

The Fox and the Grapes

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Apropos

Cognitive dissonance (denial), psychological sanitisation, and/ or false criticism

1 The fable

ORIGINAL TEXT (JONES, 1912)

A hungry Fox saw some fine bunches of Grapes hanging from a vine that was trained along a high trellis, and did his best to reach them by jumping as high as he could into the air. But it was all in vain, for they were just out of reach: so he gave up trying, and walked away with an air of dignity and unconcern, remarking, 'I thought those Grapes were ripe, but I see now they are quite sour'.

2 Systems view

The Fox was apparently driven to reach for the Grapes by a strong motive: hunger. Later on in the story, it is revealed that success of the operation was crucial to him for a second reason: he had difficulty to admit failure — Figure 1.

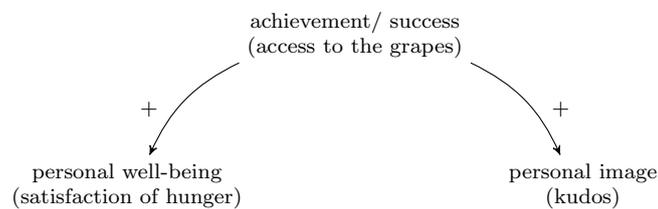


FIGURE 1 Reaching the Grapes would enhance both the well-being and image of the Fox — albeit temporarily

3 Process view

The fable has the Fox go through a number of states and actions — Figure 2. It is implied that the Fox could have stopped when defeated, but his second motive was particularly strong: maintaining a faultless image, even by lying to himself.

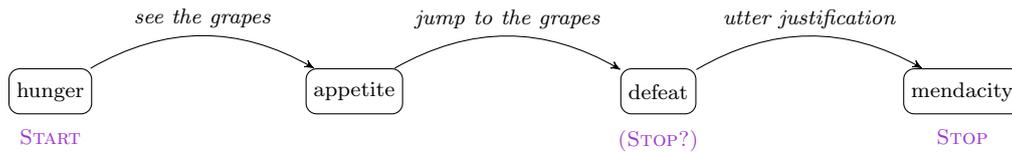


FIGURE 2 Defeat could be a natural stop, but the Fox had a significant concern for his image — Figure 1

4 Plan view

The original plan of the Fox, ‘Plan A’, was not successful: the Grapes were too high for the jumping capabilities of the Fox — Figure 3.

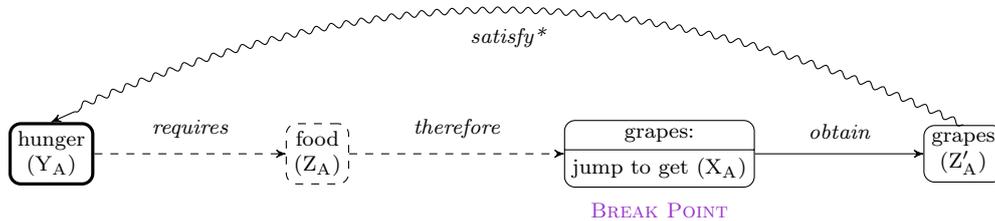


FIGURE 3 The original plan of the Fox failed: the action was not fruitful — literally

Upon failure of ‘Plan A’, the Fox conceives and implements ‘Plan B’, intended to safeguard his image — albeit through improper means. Ironically, the defence plan also fails, further damaging the image of the Fox — Figure 4.

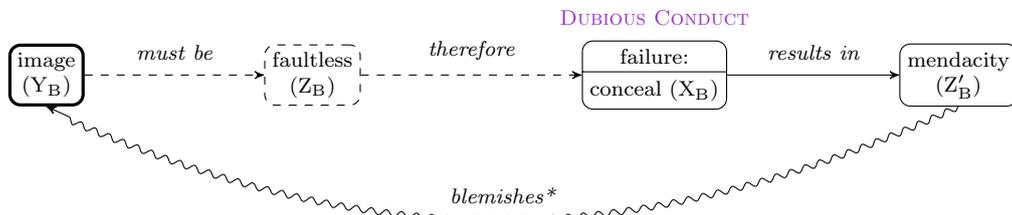


FIGURE 4 Fox’s ‘Plan B’, intended to cover up his failure, also failed — ironically

5 Commentary

This fable has a strong message about dealing with failure. If the Fox had a greater consideration for his hunger, he would have opted for other ways to feed himself — hence, ‘Plan B’ (Figure 4) could have been about seeking other sources of food. Or, at least, the Fox could have stopped upon failure (Figure 2) and go about his (other) business.

What makes the fable particularly interesting is the awakening of Fox’s second concern — his image (Figure 1) — which takes over, leads him into denial (cognitive dissonance), and then into improper conduct: to issue false criticism about the Grapes in order to be at peace with himself. For the rest of the world, though, Fox’s psychological sanitisation plan (Figure 4) collapses on him.

References

Jones, V.S.V. (1912) *Æsop’s Fables — A New Translation*. London: Macmillan & Co.

