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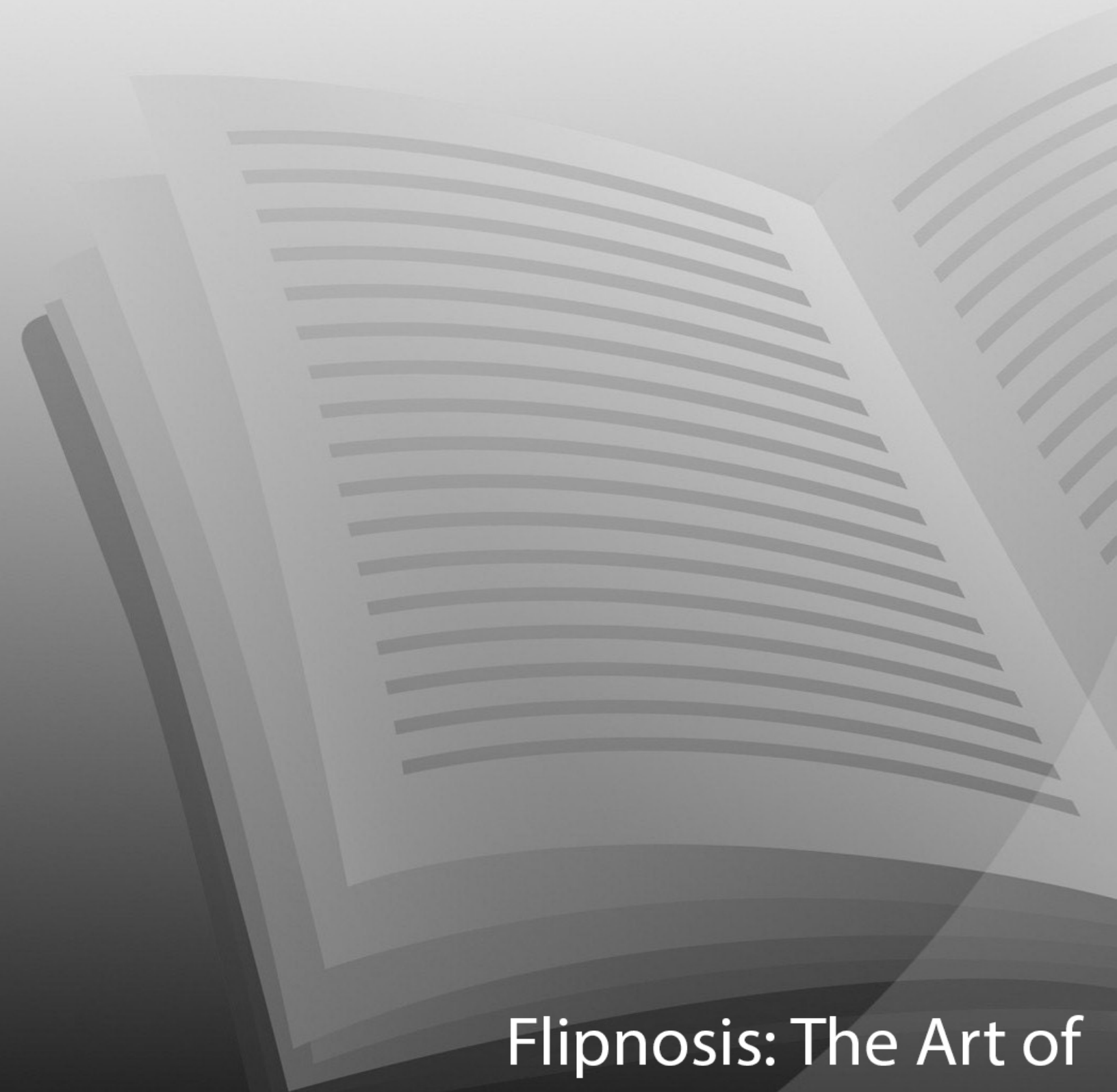

Flipnosis: The Art of Split-Second Persuasion

Kevin Dutton

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About the Book

‘Flipnosis’ is a special kind of persuasion. It has an incubation period of just seconds, and can instantly disarm even the most discerning mind. It’s a psychological secret weapon which, in the right hands, can dismantle any conflict and seal any deal, but which in the wrong hands can kill. Flipnosis is black belt mind control.

Based on cutting-edge science and encounters with the most persuasive people on earth – from politicians, advertisers, salesmen and frogs that mug each other to the malign but fascinating powers of con men, serial killers and psychopaths – this brilliantly original and revelatory book reveals, for the first time, the psychological DNA of instant influence . . . and how each of us can learn to be that little bit more persuasive.

About the Author

Dr Kevin Dutton was born in London in 1967, and is a leading expert on the science of social influence. He is a Research Fellow at the Faraday Institute of Science and Religion at St Edmund's College, University of Cambridge, and at the Department of Psychology, University of Western Australia, in Perth.

