Self-Deception
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Defining Self-Deception and Solving the Paradoxes

What's the point of calling someone "self-deceived"? It's to say that someone has a false belief (or other cognitive attitude) that is not just from stupidity or lack of information. Rather, the self-deceiver is at some level aware of information that would lead her to form the correct belief, but some motivational bias leads her to hold the opposite.

Consider a self-deceived business woman. There are signs her business will fail. But she maintains things are picking up. She even takes out a loan, self-deceptively believing profits are just around the corner. She's not incapable of processing the ominous signs; she has the intelligence. But her desires for the business to succeed—and the shame she would feel if it didn't—bias her reasoning in a way that brings about self-deception.

This kind of mental state is common. But defining it is hard. Recall we're talking about a form of *deception* (*see* LYING AND DECEIT). There appear to be two truths about deception that cause trouble for defining *self*-deception.

Apparent truth #1: in order for an act of communication to be an act of deception, the communicator must believe the contrary ($\sim p$) of the information communicated to the receiver (p). (Corollary: if I wholly believe what I'm telling you, it's not deception.)

Apparent truth #2: in order for an act of communication to be an act of deception, the communicator must *intend* to cause false belief (that p) in the receiver. (Corollary: if I communicate false information accidentally, it's not deception.)

These supposed truths, when applied to the notion of self-deception, lead to two paradoxes, which Alfred Mele (2001) helpfully labels the *static* and *dynamic* paradoxes.

The first (static) paradox, often called "the" paradox of self-deception, is as follows, where A is the self-deceiver: if A deceives A into believing that p, then A must also believe that $\sim p$, otherwise it's not deception (by #1); but then A both believes that p and believes that $\sim p$, which seems impossible. How, for example, can the business woman both believe that her business will fail and believe that her business won't fail?

The second (dynamic) paradox is about intention (*see* INTENTION). In order for A to deceive A, A must intend to cause false belief in A (by #2); but intentions are usually accessible to those who have them, so A would be aware that she intends to cause a false belief in herself; but being aware of this intention, it would be impossible for her to be fooled by it. So how is self-deception possible?

The common approach to solving the dynamic paradox is to deny that there is an intention to self-deceive. Rather, the motivational element that triggers self-deception is a desire, emotion, or perhaps goal (*see* DESIRE). For example, the self-deceived business woman desires *that her business succeed*, which biases her reasoning, but she never *intends* to deceive herself. Theorists presently disagree as to what the motivational element characteristically is in self-deception—is it a desire that p, or a desire to believe that p?—but the view that it is not an intention is widespread. (For dissenting voices, see Talbott 1995 and Bermúdez 2000.)

The static paradox is more tenacious. Nevertheless, three families of solution are prevalent: *divide the mind*, *deflate the accurate state*, and *deflate the product of self-deception*.

Divide the mind. This solution says that the mind has more than one compartment, with one part believing that *p* and the other believing that ~*p*. There are strong and weak versions of this approach. The Freudian (strong) version, championed by Donald Davidson (1985), says that one part of the mind actually deceives another (*see* FREUD, S.). This resolves the static paradox by denying that contradictory beliefs are present in one mental system. But the strong divide-the-mind view has major problems. If there were a deceiving subsystem, it would have to be capable of: (a) the goal of deception, (b) belief in the truth such that what it does counts as deception, (c) the ability to transmit information to the main system, and (d) knowledge of what the main system already knows. Such a postulate seems hard to accept. In fact, Mark Johnston (1988: 82) criticizes Davidson's approach on the grounds that, taken literally, "it implausibly represents the self-deceiver as a victim of something like multiple-personality."

The weak divide-the-mind view still posits a belief that *p* and a belief that ~*p* in separate parts of the mind, but it doesn't claim that one part acts as an *agent* to deceive the other. Let's establish some terminology: "the product of self-deception" is whatever cognitive state or attitude arises from self-deception; "the accurate state" refers to whatever informational state in the agent runs contrary to the product. (Thus, when one is self-deceived that *p*, the product has the content *p* and the accurate state has the content ~*p*.) So on one weak divide-the-mind view, the product of self-deception is a consciously accessible belief that *p*, while the accurate attitude is an unconscious or inaccessible belief that ~*p* (McLaughlin 1988). On this view, the business woman unconsciously believes that her business will fail.

