### The Mind’s Construction

Isaac Asimov

I was moved to philosophic utterance that morning. Shaking my head in mournful reminiscence, I said, “There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face. He was a gentleman on whom I built an absolute trust.”

It was a rather chilly Sunday morning and George and I were seated at a table in the local Bagel Nosh. George, I remember, was finishing his second large sesame bagel, this one liberally interspersed with cream cheese and whitefish.

He said, “Is that something from a story of the type you habitually put together for the less discriminating editors?”

“It happens to be Shakespeare,” I said, “It's from *Macbeth,”*

“Ah, yes, I had forgotten your penchant for petty plagiarism.”

“It is not petty plagiarism to express yourself in an appropri­ate quotation. What I was saying was that I had a friend whom I had considered a man of consideration and taste. I had bought him dinners. I had, on occasion, lent him money. I had praised his appearance and character fulsomely. And mind you, I did this entirely without any consideration for the fact that he was a book reviewer by profession — if you want to call it a profession.”

George said, “And despite all these disinterested actions of yours, the time came when your friend reviewed one of your books and he proceeded to slam it unmercifully.”

“Oh?” I said, “Did you read the review?”

“Not at all. I just asked myself what kind of review a book of yours could possibly get, and the correct answer came to me in a flash.”

“I didn't mind his saying it was a bad book, mind you, George — at least I didn't mind it any more than any other writer would mind such a brainless statement — but when he went on to use phrases like ‘senile dementia’ I felt that was going too far. Saying that the book was meant for eight-year-olds but that they would be better off playing tiddledywinks was hitting below the belt.” I sighed and repeated, “There's no art.”

“You said that already,” said George at once.

“He seemed so pleasant, so friendly, so grateful for little fa­vors. How could I know that underneath it all he was a vicious, libelous hellhound.”

George said, “But he was a critic. How could he be anything else? You train for the post by maligning your mother. It is really unbelievable that you should have been fooled in so ridicu­lous a fashion. You are worse than my friend Vandevanter Robinson ever was, and he, I'll have you know, was once spoken of as a possible candidate for a Nobel Prize for Naïveté. His story is a curious one.”

“Please,” I said, “the review came out in the current *New York Review of Books* — five columns of bitter spleen, venom, and gall. I am in no mood to listen to one of your stories.”

I thought you would be [said George], and you are perfectly right. It will take your mind off your own inconsequential trou­bles.

My friend Vandevanter Robinson was a young man whom anyone would have judged to be of great promise. He was hand­some, cultured, intelligent, and creative. He had been to the best schools, and he was in love with a delightful young creature, Minerva Shlump.

Minerva was one of my goddaughters and was devoted to me, as was only right. A person of my moral fiber, of course, is quite averse to allowing young ladies of outstanding proportions to hug one and attempt to climb into one's lap, but there was some­thing so endearing about Minerva, so innocently childlike, and, most of all, so resilient to the touch, that I allowed it in her case.

Naturally I never allowed it in the presence of Vandevanter, who was quite unreasonable in his jealousy.

He explained this failing of his once in accents that touched my heart. “George,” he said, “from childhood it was my ambi­tion to fall in love with a young woman of superlative virtue, of untouched purity, of—if I may use the expression—a porcelain-like gleam of innocence. In Minerva Shlump, if I may be allowed to breathe that divine name, I had found just such a woman. It is the one case in which I know I cannot be deceived. Were I ever to find out my trust was abused, I would scarcely know how to continue to live. I would become an embittered old man with no consolation but such paltry items as my mansion, my servants, my club, and my inherited wealth.”

Poor fellow. He was not deceived in young Minerva — as I well knew, for when she wriggled delightedly on my lap. I could easily tell her utter lack of any trace of vice. But it was the only person, or thing, or concept, in which he was not deceived. The poor young man simply had no judgment. He was, though it may seem unkind to say so, as stupid as you are. He lacked the art to find the mind's — Yes, I know you said that already. Yes, yes, you said it twice.

What made it particularly hard for him, of course, was that Vandevanter was a rookie detective on the New York police force.

It had been his life's ambition (in addition to finding the per­fect damosel) to be a detective; to be one of the keen-eyed, hawk-nosed gentlemen who are the terrors of evil-doers everywhere. With that end in mind, he majored in criminology at both Groton and Harvard, and read assiduously those important research reports committed to paper by authorities such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Dame Agatha Christie. AU that, together with the unremitting use of family influence, and the fact that an uncle of his was Borough President of Queens at the time, led to his appointment to the force.

