WE ARE ALL INTUITIVE POLITICIANS

If you see one hundred insects working together toward a common goal, it's a sure bet they're siblings. But when you see one hundred people working on a construction site or marching off to war, you'd be astonished if they all turned out to be members of one large family. Human beings are the world champions of cooperation beyond kinship, and we do it in large part by creating systems of formal and informal accountability. We're really good at holding others accountable for their actions, and we're really skilled at navigating through a world in which others hold us accountable for our own.

Phil Tetlock, a leading researcher in the study of accountability, defines accountability as the "explicit expectation that one will be called upon to justify one's beliefs, feelings, or actions to others," coupled with an expectation that people will reward or punish us based on how well we justify ourselves. When nobody is answerable to anybody, when slackers and cheaters go unpunished, everything falls apart. (How zealously people punish slackers and cheaters will emerge in later chapters as an important difference between liberals and conservatives.)

Tetlock suggests a useful metaphor for understanding how people behave within the webs of accountability that constitute human societies: we act like *intuitive politicians* striving to maintain appealing moral identities in front of our multiple constituencies. Rationalists such as Kohlberg and Turiel portrayed children as little scientists who use logic and experimentation to figure out the truth for themselves. When we look at children's efforts to understand the physical world, the scientist metaphor is apt; kids really are formulating and testing hypotheses, and they really do converge, gradually, on the truth. But in the social world, things are different, according to Tetlock. The social world is Glauconian. Appearance is usually far more important than reality.

In Tetlock's research, subjects are asked to solve problems and make decisions. For example, they're given information about a legal case and then asked to infer guilt or innocence. Some subjects are told that they'll have to explain their decisions to someone else. Other subjects know that they won't be held accountable by anyone. Tetlock found that when left to their own devices, people show the usual catalogue of errors, laziness, and reliance on gut feelings that has been documented in so much decision-making research. But when people know in advance that they'll have to explain themselves, they think more systematically and self-critically. They are less likely to jump to premature conclusions and more

likely to revise their beliefs in response to evidence.

That might be good news for rationalists—maybe we can think carefully whenever we believe it matters? Not quite. Tetlock found two very different kinds of careful reasoning.*Exploratory thought* is an "evenhanded consideration of alternative points of view." *Confirmatory thought* is "a one-sided attempt to rationalize a particular point of view." Accountability increases exploratory thought only when three conditions apply: (1) decision makers learn before forming any opinion that they will be accountable to an audience, (2) the audience's views are unknown, and (3) they believe the audience is well informed and interested in accuracy.

When all three conditions apply, people do their darnedest to figure out the truth, because that's what the audience wants to hear. But the rest of the time—which is almost all of the time—accountability pressures simply increase confirmatory thought. People are trying harder to *look* right than to *be* right. Tetlock summarizes it like this:

> A central function of thought is making sure that one acts in ways *that can be persuasively justified or excused to others*. Indeed, the process of considering the justifiability of one's choices may be so prevalent that decision makers not only search for convincing reasons to make a choice when they must explain that choice to others, *they search for reasons to convince themselves*that they have made the "right" choice.

Tetlock concludes that conscious reasoning is carried out largely for the purpose of persuasion, rather than discovery. But Tetlock adds that we are also trying to persuade ourselves. We want to believe the things we are about to say to others. In the rest of this chapter I'll review five bodies of experimental research supporting Tetlock and Glaucon. Our moral thinking is much more like a politician searching for votes than a scientist searching for truth.