Deflate the accurate state. But does she really believe this? Another approach to solving the paradox would say that she doesn't. Rather, she has information that by her usual, non-biased standards *would* lead her to believe that her business will fail, but because of self-deception, she doesn't go so far as believing this, even unconsciously.

Mele (2001: 120) gives a definition of self-deception that is representative of this approach. He deems the following conditions sufficient for being self-deceived in acquiring the belief that *p*.

1. The belief that p which S acquires is false.
2. S treats data relevant, or at least seemingly relevant, to the truth value of p in a motivationally biased way.
3. This biased treatment is a non-deviant cause of S's acquiring the belief that p.
4. The body of data possessed by S at the time provides greater warrant for not-p than for p.

Mele never says the agent at any level believes ~*p* ("not-p"). Rather, the self-deceiver possesses data that provide "greater warrant" for ~*p*. Thus, the accurate state on Mele's definition is deflated from a belief to data possession. To apply this to our example, the business woman has seen her balance sheets and heard customer complaints, which should get her to believe her business will fail. But her motivationally biased treatment leads her to believe her business will succeed.

The strength of this approach is its psychological plausibility, as Mele (2001)

argues at length. Its weakness may be that it's not entirely clear how it accounts for the *tension* that seems characteristic of self-deception. As Robert Audi (1997: 104) puts it, "what is missing (above all) is a certain tension that is ordinarily represented in self-deception by an avowal of p (or tendency to avow p) coexisting with knowledge or at least true belief that not-p." But as one might expect, it is controversial whether such a tension exists, and it may be that there is some other sort of tension in self-deception—emotional, epistemic—that Mele's theory can account for after all.

Deflate the product. Some philosophers think that positing the belief that ~*p* (i.e., calling the accurate state a belief) is needed to explain the self-deceiver's motivation to avoid encountering further facts that might undo her self-deception (Funkhouser 2005). How does the business woman know to avoid confronting her accountant, if she doesn't believe at some level that her business is about to fail? Theorists like Audi (1982) say that the self-deceiver unconsciously *knows* that ~*p* and merely "avows" that *p*. On this view, the product of self-deception is deflated, since it is no longer a belief, but merely an avowal, a mental state connected to verbal behavior but little else.

The avowal view of the product of self-deception is just one variety of deflate-the-product. There are at least three others. Kent Bach (1981) says that being self-deceived is a matter of motivated avoidance of a certain "sustained or recurrent" thought; essentially, for Bach there is no product of self-deception. Eric Funkhouser (2005), on the other hand, deflates the product by making it second-order; the self-deceiver believes that she believes, without actually believing. Thus, Funkhouser would say that the business woman believes that she believes her business will turn around, even though she doesn't really believe it! Finally, Tamar Gendler (2008) has recently proposed the interesting view that self-deception is a form of pretense. On her view, a person who is self-deceived about ~*p* doesn't actually believe that ~*p*, but rather is engaged in a fantasy or imagining that ~*p* that has belief-like phenomenological and behavioral consequences; but the product counts as pretense for Gendler, not belief, because it lacks belief's truth-directedness.

The strength of the deflate-the-product strategy is that it preserves the intuition that the self-deceiver at some level knows, or at least believes, the accurate information. (Mele would ask: is that intuition worth preserving?) The weakness is that it fails to make sense of the belief-like connections the product of self-deception seems to have to non-verbal actions, like taking out a loan on the expectation of future profits.

Lines of consensus. Despite the disagreement about how to solve the paradox, there are lines of consensus. First, self-deception is *motivated* by a conative state, like a desire or emotion. Second, whether or not the agent "knows" the truth at some level, the self-deceiver possesses data or evidence that by her usual standards *should* lead her to form the correct belief. Third, the product of self-deception is some sort of cognitive or representational state. (Bach's view of self-deception as avoiding a certain thought seems to be the outlier here).

