

The Intellectual Foundations of the Arbinger Institute



ABOUT THE ARBINGER INSTITUTE

The Arbinger Institute delivers training, consulting, coaching, and digital tools to help individuals and organizations change mindset, transform culture, accelerate collaboration, resolve conflict, and sustainably improve results.

Arbinger introduced its ideas to a worldwide readership with its first book, *Leadership and Self-Deception*, in 2000. The book is a word-of-mouth phenomenon that has been translated into over thirty languages. This was followed by a second international best-seller, *The Anatomy of Peace*, in 2006, which presents Arbinger's unique approach to conflict resolution and personal growth. Arbinger's newest book, *The Outward Mindset*, was published in 2016. *The Outward Mindset* focuses on how to achieve mindset change both individually and organizationally.

Founded in 1979, Arbinger has worked with thousands of organizations across every industry. As a result of this thirty-five-year-plus track record with clients, Arbinger is recognized as a world leader in the areas of mindset change, leadership, team building, conflict resolution, crisis management, and culture change. Arbinger's clients range from individuals who are seeking help in their lives to many of the largest companies and governmental institutions in the world.

Worldwide interest in Arbinger's work has propelled the growth of Arbinger across the globe. Headquartered in the United States, Arbinger now has offices in over twenty countries, including throughout the Americas, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, India, Oceania, and Asia.

Arbinger's work explores the possibility that we humans are in large part self-deceived about what kind of beings we are and why we act as we do, and the quality of living available to us if we can bring our self-deceptions to an end.

To say that we might be self-deceived is to say that our beliefs about ourselves and about each other are more than merely false. They are instead falsifications—distortions of our experience for which we ourselves are responsible. In other words, we are failing, both individually and as a culture, to understand ourselves—not because of an inability to do so, but because of a willful refusal to do so. Our mindset—the fundamental manner in which we regard ourselves and others—is a systemic and deep-seated deception of ourselves by ourselves.

This is not a narrow subject. Self-deceptive attitudes are the ethical, affective, and cognitive bases of all types of human unhappiness. These attitudes include despising what we find ourselves repeatedly doing; feeling overcome by, and helpless in the face of, abuse; suffering from enmity, bitterness, vengeance, or fear—indeed, every emotion or mood in which we feel provoked, used, victimized, disturbed, or in some manner overcome. Such attitudes express the conflictedness, defensiveness, anxiety, or compulsivity which lies at the heart of the misery suffered by those who hold such attitudes.

The foundations of this work were developed by Dr. C. Terry Warner and a team of scholars he assembled to wrestle through these issues in the development of a new theory of human psychology. To embark on a theory of this scope is to rival Freud. Whereas Freud assumed that we arrive at complex models of human nature due to our psychological complexity as human subjects, Warner asked whether these models are not instead a function of our duplicity or self-deception as inquirers. If so—and the case he makes is a compelling one—we are never going to be able to understand the corruption of experience called self-deception unless we are free from self-deception. The self-understanding of human beings turns out to be not merely a scientific project, but even more fundamentally an ethical one. The result is that what starts out in Warner's work as a technical exploration of the logical puzzle of self-deception explodes, before very long,

into a sweeping examination of the ethical and ontological character of being human.

As the solutions to the theoretical problems of self-deception gradually became clear, the Arbinger Institute was formed to disseminate these ideas to individuals and organizations.

Since it is impossible in a brief overview to do justice to the depth and technical elegance of Arbinger's work, we will not attempt to do so here. Instead, we will merely attempt to isolate the central thread of logic of these ideas and to track the major points of development in the overall theory.

THE NOTION OF RESISTANCE

We start with the notion of resistance. Beginning with Freud, keen observers of human behavior have noticed that people often seem to resist letting go of the attitudes and emotions that make them miserable. They avoid the very thing that presumably would help them most to relieve the emotional pain they are suffering. What's more, this resistance bears all the signs of being planned and carried out intentionally—with the single exception that the sufferer seems unaware of planning and carrying it out intentionally. This strategic aspect of many forms of emotional suffering became the hallmark first of the cases Freud treated and then of much of what we have come to know as psychopathology; indeed, his and many later theories are constructed precisely in order to explain why individuals would ever engage in such a strategy.

