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A Philosophical Analysis of Sartre's Critique of Freud's Depth-psychological Account of Self-Deception

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Funding: The author(s) received no specific funding for this work.

Potential competing interests: The author(s) declared that no potential competing interests exist.

Abstract

This essay addresses the notion of self-deception as articulated by Sigmund Freud and Jean-Paul Sartre. More specifically, it provides an analysis of Sartre's critique of Freud's depth-psychological account of self-deception. I critically examine his theory of bad faith as an account of self-deception. Sartre's main objection to the depth-psychological explanation of Freud's account of self-deception rests on his argument that for self-deception to occur there needs to be conscious awareness of the coexistence of mutually incompatible beliefs, and that Freud had obscured this fact by splitting the self and with a mixture of jargon.

> *"[I]n strictly logical terms Sartre's resolution is actually quite Freudian. It would seem to make little difference whether we speak of unconscious ideas or nonthetic knowledge. We are still stuck with the problem of individuals believing or not believing at the same time" (Sackeim, 1988, p. 152).*

Traditionally, the notion of self-deception was fashioned on interpersonal deception, where *X* intentionally gets *Y* to believe a proposition *p*, while X actually believes *~p*. This account of self-deception is intentional. According to the traditional model, self-deception requires an individual to hold contradictory beliefs, and the individual must intentionally believe something which s/he knows to be false. The traditional model has raised two paradoxes, the so-called static paradox (how can an individual hold contradictory beliefs simultaneously?) and the dynamic or strategic paradox (how can an individual deceive herself without her intentions being rendered ineffective?) (Mele, 1987, 2001).

For those that ascribe to a depth-psychological perspective, these paradoxes are not problematic. Depth-psychological perspectives point out that individuals can hide their own motivations from themselves (Lockie, 2003). Central to Sigmund Freud's (1915/1957, 1923/1961) psychoanalysis is the notion that our behaviour can be motivated by drives or impulses of which we are not aware. The aim of psychoanalysis is to bring awareness to these "hidden" drives. According to Freud (1915) these concealed motivations are not merely 'descriptively unconscious,' instead they are 'dynamically unconscious,' which highlights that the individual is actively (through the use of defence mechanisms) trying to keep motivations out of awareness. The notion of the dynamic unconscious is central to psychoanalysis, and approaches that

work from this position is known as depth psychology (Lockie, 2003)

In opposition to Freud's depth-psychological view of self-deception, Jean-Paul Sartre (1943) presents his theory of bad faith as an alternate account of self-deception. Sartre agrees with several of the premises of Freud's account of self-deception but does not agree that it is due to the dynamically unconscious activity of repression and resistance. Nor does he agree with Freud's theory that we repress drives and impulses that motivate our behaviour. Sartre argues that Freud has cut off the explanation of behaviour at an arbitrary point. Sartre proposes that his theory of bad faith has more explanatory power to account for self-deception than Freud's or one that proposes a dynamic unconscious as being central to an account of self-deception.

This essay addresses the notion of self-deception as articulated by Freud and Sartre. More specifically, it provides an analysis of Sartre's (1958) critique of Freud's depth-psychological account of self-deception. I critically examine his theory of bad faith as an account of self-deception. Sartre's main objection to the depth-psychological explanation of Freud's account of self-deception rests on his argument that for self-deception to occur there needs to be conscious awareness of the coexistence of mutually incompatible beliefs, and that Freud had obscured this fact by splitting the self and with a mixture of jargon (Webber, 2013).

Freud's Account of Self-Deception

Freud (1915, 1923) provides an account of self-deception in his discussion of illusion, repression, and delusion. He uses the words *Selbstbetrug* and *Selbsttäuschung* interchangeably when referring to self-deception. *Selbstbetrug* is usually translated as 'self-deceit', or 'deception', while *Selbsttäuschung* is usually translated as 'self-deceit' or 'delusion.'

In Freud's (1915, 1923) model of the mind the self is viewed as comprised of two or more distinct and warring systems, each with its own goals. One the one hand, we have our conscious mind where thoughts, beliefs, desires and aspirations are accessible and can be conceptually communicated. On the other hand, there is the unconscious mind comprised of drives and impulses which can compete with each other according to the laws of their 'cathectic energy.' The unconscious contains socially unacceptable ideas, desire, memories and motives, that are associated with conflict, emotional pain and anxiety. The unconscious is not accessible to our awareness and is composed of non-conceptual and symbolic elements that cannot be communicated through language. Our unconscious drives push for satisfaction, even at the expense of our conscious beliefs and wishes. For example, I may consciously ascribe to the idea of non-violence, but an unconscious drive can motivate me to perform an act of violence. This notion predates Freud. In *The World as Will and Representation* Schopenhauer (1818/1969) argues for a conceptual and aconceptual divide of the mind. He was critical of Immanuel Kant's (1781/1998) theory of mind that claim that all cognition is conceptual. He argued that Kant did not separate perceptual knowledge from abstract knowledge. A similar argument is made by Friedrich Nietzsche (1887/1998).