Sadly, and quite unexpectedly, he was not a success at this. Unsurpassed at the ability to weave an inexorable chain of logic while sitting in his armchair, making use of evidence gathered by others, he found himself utterly incapable of gathering the evi­dence himself.

His problem was that he had this incredible urge to believe whatever someone told him. Any alibi, however sieve-like, baf­fled him. Any well-know perjurer had but to offer his word of honor and Vandevanter found himself incapable of doubting him.

This became so notorious that criminals from the lowliest purse-snatcher to the highest politician and industrialist refused to be questioned by anyone else.

“Bring us Vandevanter,” they would cry out.

“I will spill my guts to him,” the purse-snatcher would say.

“I will apprise him of the facts, as carefully arranged in the proper order by none other than myself,” the politician would say.

“I will explain that the hundred-million-dollar government check just happened to be lying about in the petty-cash drawer and I needed a tip for the shoeshine boy,” said the industrialist.

The result was that whatever he touched got away. He had an exonerative thumb — an expression invented for the occasion by a literary friend of mine. (Of course you don't remember in­venting it — I'm not referring to you. Would I be so mad as to think of you as ‘literary’?)

As the months passed, the case load in the courts grew less, and innumerable grieving burglars, muggers, and assorted felons were restored to their friends and relations without a stain on their reputations.

Naturally it did not take long for New York's Finest to under­stand the situation and to penetrate the cause. Vandevanter had been on the job not more than two and a half years when it dawned on him that the camaraderie he had been accustomed to was fading, and that his superiors were wont to greet him with a puzzled frown. There was virtually no talk of promotion, even though Vandevanter would mention his Borough President uncle at what seemed like appropriate moments.

He came to me as young men in trouble are wont to do, seeking refuge in the wisdom of a man of the world. (I don't know what you mean, old man, by asking me if I knew of any­one I could recommend. Please don't distract me with non sequiturs.)

“Uncle George,” he said, “I believe I am in a spot of diffi­culty.” (He always addressed me as Uncle George, impressed as he was by the dignity and splendid nobility lent me by my well-kept white locks —s o different in nature from your own dubi­ously unkempt mutton chops.)

“Uncle George,” he said, “there seems to be an unaccountable reluctance to promote me. I remain a rookie detective, zero-class. My office is right in the middle of the corridor and my key to the lavatory doesn't work. I don't mind this in itself, you understand, but my dear Minerva in her unspoiled artlessness has suggested that this may mean I am a failure and her little heart almost breaks at the thought. ‘I don't want to marry a failure,’ she says, her little lips pouting. ‘People will laugh at me.’ ”

I said, “Is there any reason why you should be having this trouble, Vandevanter, my boy?” I asked.

“None at all. It's a complete mystery to me. I admit I haven't solved any cases, but I don't think *that's* the problem. No one can be expected to solve them all, you know.”

“Do any of the other detectives solve at least a few?” I asked.

“Yes they do, now and then, but their manner of doing so shocks me to the core. They have an unlovely sense of disbelief, a most deplorable skepticism, a distasteful way of staring at some accused person in a supercilious manner and saying, ‘Oh, yeah!’ or, ‘Says you!’ It just humiliates them. It just isn't the American way.

“Is it possible the accused might be telling lies and that they *should* be treated with skepticism?”

Vandevanter puzzled over that for a moment. “Why, I believe that might be so. What a horrible thought!”

“Well,” I said, “let me think about this.”

That evening I called up Azazel, the two-centimeter demon who, on an occasion or two, has been of use to me with his mysterious powers, I don't know if I've ever mentioned him to you, but — Oh, I have, have I?

Well, he appeared on the little ivory circle on my desk about which I burn the special incense and recite the age-old incanta­tions — the details, however, are secret.

When he appeared, he was wearing a long, flowing garment; or at least it seemed long and flowing in comparison to the two centimeters that measured him from the base of his tail to the tips of his horns. He had one of his arms raised high and he was speaking in his shrill way while his tail twitched from side to side.

Clearly, he was in the midst of something or other. He is a creature who is somehow preoccupied with unimportant detail. I never seem to get him when he is quietly at rest or in dignified repose. He is always engaged in some petty concern of no mo­ment and is furious at having me interrupt him.

On this occasion, however, he became aware of me and at once lowered his arm and smiled. At least, I think he smiled for it is hard to see the details of his face, and once, when I used a hand lens to help me make them out, he seemed unaccountably offended.

He said, “It's just as well; I welcome the change. I have the speech well in hand and I'm certain of success.”

“Success at what, O Great One? Though success in anything you do is certain.” (He seems to have a fondness for this sort of orotundity. He resembles you oddly in this respect.)

“I am running for political office,” he said with satisfaction. “I expect to be elected grod-catcher.”

