

# Forgetting past misdeeds to justify future ones

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Proven fact: we remember our altruistic behavior more easily than selfish actions or misdeeds that go against our own moral sense. Described as 'unethical amnesia' by scientists, it is generally explained by self-image maintenance. But could these selective oversights, not necessarily conscious, have a more strategic aim? To find out, a team of behavioral economists from the CNRS recruited 1322 volunteers in an online experiment which took place over two sessions.

The first session involved 20 repetitions of a lottery task, the results of which determined the participants' monetary payoff; however, as the participants had to self-report the outcomes they had the opportunity to cheat. During the second session, three weeks later, the same participants were monetarily incentivised to recall as accurately as possible the outcomes they had reported in the previous session.

Half of the volunteers were informed that they would then have the opportunity to voluntarily return some of the money if they had overreported their outcomes in the first session. It was within this

configuration that the participants were most prone to amnesia, as reported by scientists in *PNAS* on 28th September 2020. In other words, they remembered their cheating behavior less accurately when they knew they would have to make a [moral decision](#) again, even though they could earn more money by remembering the reported outcomes. It was as if forgetting this incident would allow them to restore their reputation, making it more acceptable for a future breach of morality.

**More information:** Fabio Galeotti et al. Unethical amnesia responds more to instrumental than to hedonic motives, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2020). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2011291117](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2011291117)

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