KEVIN DUTTON

FLIPNOSIS

THE ART OF SPLIT-SECOND PERSUASION

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Author’s Note

For legal (and sometimes personal) reasons, the names and identifying details of certain people featured in this book have been changed. In the case of one of these, con man Keith Barrett, attributes from several real-life individuals were combined in order to avoid cramming an inordinate number of these colourful characters into 90,000 words. Nothing was exaggerated, and all factual details are based on the author’s first-hand knowledge and empirical research.

The author is also delighted to take sole responsibility for the grammatical turbulence you will occasionally run into in this book – overuse of dashes, split infinitives. And beginning sentences with ‘and’.

Flipnosis / flɪpnəʊsɪs / **n.1** incisive,
inch-perfect influence. **2** the practice of this.
– DERIVATIVES **flipnotist** n. **flipnotic** adj.
– origin unknown

Any references to ‘writing in this book’ refer to the original printed version. Readers should write on a separate piece of paper in these instances.

Introduction

One evening, at the close of a lavish state banquet for Commonwealth dignitaries in London, Winston Churchill spots a fellow guest about to steal a priceless silver salt-cellar from the table. The gentleman in question slips the precious artefact inside his dinner jacket, then quietly makes for the door.

What is Churchill to do?

Caught between loyalty to his host and an equal and opposite desire to avoid an undignified contretemps, he suddenly has an idea. With no time to lose, he quickly picks up the matching silver pepper-pot and slips it inside his own jacket pocket. Then, approaching his 'partner in crime', he reluctantly produces the condimentary contraband and sets it down in front of him.

'I think they've seen us,' he whispers. 'We'd better put them back …'

Air Hostess: *Please fasten your seatbelt before take-off.*
Muhammad Ali: *I'm Superman. Superman don't need no seatbelt!*
Air Hostess: *Superman don't need no aeroplane!*

Wild Horses

It's six o'clock on a dead December evening in North London. Two men stand drinking in a bar in Camden Town. They finish their pints, set them back down on the counter, and look at one other. Same again? Sure, why not? Though they do not know it yet, these two men are about to be late for a dinner engagement. In an Indian restaurant far across town, another man sits waiting for them. Some casual, low-grade Parkinson's loosens the wires in his flickering right hand, and he's tired. He is wearing a brightly coloured new tie which he has bought specially for the occasion, and which took him half an hour to do up. It has teddy bears on it.

It is Sunday. The man in the restaurant watches the rain gust darkly against the low-lit windows. Today is his son's birthday. In the bar in Camden Town the other men watch, too, as the rain strobes amber in the desolate glow of the street lamps, glazing the liquid pavements with a slick of neon gold. Time to head off, they say. To the train. To the restaurant. To the man who is sitting there waiting. And so they leave.

They arrive late, by almost three-quarters of an hour. Somehow, they find this amusing. They have misjudged, in hindsight by quite some considerable margin, the length of time required to consume four pints of beer and then negotiate the outer reaches of the Piccadilly and Northern lines. Instead of setting aside a couple of hours for the venture, they have allowed something in the region of ten minutes. To make matters worse, they are drunk. On their arrival at the restaurant, things do not go well.

'Late *again*?' the man who has been waiting for them enquires sarcastically. 'You'll never learn, will you?'

The response is as vehement as it is instant – a million age-old grievances all rolled into a single defining moment. One of the newcomers, the smaller of the two by quite some way, turns around and walks straight back out of the restaurant. It's the son. But not before he has uttered a few well-chosen words of his own.

And so there he is, the little man. A couple of minutes earlier, rattling down a tube line heading west, he had been looking forward to a simple birthday dinner with his father and his best friend. Now he is alone under derelict December skies, hurtling back along the pavement in the direction of the tube station. Freezing cold and soaking wet because he's forgotten to pick up his coat. Funny how quickly things can change.

When the little man arrives at the station, he is seething. He stands for a few moments at the ticket barrier trying to locate his pass, and thinks to himself that wild horses

wouldn’t be able to drag him back to that restaurant. The station concourse is flooded and there is no one around. But then he hears something coming from the street: the sound of approaching footsteps. Suddenly, out of nowhere, there’s the big man. Having legged it from the restaurant to the station, he slumps against a pillar by the entrance. The little man moves away.

‘Wait!’ says the big man, when he’s finally got his breath back.

The little man isn’t interested.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ he says, raising his hand an inch, maybe two inches above his head. ‘I’ve had it up to here with his snide remarks!’

‘But wait!’ says the big man again.

The little man is getting angrier by the second.

‘Look,’ he says, ‘you’re wasting your time. Just go back to him. Go back to the restaurant. Go wherever you like. Just get out of my face!’

The big man is worried that the little man is going to hit him.