Freud's method of psychoanalysis is based on the premise that the schism between our conscious and unconscious minds can become problematic when we do not accept a drive and do not engage in behaviour that would satisfy it. For Freud (1915) repression is a defense mechanism we employ to prevent a drive to factor in our behaviour, and he views repression as a form of self-deception. Instead of acknowledging a drive, repression involves the denial that one possesses the drive that is actively being repressed. According to Freud (1915), when a drive has been repressed it exists as 'dynamically unconscious.' For Freud (1915), the dynamic unconscious contains feelings, desires and thoughts that are kept out of conscious awareness, due to the actions of a psychological force like repression. It is considered part of a larger unconscious structure whose contents is descriptively unconscious. Even though a drive has been repressed it can still motivate behaviour by pushing for satisfaction. Because a person will not engage in behaviour to satisfy a drive, according to Freud, a drive becomes manifested in actions that merely symbolize it. For example, an illicit sexual desire can result in a person engaging in shoplifting items that they do not need. The aim of psychoanalysis is to find the root causes of neurotic behaviour that are inexplicable unless we discover the drive that motivates the behaviour. Simply put, Freud views self-deception as occurring when we are unconsciously motivated to perform a certain action, but instead we ascribe the reason for our behaviour to a motive incongruent with the drive that is actually motivating the behaviour.

Next, I briefly discuss Sartre's critique of Freud's account of self-deception.

Sartre's Critique

In Sartre's book, *Being and Nothingness* (1958), a section entitled 'Bad Faith and Lies' argues that Freud does not provide an adequate explanation of self-deception by making a distinction between conscious and unconscious mental processes. Sartre claims that in the act of repression there is awareness of the drive that is being repressed as well as an awareness of the actions that aims to satisfy it – and simply put, these are both rational activities. According to Sartre the Freudian 'censor' must first register the drive or impulse before preventing it from becoming conscious. Sartre (1969) argues that

> *[i]t is not sufficient that [the censor] discern the condemned drives; it must also apprehend them as to be repressed, which implies in it at the very least an awareness of its activity. In a word, how could the censor discern the impulses needing to be repressed without being conscious of discerning them?… All knowing is consciousness of knowing (pp. 52–53).*

Consequently, for Sartre, the act of repression is not due to the dynamics of nonrational drives. They are available to conceptual understanding and can be communicated. The problem is that for it to count as self-deception one needs to hide the self-deceptive activity from oneself. Sartre argues that Freud's account of self-deception does not provide a plausible explanation of the 'self-deception paradox.'

Freud's departure from the Cartesian understanding of the mind is that he does not view the mind as only consisting of

consciously accessible and linguistically available items. The drives he proposes are part of the mind, but these operate according to mechanical laws rather than laws of rational thought. Freud rejected the Cartesian and Kantian idea that mind has only informational content that operates according to rational inference (Webber, 2013). Freud's (1915) conception of the mind draws a clear dualism between the conceptual and non-conceptual parts of the mind. Jonathan Webber (2013) states that according to the Freudian model of the mind,

> *the dualism of the conscious and unconscious does not coincide with the dualism of the rational and mechanical: all rationally structured items in the mind are consciously accessible; some purely mechanical items are consciously accessible, but others are dynamically unconscious. Cast in this light, it is clear just how much of the Cartesian picture is actually retained by Freud. It is also clear just where Sartre's criticism bites: since self-deception is an intelligent activity, it cannot be part of the purely mechanical aspect of the mind; since it is not immediately available for inference and articulation, it cannot be part of the rational aspect either (p. 8).*

From a Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean perspective one could argue that Sartre is making the same mistake as Kant in ascribing all cognition as conceptual. This objection is congruent with contemporary developments in academic and research psychology, as a vast amount of data supports the notion that a significant portion of mental life is unconscious (Westen, 1998b). Moreover, even many non-dynamic approaches do not require all mental processing to involve awareness (Webber, 2013). I will discuss this objection in more depth later in the essay.

In opposition to Freud's model Sartre proposes his theory of bad faith as an alternate and more encompassing explanation of self-deception – one that does not require a conscious/unconscious schism.

Bad Faith

Sartre writes in his chapter on "Bad Faith" in*Being and Nothingness* that a human being "can take negative attitudes towards himself" (p. 86). He states that "self-negation" is one of these negative attitudes, and he chooses for his phenomenological analysis a form of self-negation that is "essential to human reality" namely bad faith or "*mauvaise foi*." Sartre (1958) distinguishes bad faith from lying as "a lie to oneself" only if "we distinguish the lie to oneself from lying in general" (p. 87).

