THE ELEPHANT IN THE BRAIN

By Kevin Simler and Robin Hanson
Oxford, 397 pages, $34.95

Reviewed by: *Matthew Hutson*

Donald Trump's press secretary is every one of us. When the president needs a positive spin on his policies and antics, he has a designated representative face the media. Similarly, inside each of us is a voice that helps justify our actions and rationalize our decisions. What we hear in our head and consider to be our self is not the commander in chief of our mind; it is an out-of-the-loop schlub trying to smooth-talk the press corps.

The metaphor of the press secretary, coined in 1978 by the philosopher Daniel Dennett, makes a showing in "The Elephant in the Brain," a book about unconscious motives. (The titular pachyderm refers not to the Republican Party but to a metaphor used in 2006 by the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, in which reason is the rider on the elephant of emotion.) To the authors— Kevin Simler, a software engineer, and Robin Hanson, an economist—the press secretary's cluelessness is not a bug but a feature. The less that is known about the machinations behind a policy, the easier it is to market. The book builds on centuries of writing about self-deception, most directly that of Robert Trivers, the evolutionary theorist who proposed in 1976 that self-deception mainly serves the purpose of deceiving others. I can't say that the book covers new ground, but it is a smart synthesis and offers several original metaphors.

People self-deceive about lots of things. We overestimate our ability to drive. We conveniently forget who started an argument. We believe our children to be supreme gifts to humanity. A common explanation is that we think wishfully in order to feel better, particularly about ourselves. But if feeling good is the goal, a brain needs only a supercharged self-satisfaction module. An internal unreliable

narrator is useful, for instance, when we promote ourselves as potential mates or allies; it lets us puff out our chests and fluff our feathers without flinching.

If you doubt our ability to fabricate and fall for a personal version of history, consider choice blindness: You sample two jams, ginger from jar A and lime from jar B, and state your favorite. You then resample your favorite—say, from jar A—but through some sleight of hand it now contains lime. "Hold on," you say, "something's up." Actually, you don't. If you are like most people, you will think that your choice is consistent and spin a narrative when asked to explain your preference—until you are told about the switch.

 "The Elephant in the Brain" focuses on the false narrative of hiding selfish motives. Much of what we do, including our most generous behavior, the authors say, is not meant to be helpful. We are, like many other members of the animal kingdom, competitively altruistic—helpful in large part to earn status. That may be obvious when billionaires jockey for naming rights to buildings, but it plays out in more subtle ways.

Casual conversations, for instance, often trade in random information. But the point is not to trade facts for facts; what you are actually doing, the book argues, is showing off so people can evaluate your intellectual versatility. By sharing information, you are not merely being helpful or entertaining, you are advertising yourself.

The authors take particular interest in large-scale social issues and institutions, showing how systems of collective self-deception help explain the odd behavior we see in art, charity, education, medicine, religion and politics. Why do people vote? Not to strengthen the republic, the authors say. A single vote rarely matters, and we rarely even seek objective information on the candidates. Instead, we cheer for our team and participate as a signal of loyalty, hoping for the benefits of inclusion. In education, as many economists have argued, learning is ancillary to accreditation and status. A degree signals that one has the intelligence and stamina to enter and survive a degree program.

The authors call medicine "conspicuous caring." In many areas of medicine, they note, increased care does not improve outcomes. People offer it to broadcast helpfulness, or demand it to demonstrate how much support they have from others. The case for medicine as a hidden act of selfishness may have some truth, but it also has holes. For example, the book does not address why medical spending is so much higher in the U.S. than elsewhere—do Americans care more than others about health care as a status symbol?

"The Elephant in the Brain" is refreshingly frank and penetrating, leaving no stone of presumed human virtue unturned. The authors do not even spare themselves, describing their book as a vanity project that is probably too long. (It does lose the plot sometimes, but it did not lose my attention.) It is accessibly erudite, deftly deploying essential technical concepts such as "costly signaling."

Still, the authors urge hope. Our institutions may be hugely wasteful due to hidden elephants. "But," they write, "it's actually great news": Once we become aware of them, there are ways to leverage our hidden motives in the pursuit of our ideals. The authors offer a few suggestions. Spread the gospel of "effective altruism" so that people gain status for practical rather than flashy charity. Retain academic credentials but teach something useful in schools, such as personal finance. Make promises to be good; you are more likely to follow through for fear of appearing hypocritical, and through such a commitment you may also gain the status of being considered trustworthy. Unfortunately, the book devotes only a few pages to such solutions.

"The Elephant in the Brain" does not judge us for hiding selfish motives from ourselves. And to my mind, given that we will always have selfish motives, keeping them concealed might even provide a buffer against naked strife. Press officers may obfuscate, misdirect and even aggravate, but do you really want a chief executive with unfiltered access to Twitter?

Mr. Hutson is the author of "The 7 Laws of Magical Thinking: How Irrational Beliefs Keep Us Happy, Healthy, and Sane."