‘OK,’ he says. ‘OK. But before I go, will you just let me say one thing?’

Silence. The rain turns crimson as some traffic-lights change at the crossing by the station entrance.

Just to get rid of him, the little man relents.

‘Go on then,’ he says. ‘What is it?’

There’s a moment of truth as the two of them look at each other – the big man and the little man – across the barrier. The little man notices that a couple of buttons have fallen off the big man’s overcoat, and that his woollen bobble-hat is lying on the ground in a puddle some distance away. Must’ve been quite a dash, the little man thinks to himself. From the restaurant to the station. And then he remembers something. Something the big man had told him once. About how his mother had knitted him that hat, one Christmas.

The big man holds out his arms – a gesture of helplessness, openness, perhaps both.

And then he says it.

'When was the last time you ever saw me run?'

The little man opens his mouth, but finds himself treading words. Suddenly, he's in trouble. The problem is that the big man weighs close to 28 stone. Though they've been friends for quite some time, the little man has *never* seen the big man run. Which is actually kind of funny. In fact, by his own admission, the big man has trouble walking.

The more the little man thinks about it, the more he finds himself struggling for an answer. And the more he struggles, the more he feels his anger ebb away.

Eventually, he says: 'Well, never.'

There's a period of silence. Then the big man puts out a hand.

'Come on then,' he says. 'Let's go back.'

And so they do.

When they get back to the restaurant, the little man and his father both say sorry to each other and the three wiser, if not entirely wise, men sit down to have dinner together. For the second time. Nobody's talking miracles, but they sure as hell are thinking it. The big man had lost some buttons. And the woollen hat that his mother had made him would never be the same again. But somehow, somewhere, in the wind and the rain and the cold, he had traded them for something better.

There was nothing, the little man thinks to himself, that anyone could have said to him in that tube station that would have made him go back to the restaurant. Wild horses could not have dragged him. Yet the big man had done exactly that with just ten simple words. Words that had come from a kingdom south of consciousness:

'When was the last time you ever saw me run?'

Somehow, in the depths of that London winter, the big man had drummed up some sunshine.

Honesty's The Best Policy

Here's a question for you. How many times a day do you think someone tries to persuade you? What to do. What to buy. Where to go. How to get there. And I'm talking from the moment you wake up in the morning to the moment your head hits the pillow again in the evening. Twenty? Thirty? That's what most people say when asked this question – so try not to feel too bad about what's coming next. In actual fact – get ready – estimates tend to hover around the 400 mark! Comes as a bit of a shock at first, doesn't it? But let's think about it for a minute. Go through the options. What molecules of influence can infiltrate the pathways of our brain?

Well, for a start there's the advertising industry. TV. Radio. Billboards. Web. How many times a day do you think you see an ad? Right – quite a few. Then there's all the other stuff we see. The man selling hotdogs on the street corner. The policeman directing traffic. The religious guy with the sandwich board in the *middle* of that traffic. And then, of course, there's the little guy in our heads who's almost always banging on about something. OK, we might not actually see him but we certainly hear him often enough. Starts to mount up when you think about it, doesn't it? And believe me – we haven't even started yet.

When it comes down to it, we take all this for granted, don't we? Which is why, when asked how many times a day people try to get us to do stuff, we say 20 or 30 instead of 400. But there's an even more fundamental question here, one that's seldom even considered.

Where does such persuasion come from – I mean, originally? A lot is written about the origins of mind, but what about the origins of *changing* minds?

Let's imagine an alternative society to the one just described – a society in which coercion, not persuasion, is the primary tool of influence. Just think what it would be

like if every time we decided *not* to buy a hotdog, the vendor on the street corner came charging after us with a baseball bat. Or if, when we shot past the speed gun at 80 m.p.h., some death-dealing sensor riddled our windscreen with bullets. Or if when we didn't sign up with the 'right' political party, or the 'right' religion – have the 'right' colour skin even – we suffered the consequences later.

Some of these scenarios are, I would guess, easier to imagine than others. But the point I'm making here is simple. It's largely because of persuasion that we have a 'society' at all. There have been various attempts at various times to challenge such a notion. But each, at some stage, has fallen decidedly short. Persuasion is what keeps us alive. Often, quite literally.

Take the following instance. In the autumn of 2003, I fly to San Francisco for a conference. Pressed for time before leaving Cambridge, I decide, because I am insane, against the time-honoured wisdom of booking a hotel in advance, and opt instead to seek one out when I get there: a cheap, if somewhat frenetic, establishment in a neighbourhood so dangerous that even the serial killers go round in pairs.

