however, a theory is considered a proven hypothesis, a way to interpret facts. Unlike the definition often used by lay people, a scientific theory starts as a hypothesis, but it becomes a theory if there is enough trustworthy evidence to support it. A scientific theory is a synonym for a valid explanation of a phenomenon.

<sup>14</sup> See [archive.org](http://archive.org) for a free download of his book: *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson. An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man*. This excerpt is literally taken from this book on page 58: “Higher being-bodies or, as they are called on some planets of that solar system, ‘souls,’ are coated in three-brained beings inhabiting all the planets except those before reaching which the emanations of our Most Holy Sun Absolute, through repeated deflections, have gradually lost the fullness of their strength and no longer contain the vivifying power needed for coating higher being-bodies.”

<sup>15</sup> See Mercier and Sperber, 2011.

deception. Therefore, it is not difficult for me to ultimately predict what some people will think or say:

“Yes, but I have used this model and it worked” or,  
“Yes, but I have used this and I liked it” or,  
“I recognized myself, so it is a good test.”

I will deal with the reasons why all of these rationalizations are flat out wrong later in the book. For the moment let me limit my comments. These are ‘standard reactions’ of people who are unaware of the pitfalls of their own thinking and still think they can trust their subjective experiences more than the scientific method. It is a well-established fact that (lay) people overestimate the trustworthiness of their own experiences. Seeing something through one’s own eyes can be a powerful experience and can wipe away evidence from scientific research that contradicts one’s own experience. After all, our eyes ‘told’ us the earth was flat and that the sun orbited around the earth, so it *must* be true, right? Oops.

There is a well-known defense mechanism called ‘**reduction of cognitive dissonance**.’ Indeed, our brain is prone to believing errors and biases. One of the most well-known and most studied biases is the confirmation bias—the tendency to select only that information which confirms our prior convictions or beliefs, and neglect information that contradicts that cherished view. Whenever faced with contradictory information, people can either ignore it, or try to get rid of the discomfort caused by the cognitive dissonance. They often do this by trying to rationalize their choice. I will deal with the most commonly heard defense mechanisms later in this book. Meanwhile, remember I warned you that you might experience some unpleasant emotions.<sup>16</sup> But instead of abandoning the book and giving in to your anger or dismay, try to realize that the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance might be at work. You are probably an adult reader with the capacity to ignore your emotions and continue for the sake of curiosity, and because you have a moral drive to be honest towards other people, and you are a caring individual that is concerned for the well-being of your fellow employees.

But there is another complementary explanation for this irrational behavior. Evolutionary biologists and evolutionary psychologists have no doubt that we are group living animals, and rather tribal ones at that. People want to belong to several groups or tribes.<sup>17</sup> For our ancestors, this simply meant protection from predators and hostile tribes, or other tribes that could introduce dangerous diseases. Indeed, our species has an innate fear of being infected by strangers—a fear that has proven to be valid as lots of peoples have been decimated by encountering strangers (just think of the decimation of native peoples like the aboriginals in Australia or the indigenous peoples of the Americas). This innate fear of infectious disease has created an evolutionary selection pressure towards a fear of strangers. Those ancestors who felt more fear of strangers were more likely to survive, as well as those whose immune systems were strong enough to overcome the disease.

We have an innate preference for members of our own group. Three-month old infants have an innate preference for faces of their own skin color for example (e.g. Kelly et al., 2005).

But like so many evolved features, some of these traits’ functions have become wider or

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<sup>16</sup> Sorry for using spaced repetition to remind you. It is an evidence-based method applied in education.

