Self-Regulation and Political Confabulation

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Abstract
In this paper, I discuss the nature and consequences of confabulation about political opinions and behaviours. When people confabulate, they give reasons for their choices or behaviour which are ill-grounded and do not capture what really brought the behaviour about, but they do this with no intention to deceive and endorse their own accounts. I suggest that this can happen when people are asked why they voted a certain way, or support certain campaigns, and so on. Confabulating in these political contexts seems bad because we do not get a fully truthful account of why some political choice was made, and so the reasoning behind the choice is under-scrutinised. However, I argue that if people have a virtue of self-regulation, confabulation in political contexts can actually be part of the process of coming to better understand our political choices and embody more consistently the political values which we ascribe to.

When individuals make political decisions, such as voting for certain parties or supporting certain campaigns, they often give and receive explanations for why they are inclined to choose or behave in that way. Others who hear those explanations can find them implausible, unsatisfying and even frustrating. Imagine a woman who decides to vote for the UK to leave the European Union. When her peers ask her why she decided to vote in that way, she says that she doesn't like the power and influence from Europe in the UK and that it costs the UK too much money to be in the European Union. However, her peers are surprised to hear this because she did not seem to have paid any attention at all to these things before casting her vote. They suspect that other things, such as a sense of national pride, might have had a more powerful sway on her coming to vote for Brexit.

Explanations which are unsatisfying in this way may be frustrating because they are confabulations. When individuals confabulate, they don't track what has really brought about their decisions and actions, and they get something wrong about the world. Sometimes this means that harmful and irrational political decisions do not receive the scrutiny they deserve, from the individual giving the explanation or from others who receive it.

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Individuals confabulate in many different contexts, whether it be consumer choice, moral convictions, or aesthetic preferences (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Hall et al, 2010; Haidt, 2001; Wilson et al, 1993). After elaborating on what confabulation is, in this essay I will explore confabulation in the context of politically charged decisions and behaviours, which have the potential to significantly affect the lives of many other people. Confabulations also often reflect self-concepts (i.e., traits and values which individuals ascribe to themselves) and identities (the type of person they see themselves overall as being).

It seems that confabulation is something we should try to avoid in political decision-making, but despite the problems it can cause, I will argue that confabulation can be an integral part of individuals coming to scrutinize their political actions further and make relevant changes to either their outlook or their political decision-making. Specifically, I suggest people will need the virtue of 'self-regulation' to do so. Exercising this virtue results in good management of the self, such that there is a good alignment between the descriptions someone gives of themselves and the reality of their behaviour. The virtue of self-regulation will consist in various attitudes such as being open-minded, curious, and receptive to the ideas of others about oneself.[1] With these attitudes in place, even confabulatory justifications of harmful behaviour can be conducive to the formation of behaviour which better aligns with values, in the long run. Both confabulation, recognised as a form of epistemic engagement and curiosity, and the virtue of self-regulation, as something which enables individuals to embody their professed values, can therefore be valuable.

I will focus on explanations which people gave for voting for significant political change, such as in voting for Brexit, or for Donald Trump, or in campaigning against lockdown restrictions during the Coronavirus pandemic.[2] I am interested in how confabulatory explanations made references to highly valued political ideals in order to justify

[1] The attitudes which I outline as contributing to the virtue of self-regulation draw on ideas by DeBruin and Strijbos (2019) about attitudes which make up what they term 'self-know-how'; a skillset which enables individuals to preserve first person authority of their self-ascriptions despite confabulation.

[2] Elsewhere, Lisa Bortolotti and I (2022) argue that justifications of certain behaviours during the global Covid-19 pandemic – particularly of behaviours which flouted the rules – were confabulatory and referred to distinctly political themes.

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choices and behaviour. However, in these cases of confabulation, the explanations mask that the actions do not actually reflect and embody the values they refer to. This is not good for the agent, and if the value is a positive one, any harm incurred by not actually embodying the positive value can harm others and this harm is hidden. For example, in being mistaken about an action of theirs truly embodying compassion, that individual may inadvertently harm others.

1. What is confabulation?

Given how widely prevalent confabulation is, it is important to consider what influence it could be having in political contexts which are so often pressed with moral concern and expressions of one's identity. Confabulation has raised questions about the possibility and reliability of self-knowledge, and whether agents really are in any better a position to know their own mental states precisely because they are their own (Scaife, 2014). However, I think that the occurrence of confabulation highlights underlying features and motivations of how and why individuals give reasons for their behaviour, which are not necessarily bad. This will become clearer throughout my paper.