But that explanation has been elusive. How is it possible for us to adopt an offense-taking and accusing attitude, whereby we feel miserable, without knowing that we are doing so? And if we know this is what we are doing, how can we take our attitude seriously? To engage in emotional behavior on purpose at most amounts to play-acting—pretending to be suffering; it is far from actually undergoing and experiencing such suffering.

The answer for Freud and countless others who have come after has been that we manage to hide what we are doing from ourselves by some slick psychological maneuvering—that's how we can suffer intentionally without being aware that this is what we are doing. But that solution has seemed to many only to answer a problem with another problem: wouldn't this hiding of what we are doing from ourselves

make the strategic resistance impossible? Wouldn't we have to know the truth very exactly, as one of Freud's critics pointed out, in order to hide it from ourselves so carefully?

The mainstream answer to this question is that although we have no conscious awareness of what we resist, we are keenly aware of it "on another level." We plan and carry out our strategy "unconsciously." This is Freud's legacy.

But such an account is unnecessary. This "solution," which bifurcates mental life into conscious and unconscious realms, is fraught with well-known conceptual problems. It simply does not work. Fortunately, we do not need it. An alternative explanation of resistance can be found that has none of its liabilities. By this explanation, which forms part of the core of Warner's work, our strategic resistance to letting go of our offense-taking and accusing attitudes does not depend on our having any awareness of our own mental operations. It completely avoids this mistake.

ATTITUDE AND JUDGMENT

A first step toward understanding this new explanation comes with noticing the judgmental character of many emotions we experience.

All offense-taking emotions and attitudes (Warner uses the broad term "attitudes" to include both) express judgments. To take offense—whether in the form of anger, resentment, hatred, envy, humiliation, etc.—is to express a judgment about the cause of the offense. To be angry, for example, is to make a judgment about the object of our anger; it is to see whomever we are angry with as doing us wrong or as treating us unfairly. The judgments expressed in offense-taking attitudes are accusing judgments.

To accuse others by means of an offense-taking attitude is to make a presentation of oneself. In resenting someone for treating us unfairly, for example, we are also presenting ourselves as being harmed or upset by that treatment. We insist that those we are accusing are causing the agitated state we are in, and that we ourselves are being victimized by them. By our self-presentation we make the claim that they are responsible for what we are suffering and that we bear no responsibility for it.

Thus we present ourselves as passive in our offense-taking/accusing attitudes. We present ourselves as "only

responding to the circumstances,” as “only reacting to what is being done to us.”

DISHONESTY

This presentation of ourselves is necessarily false. Precisely because an offense-taking attitude is a self-presentation, it is not what it pretends itself to be. It is not a passive response to the circumstances because it is an active presentation of itself as being a mere response.

This means that accusing attitudes are intrinsically, inescapably dishonest. Each is an active presentation of itself as passive rather than active. (We might say: it is a presentation whose presentation consists precisely in denying that it is a presentation.) To present ourselves as passive and not responsible as we do when maintaining an offense-taking, accusing attitude is to present ourselves falsely.

But if it is true that such attitudes are dishonest, then why don't we recognize this fact when we are having them? Why are we unable to admit our dishonesty frankly, admit that we are “up to something” in maintaining this attitude or emotion? We might want to answer that embarrassment explains why we do not admit it to others, but even if true that answer still leaves us with the question why we are not willing to admit it to ourselves. Why do we instead steadfastly believe the false presentation we make of ourselves?

SELF-DECEPTION

Even though the judgment that is part of an offense-taking, accusing attitude or emotion is false, it is impossible to have that attitude or emotion without believing the judgment to be true. Because the attitude is that judgment, to have the attitude is to make and believe that judgment. Furthermore, as long as we continue to have that attitude we will continue to believe that judgment; so when by our offense-taking attitude or emotion we accuse another, (1) our accusation is necessarily false, and (2) just as necessarily, we believe it. To adopt such an offense-taking, accusing attitude or emotion is to deceive ourselves.

Self-deception of this kind consists of our having an attitude or emotion the falsity of which we cannot possibly discern. In its nature, such an attitude is a self-deception. Because it accuses others of causing it, we cannot, in having such an attitude, see that we and not those we are accusing are responsible for it.

What Warner's argument shows so far is that an offense-taking, accusing attitude is a lie and that while we have such an attitude we cannot see that it is a lie.