<sup>17</sup> John Tooby and Leda Cosmides call this *Coalition(al) Psychology*. I will discuss this at length in Part V, Chapter 1, on evolutionary psychology.

have shifted (exaptations<sup>18</sup>). For example, we not only feel repulsion or disgust towards bitter (potentially poisonous) or rotten foods, but also towards people who (in our eyes) commit immoral acts. But the problem of ‘us versus them’ thinking (also called ‘otherization’) is much bigger than that. We tend to feel that our group (the ‘in-group’) is superior to the other ‘out-group.’ The out-group may become the subject of innocent ridicule, hostility, discrimination, stigmatization, and social exclusion. Furthermore, people in groups display a motivation for aggression more quickly than individuals do (Nelissen, 2000). But the in-group versus out-group antagonism is not limited to observable features like skin color or cultural or tribal attire (such as clothing habits, symbols, etc.), but is also kind of ‘virtual.’ People with other ideas, political preferences (left-right wing, conservative-progressive), religious beliefs, sexual orientation, etc. are all placed in the ‘out-group.’

Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) identified four mechanisms for this phenomenon: categorization, identification, comparison, and psychological distinction. Categorization means that we not only place things and animals into categories, but ourselves and others as well. We often use labels for this purpose, such as Christian, Muslim, Jew, or Buddhist. The identification system ensures that we associate ourselves with groups, which are thus in-groups to us. Identification is an important mechanism that has a strong influence over our self-image, our social self (how we define ourselves in relation to others, e.g., ‘I am attentive to others’), and therefore also influences our self-esteem. **Studies of social identity theory**,<sup>19</sup> a psychology research domain that draws heavily on this evolutionary phenomenon, having shown that when people identified with a certain group (the in-group), they almost automatically had negative feelings about members of a different (competing) group: the out-group.

So, if people belong to, let’s say, the tribe of the ‘Jung-believers’ (like adepts of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator [MBTI], Insights Discovery, etc.), they will feel hostile to people like me who don’t belong to their belief system. They will label ‘my group,’ for example ‘positive scientists,’ ‘scientific extremists,’ ‘skeptics,’ ‘biological determinists,’ etc. This kind of negative framing reflects their hostile tribal feelings towards people who don’t share their views, or worse, who question their views. And of course, it is a challenge for ‘science lovers’ as well to not step into the same biological pitfall of shaming the out-group and making them their common enemy. I admit that I too feel the tendency to label ‘them’ with various unflattering names such as ‘weirdos,’ ‘Platonic Idealists,’ ‘softies,’ ‘dummies,’ ‘charlatans,’ ‘new-agers,’ ‘pseudoscientists’ or, more recently ‘fake HR.’ I must admit that I will gladly give in to these feelings again in *‘The curious case of’* sections of this book.

In philosophy papers, I found an interesting description of two notoriously opposite groups or ‘schools’ that pretty much summarizes the differences between an evidence-based approach and those people who oppose it. One school is the so-called Platonic Idealists (or Utopians) and their opponents are the Aristotelian Realists. Both ‘schools of thought’ go back to two famous Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. **In short, some of**

<sup>18</sup> Paleontologists Stephen J. Gould and Elisabeth Vrba are credited for introducing the neologism ‘exaptation’ in 1982. It was intended to describe a shift in the function of a trait during evolution, something that Darwin had dubbed ‘functional cooptation.’ This notion is strongly contested by many biologists like Richard Dawkins, philosophers like Daniel Dennett, and psychologists like Steven Pinker. Take for example the evolution of feathers, which started as heat-regulation (insulation), but later evolved for use in flight by many birds (but not all). Evolution is a ‘tinkerer’ rather than an ‘engineer,’ so it can be argued that all incremental adaptations are in some sense exaptations. Many authors now prefer ‘pre-adaptation’ instead of exaptation, but some describe it as *gradually evolved functions*. (Pievani & Serrelli, 2011). In humans, our ability to drive cars is probably the most uncontested example of an exaptation.

<sup>19</sup> I prefer the term ‘coalitional psychology,’ as used by most evolutionary psychologists.