Sartre argues for a phenomenological account of self-deception, because, according to him, general accounts of self-deception do not adequately describe immediate acts of self-deception. For this reason, Sartre (1958) proposes that '[i]f we wish to get out of this difficulty, we should examine more closely the patterns of bad faith and attempt a description of them.' (p. 55).

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre provides such a phenomenological account of self-deception or bad faith in an example of a woman "who has consented to go out with a particular man for the first time" (p. 55). This is an example of self-deception because the woman is aware of the man's sexual interest in her, and the potential consequences of that, but

because of her ambivalence she pretends that nothing is being asked of her. How does she accomplish this? She does this by restricting her "behaviour to what is in the present [immanent]; she does not wish to read in the phrases which he addresses to her anything other [transcendent] than their explicit meaning" (Ibid). Although she tries to disarm the 'transcendent aspect,' that is which is beyond the immanent, she does not want to deny it as "she would find no charm in a respect which would be only respect" (Ibid). Thus, she behaves in a way that can maintain these contradictory wishes. As Sartre explains, "[t]his time then she refuses to apprehend the desire for what it is; she does not even give it a name; she recognises it only to the extent that it transcends itself toward admiration, esteem, respect" (Ibid). Sartre highlights, using his terminology, that she strips that man's conduct of all "transcendence," as well as also stripping his desire of all immanence. She thus rejects the implied sexual implications (transcendence), and sees the man's behaviour as only a lofty "concern" (imminence) for her. Therefore, she can enjoy the excitement of the moment while denying the sexual implications and the potential choices it may have. According to Sartre "this woman is in bad faith" (Ibid).

So why is this woman self-deceived? For Sartre, she is self-deceived or in bad faith because she conceals something from herself at the same instant she brings it to attention (Webber, 2013). Continuing Sartre's critique of Freud, in the next section I discuss Sartre's theory of mind.

Sartre's Theory of Mind

To fully understand Sartre's critique of Freud we need to understand his theory of mind. Sartre's main departure from Freud is that he does not believe there is behavior, influenced by drives and impulses, and the thought processes associated with it, that cannot be brought to awareness and cannot be explained in relation to an individual's choices and preferences. By denying that there are such drives he denies the dualism of reason and mechanism that informs Freud's model. Sartre proposes a model of the mind that is not based on this dualism and psychic determinism. Discussing self-deception or bad faith Sartre (1958) proposes that

> *the one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person, which means that I must know in my capacity as deceiver the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived. Better yet I must know the truth very exactly in order to conceal it more carefully- and this not at two different moments…- but in the unitary structure of a single project. (p. 49)*

Sartre's theory of mind, and as indicated in the quote above, places a central emphasis on the notion of a "project." A project is something a person is committed to and remains committed to. A project can also be habitual, and one can engage in a project without much thought, yet it remains goal directed. The idea that one can pursue a project without thinking is one aspect of Sartre's theory of mind that explains motivation in relation to self-deception. Sartre's theory of self-deception is informed by how he understands how projects influence behaviour. He believes that they structure experience. According to Sartre, our experience is structured by the pursuit of projects. It is this characteristic of a project

that allows us to pursue projects that conceal themselves to us. The type of project that is central in *Being and Nothingness* is what he calls the "inferiority project."

According to Sartre, pursuing an inferior project is pursuing tasks or projects that are either beyond our abilities, or we go about it in a way that is doomed to failure. When we then fails at these projects, we blame our natural inferiority. The inferiority project requires that we genuinely believe we are pursuing these goals, otherwise they would not feel like authentic failures (Webber, 2013).

> *The inferiority project must structure one's experience such that certain goals seem achievable when they are not or seem achievable by means that will not in fact bring them about. It must also structure one's experience such that one seems to oneself to be genuinely pursuing those goals. One would then be unlikely to recognize that one is pursuing the project of proving oneself inferior; one would seem to oneself to be genuinely pursuing other projects and failing at them. (Webber, 2013, p. 10)*

The above discussion highlights a central disagreement between Freud and Sartre, which is the nature of the relation between motivations that are concealed and the behaviour that they influence. For Freud this relation is one of symbolization. For Sartre, it is about pursuing a concealed goal. For Freud, self-deception is only contingently related to motivation – it is because one disapproves of one's motivation that one conceals it from oneself. For Sartre, on the other hand, "it is in the very nature of the motivation itself that it must conceal itself if its goal is to be achieved. One will not succeed in persuading oneself of one's inferiority if one is clearly aware that this is one's goal" (Webber, 2013, p. 11).