Every morning on leaving my brothel – I mean, hotel – and every evening upon my return, I run into the same bunch of guys huddled around the newspaper stand outside: a Vietnam veteran with six months to live, a Brazilian hooker more down on her luck than anything more lucrative, and a flotilla of hungry and homeless who between them have taken more hits than a Paris Hilton slumber party on You Tube. All have had their fair share of misfortune. All their misadventures. And all stand despondently on the pavement, their windswept placards and rain-sodden signboards stacked up dejectedly beside them.

Now I'm not saying that these guys didn't need the money. They did. But after a week of small talk and slowly getting acquainted, it had reached the point where our

fortunes had all but reversed – and *I* was asking *them* for cash. Most of the posse I was on first-name terms with, and after shelling out generously for the first couple of days any desire to swell their coffers further had disappeared faster than a Bernie Madoff hedge fund.

Or so I thought.

Then one night, towards the end of my stay, I notice a guy I haven't seen before. By this stage I'm building up a bit of immunity to the hard luck stories, and as I pass I give no more than a fleeting glance at the dog-eared piece of cardboard he's holding out in front of him. Yet no sooner does the message catch my eye than I'm poking around inside my coat pocket, looking for something to give him. And not loose change but something more substantial. A mere five words has got me reaching for my wallet without a moment's hesitation:

WHY LIE? I WANT BEER!

I felt I'd been legally mugged.

Back in the safety – well, *comparative* safety – of my hotel room I sit there thinking about that slogan. Even Jesus would have applauded. I wasn't usually in the habit of doling out money to pissheads. Especially when, just a few feet away, more deserving causes beckoned. Yet that was precisely what I'd done. What was it about those five words that had had such an effect on me? I wondered. The guy couldn't have got the money out of me any faster had he pulled a gun from his jacket. What was it that had so cleanly, so comprehensively, yet so covertly disabled all those cognitive security systems I'd been so painstakingly intent on installing since my arrival?

I smile.

Suddenly, I'm reminded of a similar occasion many years before when I'd argued with my father in a restaurant. And then stormed off. There was no way, I'd thought to myself at the time, that I would be going back to that restaurant that night. *Wild horses could not have dragged me.* Yet a

mere 30 seconds and ten words later a friend of mine had dramatically changed my mind.

There was, I began to realise, something inherent in both these incidents that was timeless, weightless, and fundamentally different from normal modes of communication. They had a transforming, transcendental, almost otherworldly quality about them.

But what exactly was it?

A Superstrain of Persuasion

As a psychologist, up there in my hotel room, I felt I should have an answer to that question. But the more I thought about it, the more I struggled to come up with one. This was a question about persuasion. About attitude change. About social influence. Regular banter in the social psychology locker-room – and yet, it now seemed, there was a big black hole in the literature. I was baffled. How could a total stranger clean out my wallet with just five simple words? And how, with just ten, could my best friend clean out my brain?

Usually, it works like this. If, like my friend, we want to calm someone down, or like the beggar extract money from them, we tend to take our time over it. We carefully set up our pitch. And with good reason. Minds – just ask any used car salesman – don't change easily. Nine times out of ten, persuasion is contingent on a complex combination of factors, relating not just to what we say but also how we say it. Not to mention, once said, how it's interpreted. In the vast majority of cases, influence is wrought by talking. By a nervy cocktail of compromise, enterprise, and negotiation. By wrapping up whatever it is that we want in an intricate parcel of words. But with my friend and the homeless guy it was different. With them, it wasn't so much the wrapping that did the trick as – well – the lack of it. It was the immaculate incisiveness of the influence; the raw

and chastening elegance; the deft, swift touch of psychological genius that, more than anything else, gave it its power.

Or was it?

No sooner had I extricated myself from San Francisco and returned to the equally chaotic, if somewhat less predictable, milieu of Cambridge academic life than it began to dawn on me just how wide-ranging a question this was. Did there exist, high above the snowline of persuasion, an elixir of influence – a secret art of 'flipnosis' – that each of us could learn? To close that deal. To get that guy. To tip those scales just that little bit more in our favour.

Much of what we now know about the brain – the relationship between function and structure – has come about not from the study of the conventional but of the extraordinary. From extremes of behaviour at odds with the everyday. Might the same also be true of persuasion? Take the Sirens in Homer's *Odyssey*: beautiful maidens whose song is so bewitching that mariners, even on pain of death, are irresistibly drawn to it. Or Cupid and his arrows. Or the 'secret chord that pleased the Lord' that David plays in the Leonard Cohen song 'Hallelujah'. Outside the realms of mythology, might such a chord actually exist?

As my research progressed the answer to this question soon became clear. Slowly but surely, as the list of examples grew longer and the cold, digital voodoo of the statistics began to unfold, I started to piece together the elements of a brand new kind of influence. To plot the genome of a mysterious, previously unidentified, superstrain of persuasion. Most of us have some idea of how to persuade. But it's largely trial and error. We get it wrong as many times as we get it right. Yet some people, it began to emerge, really *could* get it right. With absolute precision. And not just around the coffee table. Or out on the town with friends. But in knife-edge confrontations where both stakes and emotions ran high. So who were

these black belts of influence? And what made them tick? More importantly – what, if anything, could they teach the rest of us?