“May I ask, humbly, that you relieve my ignorance by inform­ing me of what a grod might be?”

“Why, a grod is a small domestic animal much esteemed as a pet by my people. Some of these animals lack a license, and a grod-catcher is expected to gather them up. They are small crea­tures of fiendish cunning and resolute defiance and it takes some­one of might and intelligence to succeed at the task. There are people who sneer and say, ‘Azazel couldn't be elected grod-catcher,’ but I intend to show them I can. Now what can I do for you?

I explained the situation and Azazel seemed surprised. “Do you mean to say that on your miserable world it is not possible for people to tell when other people make statements that do not coincide with objective truth?”

“We have a device called a ‘lie detector,’ ” I said. “It measures blood pressure, electrical conductivity of the skin and so on. It can detect lies, although it also detects nervousness and tension and calls them lies as well.”

“Naturally, but there are subtle glandular functions that exist in any species intelligent enough to misrepresent truth, or is this something you wouldn't know?”

I avoided answering that question. “Is there any way to make it possible for zero-grade detective Robinson to detect that glan­dular function?”

“Without one of your crude machines? Using the functioning of his own mind?”

“Yes.”

“You must realize you are asking me to deal with one of the minds of your species. Large but infinitely crude.”

“I realize that.”

“Well, I shall try. You will have to take me to him or bring him to me and, in either case, allow me to study him.”

“Certainly.”

And it was done.

Vandevanter came to me perhaps a week later, a look of con­cern on his patrician face.

“Uncle George,” he said, “a most unusual thing has hap­pened. I was questioning a young man involved in the robbery of a liquor store. He was telling me in the most affecting detail that he just happened to be passing the store, deep in thought over his poor mother who was suffering from a headache which had struck her after she had consumed half a bottle of gin. He stepped into the store to ask if it was, after all, wise to consume gin too soon after having disposed of a similar quantity of rum, when the owner, for no reason he could tell, pressed a gun into his hands and then began shoving the contents of the cash regis­ter at the young man who, confused and astonished, accepted it, just as a policeman walked in. He said he thought it was in­tended as compensation for the pain his dear mother had experi­enced. He was telling me all this when it came over me in the oddest way that he was — uh — fibbing.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes. It is the most amazing thing I ever experienced.” Vande­vanter's voice fell to a whisper. “Not only did I know, somehow, that the young man had the gun with him when he entered, but that his mother did not have a headache. Can you imagine some­one fibbing about his *mother?”*

Close investigation proved Vandevanter's instinct to be correct in every particular. The young man *had* been telling an untruth about his mother.

From that moment on, Vandevanter's ability sharpened stead­ily.

Within a month he had become a keen, hard-eyed, remorse­less machine for the detection of falsehood.

The Department watched in gasping amazement as accused after accused failed in the attempt to hoodwink Vandevanter. No tale of having been deeply immersed in prayer at the time the poor box was rifled could stand up against his shrewd question­ing. Lawyers who had been investing orphans' funds in the reno­vation of their offices — entirely through oversight — were quickly discomfited. Accountants who had accidentally subtracted a telephone number from the item labeled “Tax due” were trapped in their own words. Drug dealers who had merely picked up a five-kilo packet of heroin in the local cafeteria think­ing it was sugar substitute were instantly tied in logical knots.

Vandevanter the Victorious they called him, and the Commis­sioner himself, to the applause of the assembled body of police, awarded Vandevanter a key that fit the lavatory door, to say nothing of moving his office to one side of the corridor.

I was congratulating myself that all was well and that Vande­vanter, his success assured, was now ready to marry the lovely Minerva Shlump, when Minerva herself appeared at the door­way of my apartment.

“Oh, Uncle George,” she whispered faintly, her lithe body swaying. She was clearly on the point of fainting. I lifted her and held her close to me for five or six minutes while I considered exactly into which chair I might lower her.

“What is it, my dear?” I asked, after I had slowly disencum­bered myself of her, and smoothed her clothing lest it be disar­ranged.

“Oh, Uncle George,” she said, and tears overflowed her lovely lower lids. “It's Vandevanter.”

“Surely he has not shocked you with unwonted and improper advances?”

“Oh, no, Uncle George. He is far too refined a person to do that before marriage, although of course I have carefully ex­plained to him that I understand the hormonal influences that sometimes overpower young men and that I was certainly fully prepared to forgive him in case of an untoward event. Yet, de­spite my assurances, he remains in control.”

“What is it, then, Minerva?”

“Oh, Uncle George, he has broken our engagement.”

“That is unbelievable. No two people are better suited. Why?”

“He says I'm a teller of — of — inexactitudes.”