But by itself this is not enough to explain resistance. It explains why an accusing attitude is a self-deception, but it doesn't explain why we continue in self-deception. What prevents us from simply giving up the lie—giving up our accusing attitude—and admitting the truth?

SELF-DECEPTION AS EXPERIENCE

Because our false judgment against others and for ourselves is part of an accusing attitude or emotion, we actually experience ourselves as being offended or misused or taken advantage of when we make this judgment. We actually feel humiliated by or angry with or resentful toward those we are accusing. For this reason we cannot doubt that our judgment is true. We cannot seriously call it into question. For to doubt the truth of our judgment against others—to doubt, for example, that they are causing us to feel humiliated—would be to doubt whether we are really feeling humiliated. And about that we can have no doubt, because in that very moment we are in fact feeling humiliated.

Moreover, any suggestion that we are not really feeling that way can only be interpreted by us as meaning that we are merely pretending to feel humiliated. But since we know we are not merely pretending, this idea can only strike us as preposterous in the extreme.

Thus the attitude and feelings we have toward others when we accuse them “prove” to us that our accusation is true. Although illogical, in our accusing mind our anger or resentment or envy itself stands as firm evidence that those we are accusing are guilty.

So the reason we can't admit the truth when our attitude or emotion is accusing is that we cannot even see this truth. The only alternative we can see to the judgment that others are responsible for making us feel as we do is the possibility that we don't really feel as we do. And this we know is absurd.

It is because our false judgment on the one hand and our attitude or emotion on the other are inseparably connected—one thing described in two different ways—that we cannot fail to be convinced that this judgment is true and to preclude ourselves from entertaining even the possibility that we might be wrong. Self-deception permeates experience.

But we still need to know what accounts for the resistant quality of self-deception. If we “just know” we are right in our offense-taking, accusing attitudes toward others, then why do we seem to hold those attitudes so insistently? Why do we seem to be resisting something in the way we hold them?

A SELF-TROUBLING ACT

One of the essential features of any accusing, offense-taking attitude, as we have seen, is its self-presentational character. To have such an attitude or emotion is to present ourselves as being free of responsibility for it, to make an assertion, by our manner if not our words, that we are free of this responsibility. The implications of this truth about offense-taking, self-asserting attitudes and emotions are sweeping.

First of all, such attitudes are inherently negative. They are denials of responsibility. “You are the problem here,” when asserted by means of an accusing attitude or emotion, is inseparably linked with the protestation, “I’m not the problem here.” Though we are capable of purely affirmative attitudes and emotions, such as love, delight, and grief, the varieties of offense-taking are not among them. Self-assertion always consists of a denial.

Second—and this is a further implication—by consisting of a denial, an offense-taking attitude or emotion calls attention to the possibility of its own falsehood. To insist by the way we present ourselves that we are not responsible calls attention to the possibility that we might be responsible after all. Our insistence raises, and calls attention—others’ attention and our own—to the very possibility it denies. We raise in our own minds the possibility that we might be responsible for it after all.

Thus our self-presenting act of maintaining an accusing attitude is inherently troubled, agitated, self-disturbing. It is troubled by the upsetting possibility that what it claims might be false, and that in claiming this, the act itself might be fraudulent. An experienced challenge to its own credibility and honesty inheres in the performance of any such attitude or emotion. Anxiety permeates its interior. It constantly raises the possibility of its own fraudulence by denying it.

This possibility—that this challenge to our credibility and honesty might have merit—is what we resist. And it is a possibility raised by our offense-taking attitude itself. That attitude thus creates the very challenge it resists. It troubles

itself. Constant self-assertion equals constant anxiety equals constant resistance.

Strangely, the challenge produces this deep anxiety and elicits this resistance even while completely lacking credibility. We know it to be preposterous. And yet we continue, agitated, troubled, disturbed. In our minds, our experience of feeling offended absolutely validates our judgment. The explanation for this turns upon the fundamental fact that the accusing attitude or emotion and the judgment made by means of it are one and the same. The idea that we might be wrong has got to be preposterous because we are actually experiencing offended feelings. But at the same time, we cannot ignore this challenge as we would some other utterly preposterous accusation because we keep throwing it in our own face as long as we continue to have these feelings.