Here's another example. Imagine it had been you on the plane. What do you think *you* would have said at the time?

I'm on a flight (business class, thanks to a film company) to New York. The guy across the aisle from me has a problem with his food. After several minutes of prodding it around his plate, he summons the chief steward.

'This food,' he enunciates, 'sucks.'

The chief steward nods and is very understanding. 'Oh my God!' he schmoozes. 'It's such a pity … You'll never fly with us again? How will we ever get the chance to make it up to you?'

You get the picture.

But then comes something that totally changes the game. That doesn't just turn the tables, it kicks them over.

'Look,' continues the man (who was, one suspected, quite used to continuing), 'I know it's not your fault. But it just isn't good enough. And you know what? I'm so fed up with people being *nice*!'

'IS THAT RIGHT, YOU FUCKING DICK? THEN WHY THE FUCK DON'T YOU FUCKING SHUT UP, YOU ARSEHOLE?'

Instantly, the whole cabin falls silent (at which point, in an amusing coincidence, the 'Fasten Seat Belt' sign also comes on). Who the hell was *that*?

A guy in one of the front seats (a famous musician) turns round. He looks at the guy who's complaining, then winks at him.

'Is that any better?' he enquires. ''Cos if it ain't, I can keep going …'

For a moment, nobody says anything. Everyone freezes. But then, as if some secret neural tripwire had suddenly just been pulled, our disgruntled diner … smiles. And then he laughs. And then he *really* laughs. This, in turn, sets the chief steward off. And that, of course, gets us all started.

Problem solved with just a few simple words. And definitive proof, if ever any were needed, of what my old English teacher Mr Johnson used to say: ‘You can be as rude as you like so long as you’re polite about it.’

But back to my original question. How do you think *you* would have reacted under such circumstances? How would *you* have got on? Me? Not too well, as it turned out. But the more I thought about it, the more I came to realise precisely what it was about situations like these that made them so special. It wasn’t *just* the psychological bullseyes – spectacular though some of them might be. No, it was more than that. It was the individuals who scored them.

I mean, think about it. Forget about the musician for a moment. In the absence of screwballs like him, air stewards (not to mention, in more hostile scenarios, policemen, members of the armed forces, professional negotiators, health-care workers and Samaritans) face such dilemmas as these every day of their lives. These are people who are trained in the art of persuasion; who use tried-and-tested techniques to maintain the status quo. Such techniques involve building a relationship with the other person and engaging them in dialogue while at the same time projecting a calm, patient and empathic interpersonal style. Techniques, in other words, that are underpinned by social process.

But there are, quite clearly, some of us who are simply ‘naturals’. Who do not need to train. Who are, in fact, so good, so extraordinarily different, that they have a gift for turning people around. Not through negotiation. Or dialogue. Or the rules of give-and-take. But with just a few simple words.

Sound crazy? I know. Back when the idea first came to me, I thought the same. But not for long. Soon I began to unearth a tantalising body of evidence – circumstantial, anecdotal, allusive – which suggested the possibility that

that there really might be black belts in our midst. And, what's more, they might not all be good guys.

Cracking the Code of Persuasion

This, then, is a book about persuasion. But it's a book about a special kind of persuasion – *flipnosis* – with an incubation period of seconds and an evolutionary history just a little bit longer. Incongruity (or surprise) is obviously a key component. But that's just the beginning. Whether we take what's on offer or leave it on the table depends on four additional factors: simplicity; perceived self-interest;[fn1] confidence; and empathy – factors as integral to persuasion in the plant and animal kingdoms as they are to the scams of some of the world's most brilliant con artists. Together, this five-part cocktail of influence – SPICE – is lethal. And all the more so when taken straight: undiluted by rhetoric, uncontaminated by argument.

Winston Churchill certainly knew as much. And as for the air hostess who once took on The Greatest – I doubt Muhammad Ali ever took a cleaner shot in his life.

It's a kind of persuasion that can get you whatever you want. Reservations. Contracts. Bargains. Babies. *Anything*. In the *right* hands. But which in the wrong hands can prove disastrous. As brutal and deadly as any weapon that's out there.

The journey begins with a simple idea: that some of us are better at the art of persuasion than others. And that with persuasion, just as with everything else, there exists a spectrum of talent along which each of us has our place. At one end are those who always 'put their foot in it'. Who seem not only to get the wrong end of the stick, but sometimes the wrong *stick* even. At the other we have the flipnotists. Those who exhibit an uncanny, almost preternatural, propensity for 'getting it right'.