Before continuing, let me distinguish some related types. So far we've mainly discussed "classic" self-deception, where someone believes what she wants to be the case. There is also "twisted" self-deception, where someone believes what she wants *not* to be the case, as in the jealous lover who without evidence believes his faithful wife is cheating. In addition, there are some mental phenomena that should not be confused with self-deception. One is *self-inflation bias*: a *general* tendency—not motivated by specific

desires—to think overly well of oneself, without any behavioral tension or epistemic tension like in classic self-deception. Second, *wishful thinking* is like self-deception in that it is motivated by desires or specific conative attitudes, but in wishful thinking that *p* it's not typically the case that the agent has compelling evidence that ~*p* is the case. So wishful thinking is also free (or more free) of self-deception's epistemic tension. Finally, willful ignorance is a step closer to actual self-deception; in willful ignorance, an agent maintains a comforting belief by avoiding evidential situations that might unsettle that belief, even though she doesn't have evidence *yet* that the belief is false. (For discussion of Sartre's notion of *bad faith*, see BAD FAITH.)

The Psychodynamics of Self-Deception

By what psychological processes does self-deception come about? Here are four models.

The Teaspoon and the Mountain. According to this model, the self-deceptive belief accords with the teaspoon of evidence the agent attends to, while running contrary to the mountain of ignored evidence encoded in the agent's mind. As Neil Van Leeuwen (2008) has it, when an agent is self-deceived that *p*, the desire that *p* makes it uncomfortable to attend to the evidence that ~*p* and more pleasant to attend to the evidence that *p*. The attention on the scanty evidence that *p* causes or at least perpetuates the belief that *p*.

Let's apply this model to the self-deceived business woman. She's cognized a mountain of evidence that her business will fail. But she wants it to succeed. This desire makes it more comfortable to attend to the teaspoon of evidence that it will succeed, like one good day of sales, which leads to the self-deceptive belief.

Internal Redefinition of Terms. You can't deceive yourself into believing you have blue eyes, when you have brown. But you can be self-deceived that you're *erudite*. Christoph Michel and Albert Newen (2010), appealing to psychological experiments by Dirk Wentura and Werner Greve (2004), explain this in terms of "pseudo-rational" internal re-definition. A person who doesn't do well on a history test may adjust her internal definition of *erudite* to exclude the requirement that one know a lot of history. Someone who does poorly in math may exclude math from his definition. But if so many adjustments are made that a mountain of evidence is ignored that the person is *not* erudite, then the agent has fallen into self-deception. So this model complements the teaspoon-mountain model: internal redefinition is one way of ignoring evidence.

The Pattern and the Exception. Bob is sober most nights, but as an exception, he gets drunk once a year. In this case, sobriety is the pattern and drunkenness the exception. But let's suppose that Bob gets drunk most nights, and stays sober only once in a while. Reflecting on his history, Bob may still treat the drunken nights as the exceptions and the sober nights as the pattern—and then generalize on this "pattern" to the belief he's not a lush. When switching the pattern with the exception is motivated by the right kind of desire, the result is self-deception.

Biased evidential standards. Consider the proposition *man-made carbon emissions cause global warming*. Suppose you hold that the evidence is just not good enough yet to assent to it, but you also cling without evidence to the belief that *there is no human-caused global warming*. In this case, you may seem rational to yourself for requiring such rigorous evidence for the first proposition. But your complete lack of

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evidential requirement for belief in the second means your evidential standards are biased. Biased evidential standards are self-deceptive whenever (1) their existence is caused by desires that make you more comfortable with believing the proposition for which your standards are lower and (2) they lead to the discounting of evidence you would otherwise admit.

What these models have in common is that they attribute a modicum of rationality to the self-deceiver. Unlike a person in a state of bizarre delusion, the self-deceiver holds her self-deceptive belief in accordance with *some* evidence.

The Ethics of Self-Deception

Let's now turn to the ethical problems of self-deception. My discussion will be organized around three questions. First, how should we assess an agent's moral responsibility for actions performed on the basis of self-deceptive beliefs? Second, does self-deception promote happiness? Third, is there something intrinsically wrong with self-deception?

