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Subject: The benefits of deception
Sent: Thursday, November 7, 2013 12:40:54 AM
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Beyond the fact that deception is a behavior that attempts to manipulate the mental states (esp. beliefs and goals) of other agents towards what the deceiver believes to be counterfactual, there is the question of the function and benefits of deceit.

Deception does not only include malicious lying and exploitation, but also humor, didactics, politeness, tact, consideration of possible fallacies in my own current beliefs and so on, and thus plays many beneficial roles in human interaction and cooperation.

Today, I had an interesting conversation with a student. She asked (starting out from the context of ubiquitous surveillance and post-privacy): imagine everybody knew everybody else's thoughts all the time, would this increase or reduce the amount of strife between people?

We could generalize this question: if humans were incapable of any kind of deception, would the net effect on human interactions, the functioning of organizations, or on societies, a positive or a negative one? Obviously, the impossibility of knowing betrayal and fraud will yield some positive effects. On the other hand, the need to accept and forgive traits, ideas and intentions of people that are culturally or psychologically very different will put a heavy strain on relationships. Furthermore, it might become harder to forge and maintain alliances with and against other players, possibly resulting in fewer gains through competition and specialization.

Could there be a way in which we can estimate, or at least gain an intuition on the net benefits of the human capability for deception? Imagine a simulation of a market place with many different players, or a day in a kinder garden, or a hospital. Could we model beliefs, desires and intentions of the individual agents, and then run the simulation once with the usual amount of deceit, and once with all agents having access to complete and truthful information about the beliefs, desires and intentions of everybody else?

Cheers,
Joscha

PS: Looking very much forward to be seeing some of you on Monday ;-)