In the pages that follow, we plot the co-ordinates of this mysterious strain of persuasion. Slowly but surely, as we cast the net of empirical enquiry farther and farther afield, beyond the familiar reefs of social influence to the deeper, less-charted waters of neonatal development, cognitive neuroscience, mathematics and psychopathology, we navigate theories about the chimeric art of persuasion that slowly begin to converge. That gradually distil into a single, definitive formula. Our journey uncovers a treasure-trove of questions:

- What do newborn babies and psychopaths have in common?
- Has our ability to change minds, like the mind itself, evolved?
- What secrets do the all-time greats of persuasion and the grandmasters of martial arts have in common?
- Is there a 'persuasion pathway' in the brain?

The answers will amaze you. And will definitely, next time you go for that upgrade, help you get it.

fn1 This refers to the self-interest of the target. Persuasion, of course, is not always in the target's *actual* interest. But if the target perceives it to be so, then the attempt is far more effective.

Chapter 1

The Persuasion Instinct

Judge: *I find you guilty as charged and hereby sentence you to 72 hours' community service and a fine of £150. You have a choice. You can either pay the full amount within the allotted three-week period or pay £50 less if you settle immediately. Which is it to be?*
Pickpocket: *I only have £56 on me at the moment, Your Honour. But if you allow me a few moments with the jury, I'd prefer to pay now.*

A policeman on traffic duty pulls a motorist over for speeding.
'Give me one good reason why I shouldn't write you a ticket,' he says.
'Well,' says the driver, 'last week my wife ran off with one of you guys. And when I saw your car, I thought you were bringing her back.'

A Spew-rious Tale?[fn1]

In 1938, in Selma, southern Georgia, a physician by the name of Drayton Doherty was summoned to the bedside of a man called Vance Vanders. Six months earlier, in a graveyard in the dead of night, Vanders had bumped into a witch-doctor and the spook had put a curse on him. A week or so later Vanders got a pain in his stomach, and decided to take to his bed. Much to the distress of his family, he'd remained there ever since.

Doherty gave Vanders a thorough examination, and grimly shook his head. It's a mystery, he said, and shut the door behind him. But the next day he was back.

'I tracked down the witch-doctor and lured him back to the graveyard,' he announced. 'When he arrived I jumped on him, pinned him to the ground, and swore that if he didn't tell me the exact nature of the curse he'd put on you, and give me the antidote, I would kill him on the spot.'

Vanders' eyes widened.

'What did he do?' he asked.

'Eventually, after quite a struggle, he relented,' Doherty continued. 'And I must confess that, in all my years in medicine, I've never heard anything like it. What he did was this. He implanted a lizard egg inside your stomach – and then caused it to hatch. And the pain you've been feeling for the last six months is the lizard – it's been eating you alive!'

Vanders' eyes almost popped out of his head.

'Is there anything you can do for me, Doctor?' he pleaded.

Doherty smiled reassuringly.

'Luckily for you,' he said, 'the body is remarkably resilient and most of the damage has been largely superficial. So we'll administer the antidote the witch-doctor kindly gave us, and wait and see what happens.'

Vanders nodded enthusiastically.

Ten minutes later, his patient vomiting uncontrollably from the powerful emetic he'd given him, Doherty opened his bag. Inside was a lizard he'd bought from the local pet shop.

'Aha!' he announced with a flourish, brandishing it by the tail. '*Here's* the culprit!'

Vanders looked up, then retched violently again. Doherty collected his things.

'Not to worry,' he said. 'You're over the worst of it and will soon pick up after this.'

Then he left.

Sure enough, for the first time in ages, Vanders slept soundly that night. And when he awoke in the morning he had eggs and grits for breakfast.

Persuasion. No sooner is the word out than images of second-hand car dealers, mealy-mouthed politicians, schmoozers, cruisers and a barrel-load of life's other users

and abusers come padding – brothel-creepers and smoking-jackets at the ready – across the dubious neuronal shag-piles of our minds. It's that kind of word. Though undoubtedly one of social psychology's hippest, most sought-after neighbourhoods, persuasion also has a dodgy, downbeat reputation: an area of Portakabins and bars, sleazy garage forecourts and teeming neon strips.

Which, of course, is where you often find it at work.

But there's more to persuasion than just cheap talk and loud suits. Or, for that matter, loud talk and cheap suits. A witch-doctor and physician go head to head (quite literally) over the health of a local man. The witch-doctor deals what appears to be a knock-out blow. His opponent rides it and effortlessly turns the tables. This extraordinary tale of a shaman and a flipnotist encapsulates influence in its simplest, purest form: a battle for neural supremacy. Yet where does persuasion come from? Why does it work? Why is it possible that what is in my mind, when converted into words, is able to change what's in yours?