Confabulation was originally studied in the context of psychiatric disorders, where it is often seen as a component of a number of conditions such as Alzheimer's, Anosognosia, or Korsakoff's syndrome (Hirstein, 2005). However, I am focusing on less severe instances of confabulation which occur in everyday situations with healthy individuals. When people are asked why they have some belief or why they have behaved a certain way, they may confabulate if they do not actually have an accurate answer (Sullivan-Bissett, 2015, p. 552). This is the crux and mystery of confabulation; instead of their attention being drawn to their lack of explanation, individuals produce an explanation which they do sincerely believe. However, these explanations are 'ill-grounded' (Bortolotti, 2018, p. 237). This means that their answers are not based on the relevant evidence and fail to capture what actually brought that behaviour about. Their answers often include false statements about the world.

Crucially, confabulators do not realise that their confabulations are ill-grounded in this way, and that they can't be giving an accurate account of why they came to behave in the way that they did. There's no intention to deceive, as they fully endorse the account they put forward, thinking that it is the truth. This is partly because they do not have access to, or don't know of, more accurate

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explanations of their behaviour (Bortolotti, 2020, p. 15). This might be because some cognitive processes operate at the sub-conscious level and then individuals cannot know through introspection about the source of, for example, their intuitions or gut feelings, or of subtle external influences on their thinking and behaviour. This is the kind of 'gap' which can be filled with confabulation.

For example, in one study, participants read a vignette about a brother and sister who decide to sleep together, and are then asked to give reasons why the act was morally right or wrong (Haidt, 2001). Participants often gave reasons that cited factors which the vignette made clear did not apply; the siblings used contraception and their relationship was not affected, and so concerns about pregnancy and damage to the relationship were not applicable and could not have driven the moral judgement. When participants are reminded that these concerns do not apply, they continue to believe that the act was wrong nevertheless and are uncomfortably 'dumbfounded' as to why. Haidt suggests that these reasons were produced post-hoc, after a strong initial gut feeling of moral disgust. This disgust is what actually drove their decision, rather than the moral reasoning offered (ibid, p. 815).

Why do people do this? There are various possible motivations. Individuals do not want to be without an answer, unable to explain themselves and embarrassingly dumbfounded (Sullivan-Bissett, 2015, p. 552). But more generally, individuals want to provide an explanation which, although it may not be strictly accurate, meets other needs for them. They are motivated by the need to have a causal understanding of themselves and the circumstances they are in (Coltheart, 2017). They want to signal to other people that they are rational, competent, and trustworthy, (Ganapini, 2020) and so they are motivated to provide explanations which present themselves positively and protect positive self-concepts (Sullivan-Bissett, 2015, p. 552). Other, perhaps more accurate explanations such as 'I just felt like it' or 'I did it at random' put them at risk of looking foolish or unkind. So, individuals want to provide explanations which paint good pictures of themselves.

Confabulations can serve as explanations and justifications, and they often take a narrative form. These things have powerful benefits for people; weaving experiences and behaviour into a sense-making story or narrative helps people understand them and give them meaning (Örulv and Hydén, 2006). And then, these narratives facilitate social communication and the sharing of themes and values which are important to them (Stammers, 2018). Individuals might be particularly keen to fulfil these needs when it comes to moral

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issues, as is seen in Haidt's study. Individuals feel strongly about these topics and want other people to know that they are good, trustworthy, and share the same values.

Overall, I suggest that we can characterise something as confabulation if the explanation has the following features:

(1) It is produced post-hoc and the reasons given are not the ones which truly led the individual to act in that way.

(2) It is a false or ill-grounded explanation, in that it says something false about the outside world or, in some circumstances, is technically correct but only by chance.

(3) It is motivated in the ways discussed above; to paint a certain picture of the agent, and/or to create and communicate what is meaningful to them.

2. Politically charged confabulation.

I suggest that individuals will have a tendency to confabulate in explaining and justifying politically charged decisions and behaviours. Our political views can be close to our hearts, forming significant parts of our identities and relating closely to our moral views. Political choices affect not only ourselves and the people around us, but how we are represented on a global stage and work alongside other global bodies and powers. This motivates giving explanations, particularly ones that make us look rational and good, even if they do not accurately reflect the facts of the matter.

