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Trends. Too Good To Be True as the Good and the True: The Political Psychology of the Con

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Abstract: This article discusses the psychology of cons (confidence games), or swindles.

Constructs such as pyramid scheme and confidence game suggest that there are timeless heuristic vulnerabilities that can be exploited by people who do not merit confidence. Cases in point include the pyramid schemes that collapsed in Albania in 1997 and just recently in Haiti. Other cases comprise the highly frequent--if petty--scams that characterize daily life. Still other cases pertain to egregious misbehaviors that have recently been publicized concerning more than several huge corporations in the United States.

The most common attributions of social cognition and motivation offered by observers of the human condition to explain the timelessness of being fleeced include human greed, overconfidence in data analysis, impulsiveness elicited by the possibility of huge material gain, and fantasy encompassing the prestige and respect soon to be awarded by friends and social contacts once the huge material gain--one's ship--comes into port. Themes permeating such attributional analyses involve how to fool all, some, or one of the people all or some of the time or just once.

One might surmise that the timelessness of confidence betrayal suggests that people are timelessly foolish or can be. However, the timeless aspect may also suggest that more is going on than just foolishness. Or, for such foolishness to persevere across huge spans of time, something more than foolishness is at issue.

Associated with or more than foolishness may be the unfoolish notion that most of what is good and true is too good to be true. Most of what is sought as the exemplar of material, psychological, or spiritual existence may be rarely obtained or only approximated. What looks like an obvious example of too good to be true does at times turn out to be good and true. The at times may be low probability but living the high probability life of obtaining neither good nor true may not be living at all.

Whether it is leading an honest life, choosing the right spouse, or making the best deal, the odds as depicted by classical statistics are not in our favor. Does this mean that we should cease striving for the rarely or even the seemingly unattainable? When behavior is attributed as foolish, the ex post facto wisdom is literally not to strive for what one truly desires. One is left with the choice between the mundane and magnificent or the common and uncommon.

In conclusion, the timelessness of the con also may be imbued with the confidence that one's ship can come in and does some of the time to some people. Choosing not to engage may ensure that instead of being tricked by others, we have tricked ourselves. And it is this aspect of the human condition that serves both as vulnerability for those who seek to con and as magisterial striving for those who seek to live. (See Gonzalez, D. (July 26, 2002). A get-rich scheme collapses, leaving Haiti even poorer. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Leo, R.A. (1996). Miranda's revenge: police interrogation as a confidence game. *Law and Society Review*, 30, 259-288; McCaghy, C.H., & Nogier, J. (1984). Envelope stuffing at home: A quasi confidence game. *Deviant Behavior*, 5, 105-119; Snyder, R.J. (1986). Gambling

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swindles and victims. *Journal of Gambling Behavior*, 2, 50-57; Sullivan, K., & Winner, E. (1993). Three-year-olds' understanding of mental states: The influence of trickery. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 56, 135-148.) (Keywords: Cognition, Deception.)