The Ancient Greeks, who seemed to have a god for more or less everything, had one, inevitably, for persuasion. Peitho (in Roman mythology, Suadela) was a companion of Aphrodite and is often depicted in Graeco-Roman culture with a ball of silver twine. These days, of course, with Darwin, game theory, and advances in neuroimaging, we see things a little differently. And with the gods up against it and the Greeks more interested in basketball, we tend to look elsewhere for affirmation. To science, for instance. Or Oprah.

In this chapter we turn our attention towards evolutionary biology – and discover that persuasion has a longer family history than either we, or the gods, might have realised. We go in search of the earliest forms of persuasion – pre-linguistic, pre-conscious, pre-human – and arrive at a startling conclusion. Not only is persuasion *endemic* to earthly existence, it's also *systemic*, too; as

much a part of the rhythm of the natural order as the emergence of life itself.

Purrsuasion

Note to architects who are currently in the process of designing modern, shiny, glassy buildings for affluent, leafy, tree-lined neighbourhoods: spare a thought for the local bird population.

In 2005, the MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit in Cambridge was having trouble with kamikaze pigeons. The courtyard of a brand new extension block was proving a blackspot for avian suicides, with as many as ten birds a day dive-bombing the window of the state-of-the-art lecture theatre. It didn't take long to fathom out the reason. Reflected in the glass were the surrounding trees and bushes. And the birds – like some architects I could mention – couldn't tell the difference between appearance and reality. What to do?

In contrast to the diagnosis, the remedy proved elusive. Curtains, pictures – even a scarecrow – all came to nothing. Then one day, Bundy Mackintosh, one of the researchers who worked in the building, had an idea. Why not talk to the birds in their own language?

So she did.

Mackintosh cut, out of a sheet of coloured cardboard, the profile of an eagle and then stuck it in the window. Deep in their brains, she reasoned, the birds would have a console; a sort of primitive mental dashboard on which, silhouetted as birds of prey, would appear a series of hazard warning lights. As soon as one of these predators came into view, the corresponding light would immediately flash up red – and an ancient evolutionary force-field would suddenly engulf the unit, repelling the birds and diverting them from the danger.

Problem solved.

Talking to animals in their own native tongue (as Bundy Mackintosh did in a very simple way with her cardboard and scissors) involves empathy. And learning the syntax of biological vernacular. And if you think it's just humans who can do it, think again. Biologist Karen McComb of the University of Sussex has discovered something interesting about cats: they employ a special 'solicitation purr' which hotwires their owners to fill up their food bowls at dinnertime.

McComb and her co-workers compared cat-owners' responses to different kinds of purr – and found that purrs recorded when cats were seeking food were more aversive and harder to ignore than other purrs played at the same volume.[1] The difference is one of pitch. When cats are soliciting food, they give off a classic 'mixed message' – embedding an urgent, high-pitched cry within a contented, low-pitched purr. This, according to McComb, not only safeguards against instant ejection from the bedroom (high pitch on its own) but also taps into ancient, mammalian nurturing instincts for vulnerable, dependent offspring (more on that later).

'The embedding of a cry within a call that we normally associate with contentment is quite a subtle means of eliciting a response,' explains McComb, 'and solicitation purring is probably more acceptable to humans than overt meowing.'

Or, to put it another way, cats, without the linguistic baggage of 40,000 words (the estimated vocabulary of the average English-speaking adult), have learned a faster, leaner, more efficient means of persuading us to do their bidding – exactly the same strategy that Bundy Mackintosh hit upon to 'talk' to the pigeons of Cambridge. The deployment of what is known in ethology as the *key stimulus*.

More Than Words Can Say

A key stimulus is influence in its purest form. It is neat, 200 proof mind control – undiluted by language and the thought fields of consciousness – which is knocked back straight, down the hatch, like a shot. Key stimuli are simple, unambiguous, and easily understood: persuasion as originally intended. Officially, of course, the definition is somewhat different: a key stimulus is an environmental trigger that initiates, solely by its presence, something known as a *fixed action pattern* – a unit of innate behaviour that continues, once initiated, uninterrupted to completion. But it amounts, more or less, to roughly the same thing.

Numerous incidences of key stimuli are found within the natural world, not least when it comes to mating. Some are visual, like Bundy Mackintosh's eagle silhouette. Some acoustic, like the solicitation purr. And some kinetic, like the way honeybees dance to communicate the location of a food source. Some combine all three. *Chiroxiphia pareola* is renowned for its cobalt coat, its sweet and melodious warble, and its elaborate courtship ritual (which, uniquely, involves a dominant male supported by a five-strong backing band). No, *Chiroxiphia pareola* is not the Latin for Barry White but a tropical songbird found deep in the Amazon jungle. It has a brain the size of a pea.

Chiroxiphia pareola is no member of the Seduction Community.[fn2] Yet there's nothing you can tell it about pulling. When the male of the species encounters a suitable mate he doesn't, all of a sudden, start beating around his bush. Quite the opposite, in fact. He dances straight out of it. And scores.