Third, what we resist in deceiving ourselves— in having accusing, offense-taking attitudes—is not any sort of truth. It is not what we might believe or acknowledge if only we were not deceiving ourselves. What we resist is a possibility created by our accusation and by our denial of that accusation. This means that, contrary to Freudian models, our self-deception is not an avoidance or repression of an awareness we find threatening. It is not an act—a logically impossible act—of intentionally hiding anything from ourselves. We create what we resist by resisting it. Offense-taking is resistant and can never cease to be. The only way to end the self-deception is not to admit a truth resisted, since there is no such truth, but to cease creating the falsehood resisted. The only way to end the self-deception is to cease taking offense.

THE TOTALITY OF SELF-DECEPTION

In our self-induced self-deception, we cannot see, cannot fathom, the possibility that those we accuse are not guilty and we are not innocent. We have discovered why: it would mean doubting the experience we are having even while having it. The horizon of possibilities that we can entertain while in this condition excludes the truth. All the alternative interpretations of our circumstances available to us are false. We have in effect created for ourselves a virtual reality, our preoccupation with which keeps us from being able to suspect its inauthenticity and imagine reality itself.

The attitudes which account for much human unhappiness—the feelings in which we take ourselves to be provoked, used, victimized, or in some manner overcome—are resistant to change because of the kinds of attitudes they are. Because they are accusations of others and presentations of ourselves, such attitudes are intrinsically resistant.

What does this intrinsic resistance imply about “hidden” motivation—about the role of unconscious processes in explaining resistance?

HIDDEN MOTIVATION AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

The falsity of our belief in others’ guilt and our own innocence, when we adopt offense-taking, accusing attitudes and emotions, is not some hidden fact of which we are aware “on some level” but resist. Instead, what we resist is created by and part of our self-deception, and only arises with it. What appears to motivate our defensive and insistent attitude is a function or product of the attitude itself.

This means that the hypothesis of unconscious processes is superfluous. Such processes were invented to supply the motivation for resistance. But resistance can be fully and coherently accounted for without reference to any such “hidden” processes.

The idea of the unconscious, then, is doubly deficient. It is self-contradictory, hypothesizing motives—supposedly attended to and unknown at the same time—that logically cannot play the part assigned to them. And it is theoretically extraneous: what it wants to explain—self-deceived behavior—can be explained without postulating any hidden process.

The attitudes and emotions by which we make ourselves miserable, then, are intrinsically resistant and intrinsically self-deceptive. Their natural structure is such that we resist changing them even while experiencing the misery they entail. Making ourselves miserable and resisting change are two sides of one coin.

The question now is: Why does anyone ever have such defensive and accusing attitudes in the first place? In what context and for what reason do they arise at all?

SELF-BETRAYAL

Let us call an act in which we do what we feel to be wrong an act of “self-betrayal.” In such an act, we go against our own endorsement or assent to the rightness, for us,

of a particular course of action. We go against our own fundamental moral commitments. We betray ourselves.

The only way we can carry off this self-betrayal is to do it hypocritically—to do it in a way that makes the wrong we are doing appear right, or at least not wrong. It is to do all we can do, given that we are doing wrong, to make this wrong, this refusal to do right, morally conscientious. Of course we cannot make it conscientious in fact, since it is not. But we can insist by the way we do it that it is morally conscientious. We present ourselves so. Self-betrayal is always concerned to justify itself.

In this assertion of conscientiousness, we acknowledge the sovereignty, for us, of the morality or rectitude that we are refusing to be governed by. In the way we dishonor it, which is by trying to justify ourselves, we honor it. We live a lie.

This self-justifying lie takes the form of an accusation. We blame others in order to shift responsibility for the wrong we are doing away from ourselves. This is how we present ourselves as morally conscientious. In our warped perception, others’ blameworthiness excuses us if our acts are less than exemplary (“How can she expect me to be considerate when she acts the way she does?”). And it brings us credit if, despite our belief that we are being mistreated, we nevertheless behave in the manner of a conscientious person (“I will treat her considerably even though she doesn’t remotely deserve it”). Since in blaming the other person we actually feel offended, we can convince ourselves that whatever we do is all right—we are justified if we give into the provocation we are feeling and justified if we “nobly” rise above it.