**Plato's followers believe in an ideal world and an ideal society with ideal (human) beings.** In their view, reality is an illusion. Plato (428/427–348/347 BCE) relied more on (abstract) ideas and thoughts (eidos). He believed that the human brain contains unchangeable models<sup>20</sup> representing natural phenomena. Many people consider Plato's *The Republic* to be the first Utopian work. One of the basic ideas of this utopian way of thinking is that humans are pure and intrinsically good. Plato believed that every human being has the intrinsic impulse to strive to do good, and to seek out truth and beauty. Nowadays, Platonic Idealism is also called postmodernism (e.g. There are no truths, only interpretations).

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) was a disciple of Plato. He differed from Plato in that to a large extent he relied on his senses to closely observe plants and animals. He was convinced that material objects exist, whether we can perceive them or not (this is known as *Perceptual Realism*). That is why he is considered by many to be the first philosopher to study nature in a scientific manner. Indeed, he relied more on empiricism (observations and experiences), although he also liked theorizing, and especially logic. His work deals with mathematics, biology, art, ethics, logic, and politics. Of course, his view was incomplete, and in many respects inaccurate, as he did not have the scientific tools we have today. However, many aspects of his view have been confirmed by many scientific domains. For example, biological and psychological research has demonstrated that our senses, in combination with our brain, offer a quite accurate representation of the natural world. His line of reasoning about the world is labeled 'realism.'

These two opposing schools of thought have never put an end to their squabble. In the Utopian tradition, there were notorious figures such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778; he idealized indigenous people because he felt they were never 'corrupted' by western societies and were in fact innately good), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804; our brain structures reality), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860; our knowledge depends on our representations), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Margaret Mead (1901–1978; a cultural anthropologist who denied innate human nature, particularly the difference in sexual strategies used by men and women), or Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961; he believed that through a paranormal process we can gain access to information about a human archetype that is stored in a parallel universe).

A notorious school of followers of these ideas comprises the New Age Movement, a broad term for people who believe in the mystical transformation of humans and the world into better beings and a better world—the belief that humanity will enter a *new age*. Two of the most important claims are that nature is fundamentally good<sup>21</sup> and that a better way of life for humanity is dawning (there will be no competition nor survival of the fittest—only love will flourish, and humans will heal themselves<sup>22</sup> and society). Another claim that New Age believers make is that the universe contains all possible knowledge there is to know—some believe we only need to find a way 'to plug in' to this universal knowledge and we will be fully enlightened. Another strong idea of this group is egalitarianism, which has now be-

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<sup>20</sup> *Eidos* means 'visible form'; Plato believed that there was another world with real or even 'perfect' 'Forms' – the nonphysical essences of all things. In the world we can 'experience', all objects are merely imitations.

<sup>21</sup> This is called the *moralistic fallacy*, or the belief that what is good or moral is a priori also to be found in nature. Everything is explained from this point of view: e.g. *lions only kill weak animals and this is good*. The Wikipedia entry is a good source for distinguishing between the moralistic fallacy and the naturalistic fallacy (the inverse: all we find in nature must be good, e.g. our instinct to do warfare must be good)

<sup>22</sup> Healing can occur in several manners, such as using 'alternative medicine,' altering the state of consciousness, homeopathy, herbal medicine, crystal healing, rebirthing, reincarnation therapy, etc.

come very popular through acolytes such as Ken Wilber ('transpersonal' psychology and 'integral theory') and Frédéric Laloux, who claims that humans can function perfectly without leaders. I will deal with their erroneous ideas in the myth busting section. Adepts of this school also do not accept the scientific method. They firmly believe that some things will never be explained by the scientific method and instead they 'rely on other ways of knowing,' whatever that might mean. Many people adhere to this Idealistic in-group, especially those who lack the motivation and/or intellect to consult scientific articles and who are prone to believing in conspiracy theories<sup>23</sup> ('the established scientific community is not to be trusted—after all they oppose true alternative science').