A number of tumultuous events recently have brought this out. Britain unexpectedly voted to leave the European Union in 2016, Donald Trump was controversially elected president of the USA in the same year, and in 2020 world governments had to navigate a global pandemic owing to the Covid-19 virus. Each of these events brought our moral convictions to the surface, as the consequences were highly significant for huge numbers of people. Individuals were keen to be able to justify their own decisions and to demand explanations from others for their choices. All these events were also plagued with issues of 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' being circulated, causing confusion, and making it difficult to know the facts of the matter. Sometimes this could provide more convenient versions of the 'truth'.

Return to the example of the woman explaining her decision to vote for Brexit, whose statements are found unconvincing. Perhaps the woman in question is generally quite patriotic, feeling particularly proud and protective of her country and its values. She is therefore

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drawn to the idea of Brexit through gut feeling, but she is not fully aware of the source of this inclination. After she votes for Brexit, she is asked by her friends why she did so. She doesn't want to seem politically ignorant or to have made such an important political decision flippantly, so she thinks about all the campaigning she saw for Vote Leave even though she didn't actually pay much attention to it before now. She recites that voting leave secures freedom from European lawmakers, means that the UK will keep more money, and will curb rates of immigration. She is confident that these are the reasons why she voted for Brexit.

I suggest that this kind of response is confabulatory; the reasons she gives for voting for Brexit never particularly crossed her mind in the run up to voting to leave, so the explanation is post-hoc. Her answer doesn't capture that her patriotic gut feelings and negative intuitions about European influence were factors in her coming to vote for Brexit, and so has feature (1) from the previous section.

We can see this kind of mechanism at play in considering the controversial case of extensive targeted advertising being used to show pro-Brexit advertisements to millions of people on facebook (BBC 2018). This could have had a significant impact on people's choices and the outcome of the referendum, yet this influence likely stemmed from merely an increased sense of familiarity with basic pro-Brexit sentiments and values. This could have contributed to, for example, our imagined voter's unexamined nationalistic gut feelings. But importantly, this is not a carefully considered change in decision-making. It is unlikely that the individuals would have endorsed this intervention on their decision-making, and agents are more likely to produce confabulatory explanations such as the one our voter gives, than acknowledge the role of persistent advertising on their decision. In overlooking the influence of these more basic feelings of familiarity and intuition in explanations, and instead citing more complex political and economic reasons for their decisions, confabulators are wrong about the psychological processes which led to their decisions.

The explanation also has feature (2); the explanation makes demonstrably false statements about the world. Specifically, her answer draws on false statements about the reality and scale of immigration. Rates of immigration are widely misconceived in the UK, with people guessing that the proportion of immigrants in the population is twice as high as it actually is (Ipsos Mori, 2014). Her answer also draws on false statements about how much money the UK sends to the EU, how it is spent, and how it may in fact be received back, facts that were difficult to ascertain even for experts. Yet, our

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Brexit voter doesn't convey this in her simple assertion that the UK 'pays too much money' to the EU. It is also false to say that she paid considerable attention to these political and economic factors, deliberating about them *before* coming to make her choice. It is important to note that these are not incorrect beliefs which she acts on; she acts on her nationalistic intuition and draws on these mistaken beliefs in her confabulation because they make her decision seem more rational and acceptable.

I have used an example of voting for Brexit because it is an example of a politically charged explanation which is likely to have particularly high pressures to preserve positive self-concepts, as described in feature (3). This is because, akin to going against government-mandated lockdown regulations and voting for Trump, these were political behaviours which aroused particularly strong reactions and were votes for substantial change rather than for keeping more established political arrangements. Therefore, our voter is subject to particularly stark pressures to provide an explanation which justifies (in her eyes) her actions, meeting feature (3). She produced this explanation for her choice because she wanted to be able to share and communicate her values relating to Britain and Brexit with her friends when they asked, and not to seem uneducated on the issue or that she didn't actually have a particularly firm reason for voting as she did. One way that she makes her decision particularly acceptable and appealing to others is by drawing on a valued cultural ideal. Specifically, the value of freedom, particularly from European influence and law-making, was one such valued cultural ideal which she drew on and ascribed to herself. Anti-lockdown movements and marking the end of lockdown as 'freedom day' similarly drew on the same value, and so confabulatory explanations for rejecting measures to contain Covid-19 could work in the same way, emphasising a cultural and personal value for the individual at the expense of acknowledging scientific data and expert opinion on the spread of coronavirus.