(Nobly rising above a provocation is a case of self-betrayal because even there we are failing to do what we are assenting to do—even there we are not really being considerate but are instead displaying our moral superiority through a self-righteous deigning-to-be-considerate.)

The two responses are just variant ways to act upon the accusing attitude or emotion to which the self-betrayal gives rise. In one, we blame another for our failure to do what we, in the very act, are endorsing as right for us to do, and by this means exonerate ourselves. In the other, we “rise above” the mistreatment we feel sure we are receiving and, in our behavior though not in our feelings, do as we feel we ought to do—we do “the best a person can” when feeling so

mistreated. Both courses of action are ways of carrying out the basic self-betrayal.

Accusing attitudes and emotions—the psychological conditions in which we self-deceivingly make ourselves miserable—originate in self-betrayal. The ultimate accounting for them is moral or ethical. This explains why in having an accusing attitude or emotion moral or ethical issues dominate our attention: we make excuses, we fault others, and we defend ourselves. These would not be issues for us if we were at peace with ourselves morally and ethically.

REALITY

The picture of the social world as an arena of intrinsically self-seeking and defensive beings—as “a paranormal of allergic egos,” in Emmanuel Levinas’s description—is a virtual reality, the product of the technology of defense inevitably employed by self-betrayers. Freed from this virtual reality, we would see others and ourselves differently, truthfully. It would be clear to us that their accusations of us and their defense of themselves have nothing whatever to do with us, but only express their own struggle to save themselves in their self-betrays. Hence we would have no occasion to take offense, no need to accuse them in return. The end of attitudinal and emotional misery comes only with renunciation of self-betrayal.

The question that began this introduction to Warner’s work was: How and why do we resist changing the very emotions that make us miserable? The answer is, these emotions and attitudes are accusing and inherently dishonest—and for this reason they are intrinsically resistant. They are inherently self-perpetuating because they are inherently self-deceptive.

The final question was: Why does anyone ever have such attitudes to begin with? The answer is: self-betrayal. When we betray ourselves we generate attitudes by which we blame others and justify ourselves. These accusing attitudes are our self-deceptions. Our unhappiness—the miserable emotions we seem unable to change—arise from our wrong-doings, as efforts to be justified in them.

All of this means that to deceive ourselves in these attitudes, and to resist change, is not to perform a special act of mental subterfuge or concealment, as Freud and his theoretical cousins have thought. It is simply to perform this ordinary act—self-betrayal—whose very properties are self-deceiving and thus self-perpetuating.

As a brief sketch of the central thread of Warner’s argument, this treatment obviously omits most of Warner’s actual work. Nevertheless, some of its sweeping implications (all of which have been explored by Warner, and some of which appear in the accompanying essays) should be apparent.

For one thing, a corollary of this argument is the centrality of moral experience in understanding all of human conduct. Far from being just one dimension of human personality, moral experience seems instead to be the very ground of human personality.

Second, to be in self-betrayal is not to modify our experience in peripheral ways; it is to enter a whole new way of being, and to inhabit a virtual reality in which others are to be resented and we ourselves freed from responsibility. It is to distort our experience, both of ourselves and others, in a radical and unhappy manner.

Third, we can no longer think of social interaction in the familiar ways we are accustomed to. To the extent we are self-deceiving, we do not act independently of one another. We take whatever others may be doing as our excuse for our accusing treatment of them, and thereby give them excuse for their mistreatment of us. Together we create and reinforce for one another the self-deceived reality in which we each feel unfairly treated, and each are convinced we alone are completely justified.

Fourth, understanding self-betrayal and the nature of the self-deception it generates alters our understanding of the very idea of understanding. What we believe about ourselves and others is the product of our moral or ethical responses. We cannot control our social cognitions cognitively; we can only control them morally.

Fifth, reality differs profoundly from what we believe when we are entrapped in offense-taking attitudes or emotions. We have glimpses of this in our best moments, while we are deluded about the possibility of this reality when we betray ourselves. Freedom from self-betrayal means inhabiting reality.

Sixth, the view of human nature embodied in Warner’s work transforms our understanding of personal and social change. It explains (a) why genuine change—change in one’s very way of being—is possible at all, (b) what its structure is when it occurs, and (c) how the conditions for such change can (and cannot) be deliberately pursued.