Especially in Social Psychology, this Platonic or Utopian bias is still alive and kicking: Inbar and Lammers (2012) found that 85% of the respondents from a discussion list of the *Society for Personality and Social Psychology* declared themselves as liberal. Duarte et al. stirred up this discussion in 2015. In the U.S., concerned researchers have founded the *Heterodox Academy* in an attempt to break down political homogeneity in certain areas of research. In 2017, Frank Schmidt, a psychology professor at the University of Iowa, described how some researchers systematically ignore well-established findings in behavior genetics research. Although "*virtually all tendencies, traits, behaviors, and life outcomes have a substantial genetic basis,*" (p. 33) he found a failure to acknowledge this genetic contribution (or partial cause) in the following areas of psychological research:

- The day-to-day variability in positive and negative affect (emotions).
- The correlation between environmental variables such as the number of books and magazines in the house and later life outcomes.
- The correlation between growing up as a child in an abusive family and the fact that many of these children later become abusive adults themselves.
- Children who were spanked at age 3 spanked other children at age 5.
- Parents of autistic children talk less to them.
- The correlation between nurturing family environments and emotion regulation styles as adults.
- The correlation between a coercive parenting style and antisocial behavior in children.
- The correlation between neuroticism and job satisfaction.<sup>24</sup>

The obvious elephant in the room, our genetic constitution, is completely ignored by those Platonic Idealists who fail to acknowledge that psychology rests on biology. They are devastatingly responsible for misinforming the public and causing people to believe in false causal mechanisms.

The school of Realists relies on the scientific method, using close observation and other empirical methods. Realists differ in important respects from idealists in that they accept that humans can commit both 'good' and 'bad' acts and that there are many differences between people. They accept the reality that people vary along a continuum, ranging from people who are very dishonest and even criminal, very cruel to others, very dominant, or very self-serving, to very honest, very altruistic, very egalitarian, and very caring people.

<sup>23</sup> It is clear that people sometimes conspire. What I mean here are the far-fetched conspiracy theories, such as the death of Princess Diana, the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, United States, the real birth place of former U.S. president Barack Obama, the cover-up of alien contact, or the theory that there is a worldwide conspiracy among the most powerful people to poison us by spreading 'chemtrails' (chemical or biological agents) via the lingering contrails produced by all airplanes (these trails are condensation trails).

<sup>24</sup> Yes, job satisfaction is influenced by neuroticism, which is at least 50% genetic.

They see the world as it is, not as it should be. That of course doesn't mean they don't try to change or influence certain aspects. Prominent figures include Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679; everything in the world is physical and thus the supernatural does not exist—he was also convinced that the scientific methods could always be improved, meaning we will ultimately find answers to all the questions we have about the world), Benedictus de Spinoza (1632–1677; he strived to discover the true reality), Bertrand Russell (1872–1970; his main contributions concerned logic, but he was also known for his 'teapot' argument), Karl Raimund Popper (1902–1994; he proposed falsifiability as a new criterion to practice science), and Daniel Dennett (1942–; he writes a lot about the concept of free will and studies evolutionary biology—he writes that morality has its roots in our evolutionary past).

A lot of the myths I debunk in Part III are in the tradition of Platonian Idealism or postmodernism: commercial alpha training (belief in our capacity to plug into universal creativity), organizational constellations (belief in the paranormal), DiSC (belief in *psychons* as an elementary unit of the human brain), the enneagram (the belief that we have *three brains* and that our earthly existence only serves to feed the moon), Jungian Typology and the related MBTI and Insights Discovery measurements (the belief in the paranormal and knowledge of archetypes stored in a parallel universe), Maslow's Pyramid of Needs (although he distanced himself from this idea), the Leadership Circle, Management Drives, Spiral Dynamics, and 'Reinventing Organizations' (belief in humanity reaching a next level of consciousness).

To reiterate my point: I am under no illusion that I could convince the Platonic Idealists, Utopians, and those believers who are hostile towards a scientific or evidence-based approach to HR. I consider them lost causes and a total waste of my energy. I can do nothing to 'deradicalize' them from their utopian beliefs, whether I use the smartest or gentlest approach, or the most brutal one, and everything that falls in between. For that reason, I have stated that I will focus on people who already have a critical thinking mindset and those with a high degree of integrity.

## ■ Original sources consulted

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