In pondering self-perception, the first step is to pose a question we rarely ask: Where do beliefs about the self actually come from? We infrequently consider the origins of self-knowledge because we usually take this information for granted.

How do you know your strengths and limitations? Your likes and dislikes? Your brightest dreams for the future and deepest regrets about the past?

You just do, that’s how.

But there’s a more profound answer to such questions. In fact, there are several, though you wouldn’t know it from listening to the presumed experts, the gurus of self-help who populate the bestseller lists and the couches of daytime talk shows. The cottage industries of self-help, self-insight, and self-actualization suggest that you come to know yourself by exploring your own thoughts and feelings—by turning the lens of social vision inward. A core treatise of these books is that you need to locate your true, “authentic” self. You have to get in touch with who you really are, they keep telling us. Thou can’t be true to thine own self if that self remains a mystery, the thinking goeth.

How, exactly, do we get acquainted with this core self? A trip to the local bookstore suggests that the answer has something to do with chicken soup. That, plus we’re supposed to ask ourselves questions like these suggested by Dr. Phil: “What are the 10 most defining moments of your life?” “What are the 7 most critical choices you have made to put you on your current path?” “Who are the 5 most pivotal people in your world and how have they shaped you?”

Dr. Phil’s questions share a common link. And I don’t just mean the use of arbitrary digits that I can only assume were once his for-
tune cookie lucky numbers. Their more important shared characteristic is the assumption that introspection produces reliable self-insight. These questions imply that looking inward provides some sort of direct channel to your internal preferences, deepest thoughts, and true motivations.

It’s a nice idea, that you have an authentic self lurking within, waiting to be unveiled. But your answers to Dr. Phil’s questions—like your responses to the Twenty Statements Test—change across time and location. So which are the authentic ones?

In trying to name my 5 most pivotal people, my biggest challenge is whom to rank higher: Jennifer Aniston or Eva Longoria. Yet, somehow, when my wife’s in the room, they both drop off the list entirely. But even when you strive for honesty, looking inward only gets you so far in the effort to learn about the self. While Dr. Phil’s assumption seems reasonable enough—the idea that we can accurately articulate the influences on our own behavior or how happy we are with various aspects of our life—it just isn’t how self-perception really works. Introspection turns out to be far more difficult and limited than we give it credit for.

For starters, take the presumption that we can reliably explain why we make the decisions we do, one that underlies Dr. Phil’s questions about “choices that put you on your current path” or “how others have shaped you.” This is the same assumption that drives political pollsters trying to forecast voting behavior or marketing departments conducting focus groups. However, research demonstrates that we’re not nearly as good at explaining the factors that shape our preferences and actions as we think we are.

Consider a series of experiments conducted at the University of
Michigan by Dick Nisbett and Tim Wilson. In one, they investigated consumer behavior, with hundreds of male and female respondents asked to evaluate various household items. One set of participants examined four pairs of nylon stockings in an effort to determine which was the best product. In addition to visual inspection, they were allowed to handle each sample to assess its feel, durability, disguise potential for convenience-store robbery, and whatever other characteristics one looks for in evaluating this product. Their ultimate preferences increased in a clear left-to-right progression: the far right pair of stockings was, on average, rated the highest, followed by the pair to its immediate left, and so on. In fact, the right-most stockings were selected almost four times as often as those on the far left of the nylon stocking array.

Fascinating data for those hosiery aficionados out there, sure, but what do the rest of us learn from the study? First, on a personal note, I learned that when using your visible-from-the-hallway work computer, it’s probably best to close your office door before Googling “nylon stockings.”

Second, this study captures the limitations of introspection in action. Because it just so happens that all four pairs of stockings used in the array were identical. Same brand, same style, same color. One would have predicted, therefore, that ratings for pairs A, B, C, and D would have been comparable. That they weren’t—that they varied systematically as a function of position in the array—suggests that consumers often hold off on selecting a product until they’ve been able to “shop around” and view multiple possibilities (since respondents typically inspected the stockings in left-to-right fashion).

But the researchers never would have realized this had they relied on participants’ introspective explanations. When asked to account for their choice, not a single person cited stocking order. Instead, they
YOU'RE NOT THE PERSON YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE

talked about knit and sheen and weave and other product characteristics that transcend the imagination of a mere nylon neophyte such as myself. These individuals had no idea what had actually shaped their behavior, but they had little trouble generating explanations. And confident ones at that. When the researchers asked respondents—point-blank—about how the order of the stocking array might have impacted their evaluation, “virtually all subjects denied it, usually with a worried glance at the interviewer suggesting that they felt either that they had misunderstood the question or were dealing with a madman.”

Just as we sometimes fail to note the true influences on our behavior, in other instances we show the opposite tendency: thinking that factors have influenced us when they actually haven’t. In another study, Nisbett and Wilson asked a different set of participants to watch a documentary about urban poverty. One group viewed the film under normal conditions. Another watched the movie while suffering through construction-related noise from a power saw in the hallway outside.