In certain species of frog it is sound, primarily, that makes up the language of love.[2] The Green Treefrog is one of Louisiana's most instantly recognisable critters – especially if you're tired and trying to catch forty winks. More commonly known as the Bell Frog (because of the

distinctive sound of its mating call which resembles a ringing bell: quonk, quonk, quonk), it's equally at home in a variety of different environments such as ponds, roadside ditches, rivers and swamps. Not to mention well-lit verandahs where it feeds, amongst other things, on sleep deprivation.

The acoustical arsenal of the Bell Frog is actually more complicated than it appears. When calling in unison, for instance, individuals frequently co-ordinate their efforts – and the resulting cacophony will often emerge as a harmonious (though exasperating!) 'quonk-quack, quonk-quack' refrain.[3] Research has also shown that males tend to vary their calls depending on the circumstances. At dusk, for example, as a precursor to hitting the breeding pool, they will issue a preliminary 'territorial' call (one that tells other males to back off), and then, while en route to the pool, resort to a rather more prickly-sounding chunter as they gruffly, and somewhat slothfully, bump into each other. It's only on reaching the breeding pool that they really open up – cranking up the chorus to its anthemic 'quonk quonk' finale. So resonant, in fact, is this eponymous mating call that female Bell Frogs can actually make it out from up to 300 metres away. A statistic, oddly enough, not lost on local residents.

Croak and Dagger

Up until now, the influence that we've been looking at in birds and frogs has been the kind of honest, straight-down-the-line persuasion we see repeated a million times over in human society – the only difference being that these guys do it better. From finding a partner to nailing that crucial deal, success depends on speaking a common language. And they don't come any more common than the key stimulus.

But the importance of this common language in persuasion – this mutual understanding, or empathy[fn3] – is brought into even sharper focus when we consider a completely different kind of influence, mimicry: when a member of one species assumes or manipulates the characteristics of another (though this can also occur *intra*-species) for the purposes of personal advancement.

Let's stay with Bell Frogs for the moment. For most frogs, the dating game is set in stone. I mean, face it – when all you can do is croak, there isn't much room for manoeuvre. What tends to happen is this. The males just sit there and croak … and the females, if they get lucky, come hopping. It couldn't be any simpler. But Bell Frogs have figured something out. These little buggers have incorporated an element of skulduggery into the proceedings, and it's by no means unusual for a deeply resonant baritone in full quonk to be stalked, completely unawares, by a silent, shadowy cadre of male hangers-on.

This bears testament to the steely ingenuity of natural selection. Think about it. A hard night's quonking uses up vital energy stores. And because of this, one of two things can happen. On the one hand, the caller might draw a blank, and – exhausted – hail a taxi. On the other, he might get lucky and finish up down by the breeding pool. On whichever note the evening finally ends doesn't really matter. Observe, in either case, what happens to the original calling site once its former occupant slopes off. Suddenly it goes on the market. And turns, in the process, into prime location real estate for any one of the non-quonking identity thieves to clean up in. Any unsuspecting female who shows up after the quonker has left discovers – as if nothing has changed – a non-quonking impostor in his place. But how is she to tell the difference? Bottom line is: she can't.[fn4]

Self Be-leaf

As a weapon of persuasion mimicry is ingenious. If the key stimulus is influence taken straight, then mimicry, you could say, is empathy taken straight. Just like the key stimulus, there are several different kinds – not all of which, as we've just seen with the Bell Frogs, are benign.

For a start, there's the most obvious form – visual mimicry – which is sort of what the non-quonking love rats get up to down in Louisiana. But depending on the scale of the biological forgery, and how sophisticated it is, there are also more subtle varieties that incorporate, alongside visual cues, both auditory and olfactory ones too.

A good example of this hybrid mimicry is found in plants (when I said that persuasion was integral to the natural order, I meant *all* of it). The discomycete fungus *monilinia vaccinii-corymbosi* is a plant pathogen that infects the leaves of blueberries, causing them to secrete sweet, sugary substances such as glucose and fructose.[4] When this happens something rather interesting occurs. With the leaves, in effect, now producing nectar – thus fraudulently impersonating flowers – they begin, like flowers, to attract pollinators, even though they actually look nothing like flowers and still, in every other respect apart from smell, resemble leaves. Natural selection then takes care of the rest. A bee drops by believing the sugar to be nectar. It slurps some up (during which time the fungus attaches itself to its abdomen) then subsequently moves on to the blueberry flower proper where it transfers the fungus to the ovaries. There, on the ovaries, the fungus reproduces – spawning mummified, inedible berries, which hibernate over the winter before going on to infect a fresh crop of plants in the spring. Clever, huh?

But the hustle doesn't end there. There is, it turns out, a whole other level to this seedy little love triangle. The olfactory emissions from the surface of the blueberry