This is not to say that explanations for voting in other directions (for Remain, for the Democrats etc.) could not also draw on rousing personal and political values which might not be strictly relevant, as nearly all political decision-making will bring pressures to confabulate. But the cases of Brexit and rejecting lockdown also provide a clear example of drawing on similar political values. For instance, the day the UK left the European Union (31 January 2020) and the final day of UK lockdown (19 July 2021) were both heralded as 'Freedom Day' (Duffield, 2021; Honeycombe-Foster, 2019). The political ideal of freedom is highly valued in the UK,

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and so it is powerful in glossing these political choices with some good-looking purpose.

3. Harms and costs of confabulation.

We are now in the position where an imperfect, confabulatory explanation has been offered, and the individual seems worse off for it. She is unaware of not having had a particularly well-formed reason for her decision and does not seem to be prompted to check whether her conceptions about, for example, immigration, are accurate.

The first type of concern relates to feature (1) of confabulations, when agents are wrong about the reasons they acted in some way and sometimes falsely posit certain psychological processes as being behind a decision. One reason we might care about agents 'filling in this gap' with an inaccurate explanation is that highly valued ideals get mis-applied, with consequences for others. For example, the decision to call the final day of the UK lockdown 'freedom day' was criticised for being directly at odds with the reality of the situation for many. For example, vulnerable individuals and young people who were not able to be vaccinated had to give up many freedoms in order to shield, and precipitating a fourth lockdown would reduce freedoms, and finally overloading the NHS to the point of barely functioning reduces freedoms (Ahuja, 2021).

It can sometimes seem that an individual's political choices bring about states of affairs which do not necessarily reflect that value very much. But, in their confabulations individuals draw on these highly valued political ideals and nevertheless ascribe them to themselves because it justifies the behaviour for them and satisfies other motivations in play described in feature (3); to have an explanation and understanding of one's decisions. We would want requests to explain and justify these decisions to be met with earnest thought and scrutiny, but this seems to be lost when a confabulation is offered instead. This fits the behaviour into a story that justifies it, protecting the reputation and self-concepts of the individual, and even imbuing it with a noble personal and political value.

A second type of concern arising from confabulation relates to feature (2) of confabulations; making ill-grounded claims. In drawing on false statements about the world, by fitting these false statements into narratives which make the decision more acceptable and rational, confabulation discourages the agent from thinking further about the possible falsity of those claims. Inaccurate claims about the nature of coronavirus put other people's health and lives

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at risk, as well as the wider project of containing the virus. Yet these false claims will be reinforced for a person if they are propping up a confabulatory explanation which holds meaning for them.

4. The role of confabulation in self-regulation.

So far, I have described what confabulation in political contexts looks like and why we might not welcome it. In the rest of this essay I will argue that political confabulation can be beneficial alongside a virtue of self-regulation.

I have already touched upon some of the motivations which underlie confabulation; people want to have an understanding, to display certain concepts of themselves, to construct meaningful narratives of their experiences, and to communicate them with others. These are very worthwhile endeavours which bring great benefits to people. Not only is it psychologically valuable to be able to organise our experiences into a coherent story which makes sense, but individuals can use these crafted personal identities and senses of themselves to actually guide their future behaviours, making them a reality (Velleman, 2006). Bortolotti suggests that confabulation can even mean that in the long-run, agents end up with *more* accurate beliefs about themselves and the world. This is because in giving reasons, even though they may not be accurate, their sense of agency is emboldened, their self-concepts are enhanced, and they engage with peers (2018, pp. 239–40). This 'active engagement with the world is also an epistemic goal' (2018, p. 241). Agents can receive feedback from others on their explanations and begin to think more explicitly about their behaviour and what is driving it. So, there is not anything distinctly bad about the motivations which individuals have for confabulating. They are primarily for understanding, for meaningfulness, and for connectedness with others.

However, there seem to be frustrating cases of confabulation in which someone re-casts themselves and the situation again and again in a way which preserves their good self-image, even when it's not deserved. In these kinds of cases, a good picture of the person continues, whilst the harmful and misguided reality of their behaviour continues too. There's an uncomfortable gap between what they *do* and what they *say*. Ideally, we want people to be able to bridge this gap; to give more accurate explanations of what is driving their behaviour, or for their behaviour to more reliably and consistently reflect an appreciation and adherence to these values. If every time someone is confronted for not wearing a mask they

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passionately espouse the value of personal freedom, they might only become more entrenched into that narrative despite the fact that they actually just couldn't be bothered to wear a mask and are indirectly curbing the personal freedoms of others.