When asked how they liked the film, no meaningful differences emerged between the responses of the two groups. If anything, the film ratings of those viewers subjected to the construction noises were trivially more positive. But when the person supervising the screening apologized to audience members in the loud room and asked whether their ratings of the film had been adversely affected by all the noise, more than half—55 percent—said yes. Once again, these people were confidently answering questions regarding what shaped their judgments, but they were flat-out wrong.

Voters claim to ignore negative political ads, jurors tell you they’re not swayed by inadmissible evidence, and my younger daughter simply can’t eat another bite of dinner because there’s no room left in her tummy. But the data are in: negative campaigning works, inadmissible evidence isn’t disregarded, and, miraculously, just minutes later, there’s
enough space in that belly for a whole ice cream cone plus some of my dessert.

So think twice the next time you’re tempted to make major changes to your physical appearance, wardrobe, or first-date strategy based on some magazine’s “What Men/Women Really Want” poll—the respondents may be answering confidently but still misleadingly. It’s easy to think of potential reasons for our decisions or influences on our preferences. Being accurate about it all is the hard part.

These conclusions aren’t limited to trivialities like stocking preferences and film ratings. Consider a recent study in the Journal of Arthroplasty, in which researchers interviewed 101 adults preparing for hip replacement.8 Patients were given a checklist of twenty-five possible reasons why they might be planning to undergo the procedure; one year later, they were given the same checklist and asked to offer retrospective explanations for why they had opted for surgery. For the majority of patients, these pre- and post-surgery responses differed. That is, the explanations they gave before the procedure were markedly different from those they gave afterward, particularly among patients who felt that the surgery didn’t live up to their expectations.

For example, before the procedure, 36 percent of patients had said that difficulty putting on their shoes (and taking them off) was an important basis for having the surgery. One year later, only half of this 36 percent identified such problems as one of their original concerns. Before the surgery, 29 percent said that difficulty navigating stairs was a major factor; a year later, fewer than one-third of this 29 percent cited issues with stairs as having been an important consideration in their decision.

These patients aren’t alone—we can all think of examples when our
own explanations for a decision changed over time. How did you decide on your profession? Why did you choose your college major? What made you realize you wanted to marry this person? These are tough questions, and depending on what stage of life you’re in, your mood, and who asks you, introspection produces different insights. When your answers to personal questions evolve in this manner—whether over time, context, or company—it becomes difficult to put much stock in the ability of introspection to provide direct access to authentic attitudes and an indisputably true self.

Over the years I’ve given many different answers to the question of how I chose a college. At the time, I would have said that coming from a small high school, I wanted a small college with a similar feel. After graduating and beginning work toward my Ph.D. elsewhere, I would have emphasized the research opportunities available at a liberal arts college. Today I look back at my seventeen-year-old self with the jaded perspective of presumed wisdom and insight. I’d tell you that my parents took me on a seven-day, eight-school college visit marathon, in which one campus walking tour started to look a lot like another campus walking tour, until I became no different than the average nylon stocking shopper and decided that the last school I visited was the best one.

You might propose that introspection should be more reliable when it comes to other forms of self-insight beyond explaining past decisions. Even if it is more difficult than expected to articulate why we’ve made the choices we have, surely we’re able to give an accurate reading of highly personal ideas such as our likes and dislikes, or what we need to be happy in life. Right?

But behavioral researchers have consistently found that even the assessment of our own life satisfaction is, in a word, malleable. How happy are you with your life? It depends. More so right after your
favorite sports team has won or when you’re seated in a pleasantly decorated, comfortable room. You’re more satisfied with the entirety of your life when it’s sunny outside. Hell, all it takes to boost overall life satisfaction is the pleasant surprise of finding a dime before you’re interviewed.

As Harvard psychologist Dan Gilbert explains throughout *Stumbling on Happiness*, we’re not so good at anticipating what will make us happy in the future. It’s no wonder—we have trouble making up our minds about how happy we are in the here and now!

So it goes for a wide range of personal beliefs. Including politics: Americans’ evaluations of Republicans become markedly more positive when they’re first asked about a particularly popular member of the party (think mid-1990s Colin Powell). Perceptions of physical attractiveness, too: Men asked to rate photos of unfamiliar women see the strangers as less attractive after watching the provocatively clad detectives on display in *Charlie’s Angels.* Which are the “true” perceptions about Republicans? Or the “authentic” assessments of attraction? There’s no way to know.

Sure, there’s *something* to be learned when we look inward to explore our attitudes, preferences, and decisions. But much of the information that introspection generates is fleeting, on-the-fly construction at a particular point in time: how we think we feel; why we guess we’ve made the choices we have. By looking inward, we don’t gain access to a stable set of impressions regarding an unwavering, authentic self. We produce a temporary status report.

In other words, the gurus of self-help got it wrong. Our sense of who we are is no less context-dependent than the behaviors of everyone else around us. Book sales, Nielsen ratings, and *Oprah* appearances notwithstanding, introspection just isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be.