My reluctant lips formed the word: Liar?

She nodded. “That vile word did not cross his lips, but that is hat he meant. It was only this morning that he looked upon me with his dear glance of melting adoration and said, “Loved one, have you always been true to me?” And, as I always do, I said sentimentally, ‘As true as the sunbeam to the sun, as the rose petal to the rose.’ And then his eyes grew narrow and hateful and he said, ‘Aha, your words are not in accord with verity. You have told a taradiddle.’ It was as though I had been struck with a heavy blow. I said, ‘Vandevanter, my own, what are you say­ing?’ He answered, ‘What you heard. I have been mistaken in you, and we must part forever.’ And he left. Oh, what am I to do? What am I to do? Where will I find another success?

I said thoughtfully, “Vandevanter is usually right about such things — in recent weeks, at any rate. Have you been untrue to him?”

A faint flush mantled Minerva's cheeks. “Not really.”

“How unreally?”

“Well, some years ago, when I was but a slip of a girl, aged seventeen, I kissed a young man. I held him tightly, I admit, but that was only in order to keep him from escaping, and not out of any personal affection.”

“I see.”

“It was not a very pleasurable experience. Not *very.* After I met Vandevanter, I was astonished to find how much more grati­fying his kiss was than the one I had earlier experienced with the other young man. Naturally, I was intent on reexperiencing that gratification. Through all my relationship with Vandevanter, I have periodically — entirely in a mood of scientific inquiry — kissed other young men in order to assure myself that not one, not *one,* can match my own Vandevanter. In doing so, I assure you, Uncle George, I granted them every advantage in style and form of kissing, to say nothing of grip and squeeze, and *never* did they match Vandevanter in any way. And yet he says I am un­true.”

“How ridiculous,” I said. “My child, you have been wronged.'\* I kissed her four or five times and said, “There, that does not gratify you as Vandevanter's kisses do, does it?”

“Let's see,” she said, and kissed me four or five more times with great skill and ardor. “Of course not,” she said.

“I shall go see him.” I said.

That very night, I presented himself at his apartment. He was sitting moodily in his living room, loading and unloading his revolver.

“You are,” I said, “doubtless considering suicide.”

“Never,” he said with a hacking laugh. “What reason have I to commit suicide? The loss of a trifling jade? Of a storyteller? She is well done with, say I.”

“You say wrong. Minerva has always been true to you. Her hands, her lips, and her body have never made contact with the hands, the lips, and the body of any man but yourself.”

“I know that is not so,” said Vandevanter.

“I tell you it *is* so,” I said. “I have spoken with the weeping maiden at length and she has revealed to me the innermost secrets of her life. Once she blew a kiss at a young man. She was five years old at the time; he, six; and she has agonized over that moment of amorous madness ever since. Never has such a scene of ribaldry been repeated and it is only that moment that you detected in her.”

“Are you telling the truth, Uncle George?”

“Consider me with your unfailing and penetrating glance, and I will repeat what I have just said and then you tell *me* if I am telling the truth.”

I repeated the tale, and he said, wondering, “You *are* telling the exact and literal truth, Uncle George. Do you suppose that Minerva will ever forgive me?”

“Of course,” I said. “Humble yourself to her and continue your keen pursuit of the dregs of the underworld through every liquor store, corporate boardroom, and City Hall corridor, but never, never turn your keen eyes on the woman you love. Perfect love is perfect trust and you must trust her perfectly.”

“I will, I will,” he cried out.

And he has done so ever since. He is now the best-known detective on the force and has been promoted to the rank of Half-Class Detective with an office in the basement right next to the laundry machine. He is married to Minerva and they live together in ideal peace.

She spends her life testing the superior gratification of Vande-vanter's kisses over and over in an ecstasy of happiness. There are times when she will willingly spend the entire night with some likely man who seems suitable for investigation, but always the result is the same. Vandevanter is the best. She is now the mother of two sons, one of whom bears a slight resemblance to Vandevanter.

And so much for your claim, old man, that my labors and those of Azazel always lead to disaster.

“As it happens, though,” I said, “if I accept your story, you were lying when you told Vandevanter that Minerva had never touched another man.” “I did it to save an innocent young maiden.” “But how is it that Vandevanter did not detect the lie?” “I presume,” said George, wiping the cream cheese from his lips, “that it was my air of unassailable dignity.”

“I have another theory,” I said. “I think that neither you, nor your blood pressure, nor the electrical conductivity of your skin, nor your subtle hormonal reactions, can any longer tell the dif­ference between what is true and what is not; and neither can anyone else who must depend on the data derived from studying you.”

“Ridiculous,” said George.