So, while this is far from guaranteed, confabulation has the potential to impress valued self-concepts more explicitly into one's own mind and guide future behaviour to reflect those concepts and values.

5. The virtue of self-regulation.

The virtue of self-regulation will function like Cathy Mason's virtue of hope as described in this collection; as a structural virtue (2022). That is, rather than being directly related to a motivation for perceiving and responding correctly to certain values in the world, self-regulation is a valuable form of self-government which is called for in certain kinds of situations.

The situations which will call for the virtue of self-regulation are ones in which someone faces a possible inconsistency between their self-ascriptions and their behaviour, which is likely to happen when someone confabulates. Self-regulation is the matter of being able to effectively re-align these inconsistencies.[3] I suggest that someone with the virtue of self-regulation will be: open-minded about what may in fact be influencing their behaviour which is not being captured in confabulatory justifications; will be curious and attentive towards their own feelings, motivations and what may be causing them; will be receptive to the feedback received from others on the accuracy of their self-ascriptions, and will have the right amount of confidence in self-ascriptions such that they are not defended even in the face of compelling evidence to the contrary but neither do they crumble under the slightest pressure.

These attitudes are complex in that they equip the individual with the disposition to behave in the relevant ways when required (for

[3] Leon DeBruin and Derek Strijbos (2019) suggest that in order to close this gap, it helps if people have certain self-directed attitudes that make up a sort of skilful 'know-how' (as opposed to propositional knowledge of self-related facts). I also draw on their idea that how one goes about closing the gap is more important (and what we value more in others) than the gap itself, whether this be a large gap, as in cases of people with poor self-regulation, or a very small gap. They even describe *perfect* alignment as possibly indicating psychological, neurocognitive or personality vulnerabilities and an obsession with rigidity (p. 159).

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example, actually changing one's mind when one encounters new evidence) and could be described as virtuous given that they reflect the virtue of self-regulation. They give the agent a mastery in managing their own behaviour given that it is in fact *their own* behaviour. Individuals do not simply 'read off' what their traits are from observing their own behaviour. Instead, in this process, they play an active role in shaping and negotiating their own behaviour and self-ascriptions.[4] Ideally, we want to be able to describe ourselves accurately but also live up to our own descriptions. This will involve dealing well with discrepancies between the two when they arise by adjusting either the ascriptions or the behaviour.

As with many virtues, the virtue of self-regulation will be subject to ideally operating within a 'golden mean'. Someone with a deficiency in courage might avoid dangers, or minimize and misrepresent dangers, and an excess of courage might lead someone to be reckless or to seek out confrontations. Similarly, a number of different attitudes and behaviours may come out of an excess or deficiency of self-regulation. In excess, individuals will be too preoccupied with the alignment of their self-ascriptions and behaviour to ever try anything slightly new, spontaneous, or 'out of character' for them. They would stringently avoid any self-ascriptions which could possibly be a little wishful or incorporate aspects of their idealised selves, which means that they lose the opportunity to regulate themselves 'up' to this desired self-image (as is suggested and described in Jefferson 2020). In deficiency, individuals live in a state of fantasy that they are already whatever person they perceive themselves to be, just in virtue of perceiving or desiring that they are that way. This could be completely at odds with reality. They will have no open-mindedness, no curiosity, and be utterly dismissive of the views and ideas of others with regards to their self-ascriptions and behaviour. Moreover, even in the right quantity, self-regulation could allow its possessor to be, for example, consistently unkind, impatient, or, in the political realm, fascistic. So, the virtue of self-regulation will also be subject to proper exercise in accordance with a more general ethical wisdom, or phronesis.

Finally, self-regulation also works as a corrective in Philippa Foot's sense (2002). That is, it prevents individuals from falling into the temptation of simply believing that they in fact are the type of person they admire and wish to be, simply because of their appreciation for that type of person. Generally, the appeal of being a good,

[4] For more on this 'regulative' dimension of self-knowledge, see McGreer (2015).

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competent person is not difficult to find in people. The harder work of ensuring that they live up to such an image, avoiding the lures of self-deception and looking the other way when they do not live up to their ideals, is what takes some correcting.