Sartre (1958) believes that our capacity for self-deception reveals something about the nature of our minds. It reveals that conscious experience and practical reasoning are given structure by our projects. According to Sartre our prior projects influence our practical reasoning. This view of Sartre seems incongruent with his view of radical freedom – that is the freedom to choose or replace our projects at any time. If our projects or commitments influence our cognition, as research in social psychology has revealed, then do we really have the capacity to abandon a project at will?

It is not hard to see why Sartre needs an account of self-deception that does not rest on psychic determinism in his existential conception of radical freedom. For we would not be capable of radical freedom if we were motivated by purely unconscious drives. Yet, his conceptualization of the influence of projects on our motivation seems to be incongruent with his notion of radical freedom.

In the next section I will provide a brief critique of Sartre's objection of Freud theory of self-deception. It is beyond the scope of this essay to be comprehensive, and I will focus my discussion one only aspect of Sartre's theory of mind that relates to his critique of Freud's conception of self-deception.

Conclusion

In the following section I present the argument that research and modern academic theories are more congruent with Freud's view of how hidden motivations can influence our behaviour, than with Sartre's Neo-Kantian theory of the mind.

The is an overwhelming amount of data that supports the notions that thoughts, feelings, and motives can be part of unconscious processes (Westen, 1998b). Sartre's theory of self-deception or bad faith is based on the proposition that we need conscious access to our motivations and thoughts at the same time as we are denying them. Only by consciously holding two contradictory thoughts are we capable of self-deception. I reject this view, as I will highlight below that much of our thoughts and motivations can occur outside of awareness, so we can hold two conflicting views and motivations at the same time - one in awareness and the other outside of awareness.

Partly due to advances in functional imaging, we now have access to the neurological bases of instinctual drives and emotions, and evidence for their role in mental processes (Etkin et al., 2004). Findings support Freud's view that mental activity is influenced by phylogenetically old emotion and motivation systems (Panksepp, 1998). Research on unconscious affect provide strong support of Freud's central thesis, which has guided psychoanalytic practice for the last century, namely that people can thinks things of which they are not aware and act on feelings that they are not aware of (e.g., see Westen, 1998a, 1998b). Thus, we can have motivations and thoughts outside of awareness that are contradictory than those held in awareness at the same time.

Sartre's theory of mind is more congruent with theories of rational agency that view humans as agents with practical reasoning systems, using logic to decide which actions to perform, guided by their beliefs and worldviews (Wooldridge, 2000). From this perspective humans are understood as "intentional systems" (Dennett, 1987). But as highlighted above there is overwhelming evidence that our mental processes and behaviour is also significantly influences by non-logical and emotional processes.

For example, Antonio Damasio (1994) argues that rationality cannot be separated from emotions, which are "an integral component of the machinery of reason" (p. xii). Emotions can negatively affect our rational thinking, but their absence can be equally adverse. Damasio (2003) highlights the centrality of emotions in our being-in-the-world, saying that "feelings are the expression of human flourishing or human distress, as they occur in mind and body" (p. 6). He proposes that rational deliberation activates "gut feelings" that guide us in the process of reflection. The somatic marker "forces our attention on the negative outcome to which a given action may lead, and functions as an automated alarm which says: Beware of danger ahead if you choose the option which leads to this outcome" (Damasio, 1994, p. 173). So, feelings may have their basis in body representations, but we do not have conscious access to the neuronal processes that underlie bodily homeostasis and emotion states (Craig, 2002, 2009). Nelson Maldonato and Paolo Valerio (2018) argue that emotions are fundamental for moral choices. Therefore, emotions that operate outside our awareness can greatly influence our behaviour and can contribute to self-deception. Moreover, Sartre's view on how projects influence and structure our experience and behaviour, and that we are radically free to change the trajectory of these projects is

incongruent with the above-mentioned theories of emotions.

I agree with Sartre's that our projects influence our experience of the world, and influence our behaviour, but do not agree on how he applies this to his theory of self-deception – nor with that we are radically free, using rational thought processes, to change our behaviour. For example, according to metacognitive theory, psychological dysfunction develops when there is persistence and strengthening of maladaptive emotional responses. Extended counterproductive ways of thinking can intensify and prolong negative emotions. From a metacognitive perspective, psychological dysfunction is not merely about irrational thought processes, it is a certain pattern of thinking, called the cognitive attentional syndrome, that causes extended negative thinking associated with psychological dysfunction (Wells, 2005). To change one's metacognitive style of thinking takes prologued effort and is not something one can change by merely replacing irrational thoughts with rational thoughts.

In conclusion, I do not believe Sartre's provides a convincing critique of Freud's account of self-deception, and his theory of mind is not congruent with recent advances in psychological research and academic psychology, nor with clinical practice - as most psychotherapists would agree, except perhaps those that adhere to a ridged cognitive and behavioral view, that it requires more than mere rational deliberation to change deeply entranced behaviour.

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