In instances of political confabulation, individuals espouse certain political values and ascribe them to themselves. Then, if someone has the virtue of self-regulation, they are able to make the most of those self-ascriptions by more effectively and consistently embodying those values in their future decision-making and behaviour.

So, although we may have individual instances of confabulation, looking at a longer time-span, these inaccurate explanations can still have a role to play in bringing individuals to live up to the ascribed self-ascriptions. Without self-regulation and the attitudes described therein, individuals just continue to confabulate in all instances in which their behaviour does not reflect what they want it to. This is because they are unable to manage the misalignment; they can't consider other possible explanations for their behaviour, or integrate feedback from others about the plausibility of their offered explanations, or pay more attention to their thoughts and feelings. In the next section, I describe in more detail how this virtue and its associated attitudes could bring our Brexit voter to better embody the values she is espousing in her confabulatory explanation of why she voted for Brexit.

6. Confabulation and self-regulation at work.

Returning to our imagined Brexit voter, recall that she has provided a confabulatory explanation of her behaviour and the concern is that this has stopped her considering more earnestly what her reasons for voting for Brexit really were, and that sometimes harmful behaviour ends up being justified in this way.

I argue that this non-ideal, confabulatory explanation is better than being dumbfounded in that it affords the individual certain opportunities. Importantly, being dumbfounded is the only other option available to the would-be confabulator, because agents do not have access to more accurate explanations (Sullivan-Bissett, 2015, p. 552). Our Brexit voter does not have introspective awareness of the influence of her patriotic gut feelings on her decision to vote in that way. But her confabulation does make more explicit to herself and others the factors – and their associated values – which she wants and expects to be the causes of her behaviour. She signals that she values British independence and self-governance. Once she

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expresses these self-concepts of being protective of Britain, she can then be more mindful going forward of whether her decisions reflect those values. Thus her self-ascriptions of value and her behaviour can become better aligned.

How well individuals do this will depend on whether they have the virtue of self-regulation. It is hard to imagine someone without any of the attitudes involved in this virtue (curiosity, openness to others' interpretations, attentiveness to feelings) not confabulating (and instead being dumbfounded) because they both reflect an epistemic curiosity to understand oneself and the circumstances. One of the first things an individual with a curiosity and open-mindedness for explanations of themselves is going to do, is to come up with a possible – if unideal – explanation. They are likely only to be more comfortable with being dumbfounded when it comes to very neutral topics, which they don't regard as being particularly reflective of their values and personalities more widely. I think this is unlikely to be the case with political decisions and actions.

Without the virtue of self-regulation, confabulation carries important costs. For example, in these cases, it could drive entrenchment of the attitudes that actually motivated the action and prevent further reflection. At worst, confabulation is not only a missed opportunity for individuals to present themselves with self-ascriptions which they can work with over time, but could lead to them being perceived by others as unreliable describers of themselves. DeBruin and Strijbos describe this as the most significant possible cost for agents with regards to confabulation (2019, p. 154). If this happens, agents are not considered reliable, trustworthy and intelligible members of the community. However, the person who is serially dumbfounded has no epistemic curiosity with regards to their behaviour at all, and so is also unlikely to reflect on their explanations and to experience some lack of intelligibility and isolation from others. (Imagine our Brexit voter looking bored and saying that she has 'no idea' why she voted for Brexit, when she is asked.)

In summary, we should not immediately judge an occurrence of confabulation as a wholly negative thing. It stems from good and epistemically valuable motivations. By this I mean that these motivations can improve the state of an individual's knowledge about themselves and the world. What is even better is if, further than this, agents have the virtue of self-regulation and can navigate the resulting feedback well and negotiate competently between their ascriptions and their behaviour. In the next section, I illustrate this point by showing how this could happen in the context of navigating 'undermining propaganda'.

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7. Navigating Undermining Propaganda.

There are some political phenomena in which there are particularly stark 'gaps' or 'mismatches' between the values being espoused and the reality of that political goal being realised. This is exactly what we see in cases of 'undermining propaganda', so here I consider how the virtue of self-regulation and its associated attitudes can help individuals navigate such propaganda.

Jason Stanley's (2015) influential account of propaganda includes the following sub-type of propaganda:

> *Undermining Propaganda*: A contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to erode those very ideals. Undermining propaganda involves a kind of contradiction between ideal and goal. It's an argument that appeals to an ideal to draw support, in the service of a goal that tends to erode the realization of that ideal. (2015, p. 53).

The ideals in questions can be any sort of ideal, but Stanley's focus is, usefully, on political ideals. He cites a number of examples of undermining propaganda, one of which being the 'war on drugs' in America in the 1980s-90s. The 'war on drugs' invoked the ideals of justice, law and order, and fair sentencing in a campaign which in reality exacerbated sentencing disparities for white and black people using cocaine and crack cocaine (ibid, pp. 59-60).

When we consider for ourselves which political messages we want to adhere to and which values we wish to embody, the attitudes involved in self-regulation can be beneficial in helping combat the effects of undermining propaganda by improving alignment between our espoused political values and the realities of our behaviour. We may be better able to *spot* undermining propaganda, and not personally participate in furthering its goals by following its message and thereby eroding the value we initially espoused. The contradiction between the ideal expressed in a political message and the realisation of that message is masked by individuals having flawed ideological beliefs (ibid, p. 57). If these ideologies are accepted because there is something personally appealing about them, or in other words because the individual feels that accepting them exemplifies some trait that they (gladly) perceive themselves as having, then having the virtue of self-regulation would put pressure on the link between one's acceptance of this ideology and the reality of their behaviour responding to the propaganda.

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Here is an example. Imagine that Jack and Jill are both fed up with the state of American politics. They believe that politicians are out of touch and haven't made any changes which actually improve their lives in any way, because politicians are too caught up in various scandals and alliance-forging which make up political life. So they both have a general, unexamined sense of disenfranchisement, and this is what brings them to decide to vote for Donald Trump. Then, they are both drawn to Trump's presidential campaign messaging which invokes the values of anti-corruption ('drain the swamp'), law and order, and politics re-centering around the average American. In confabulatory explanations of why they voted for Trump, they cite an adherence to and having been moved by these values. However, this isn't a completely accurate explanation because adherence to these values isn't what drove their sense of disenfranchisement; in fact it is the other way around. Their basic sense of disenfranchisement drove their decision and then these values of law and order are drawn on post hoc in order to justify this political choice in a way which is more satisfactory to them. It has meaning for them and allows them to communicate with others that they appreciate these political values.

Over time it becomes clear that Trump appoints his friends and family members to key positions in the White House, engages in unlawful tax-dodging and lives a life very unlike the 'average American'. This points to Trump's election campaign being an instance of undermining propaganda because electing him did not further those values. It also raises issues about the possible falsity of claims about Trump's actions and practices, such as whether he engages in tax-dodging. Yet, these claims are unexamined when they become a part of Jack and Jill's confabulations about why they voted for Trump.

Jack not only subscribes to these political values, but in his eyes they support his conception of himself as being independent, self-sufficient, and able to take care of himself. Also, that he is savvy to the constant deceit and deal-making amongst politicians, and this explains for him why his general situation and quality of life never improves. He is too confident in his own appraisal of what is wrong with politics and receives psychological comfort from it because it satisfies his need for an understanding of the world. He has too little interest and respect for the opposing thoughts and experiences of those around him. He isn't curious enough and is too inflexible in his thinking to consider whether Trump being president really furthers the de-corruption of politics, and whether his illegal tax-dodging is actually an endorsement of breaking the law when it benefits you. Jack does not have the virtue of self-regulation and

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his confabulations about voting for Trump will include ill-grounded statements which prop up a narrative of having made a political choice which embodies his values, and these statements are unlikely to be scrutinised further.

Jill, on the other hand, despite self-ascribing the same values of being against political corruption and wanting average Americans to be more central to political decisions, is more open to the perspectives of others in considering what a Trump presidency would look like and mean for them. In talking through with peers her explanation as to why she voted for Trump, she comes to see how angry and disenfranchised she feels about American politics and she has an interest and inquisitiveness as to how and where that anger is best directed. Her self-confidence is not so low that she quickly assumes she is wrong about something if she hears an opposing view, but when some friends ask her whether avoiding paying your taxes really reflects her value of being law-abiding and understanding the lives of 'average Americans', she reflects on this. There is a possibility that she comes to stop seeing Trump and his presidential campaign as something that will truly further the values of anti-corruption, law and order, and a focus on the 'average American'.

Jill therefore demonstrates how having the virtue of self-regulation can mean that her confabulating actually played an integral part in her coming to consider whether a political action of hers – voting for Trump – actually aligned with her political values. In this turbulent political world, the drawing together of one's political outlook and political decision-making, unhampered by misleading political propaganda, is particularly valuable.[5]

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