The Problem of Self-Deception in Action

Let's consider an example of self-deception in politics. Jeff, who is running for office, attacks his opponent for "promoting measures that will damage public schools." This action would be justifiable, if it were true that the opponent's measures would damage the schools. But that's not the case; they're actually likely to help. Jeff, wanting to have something to attack his opponent for, has become self-deceived that the opponent's proposed measures would be damaging. Is he morally blameworthy for his attack?

Consider two related cases. (a) Jeff's campaign manager, immediately prior to a debate, handed him a credible-seeming report that outlined how the opponent's policies would cause damage. If Jeff sincerely believed the report and attacked the opponent accordingly, the campaign manager, not Jeff, would be the one to blame. Now the other case. (b) Jeff willfully and knowingly lies. Knowing that the policies are beneficial, he lies and says they'll be damaging anyway. In this case, Jeff is clearly blameworthy.

Our question can be thought of in these terms: is the case of self-deceived Jeff's attack more akin to (a) or (b)? Clearly, that depends on what self-deception is. One line of thought says that Jeff's self-deception was not intentional, as many philosophers of mind now agree, so he was not responsible for his self-deception (Levy 2004). If that's the case, then the self-deceived Jeff may be more like (a), the wholly deceived Jeff, whose false belief also was not intentional. Does that exculpate him?

Not yet. As Simon Blackburn (2009: 64) puts it:

> If we deny, as I think we should, that we are intentionally deceiving ourselves, what remains of responsibility? How are we to blame, if no wayward intentions are involved? Well, it is a mistaken dogma in moral thought that we are only to blame for things that lie full and clear within our own conscious thoughts. The familiar counterexamples include *negligence* and *perversity*. [Blackburn's *italics*]

A useful analogy is bad posture. Bad posture is a habit with negative health consequences. Is someone with bad posture *responsible* for those negative consequences? It would seem facile if a person were to say, "It's not my fault. I never intended to have

bad posture!" For surely a person, without thinking of posture every minute of the day, can be aware of her tendencies enough to correct her bad posture. Correcting a tendency toward self-deception is similar.

The morality of Jeff's case, then, seems more like the following (a'). Jeff's campaign manager is in the habit of slipping him documents that distort his opponent's policies, and Jeff has some low-level awareness of this habit. He doesn't bother to check the documents. Is he blameworthy for his distorted attack? It would seem so, since it was in his power to check the documents. It is a further open ethical question whether the morality of Jeff in (a') is as bad as that of lying Jeff (b).

In sum, self-deception, even if it is not intentional, is the result of bad cognitive habits, of which one can become aware. Let's assume that the teaspoon-mountain model of self-deception is correct. If so, you can avoid self-deception by choosing not to ignore evidence that makes you uncomfortable. If the internal redefinition model is correct, self-deception can be avoided by active adherence to consistent definitions. And if the pattern-exception model is correct, self-deception can be avoided by cultivating a habit of considering that what you regarded as exceptions may actually be the pattern. Likewise, one can commit to consistent evidential standards both for believing a proposition and for its negation. Insofar as there is some possibility of control over self-deception, there also seems to be some responsibility for the consequences of self-deception.

The Problem of Self-Deception and Happiness

Shelley Taylor (1989) reviews a range of findings in social psychology that can be boiled down to two points. First, depression is associated with more accurate appraisals of the self and one's social situation. Second, most "normal" or healthy people have misconceptions that make themselves out to be more competent, likeable, popular, and so on. From these points, it's easy to conclude that self-deception is conducive to happiness. The self-flattering illusions feel good and make people happy, right? But the two points express correlations, not causation, so we should be wary. There are also empirical and conceptual reasons to be skeptical of the supposed connection between self-deception and happiness.

The first issue is conceptual. Empirical findings do suggest that people who believe they will be successful are more likely to be successful, just as people who believe they will have good relationships are more likely to have good relationships. Taylor argues on the basis of those findings that positive "illusions" are conducive to success (which presumably leads to happiness). But there's a conceptual mistake in such an argument. If those findings are correct, then the so called "illusions" actually end up being largely true, in which case they are not illusions, much less self-deception. They should rather be classified as *self-fulfilling beliefs*.

The second issue is practical. False beliefs, including self-deceptive ones, undermine desire satisfaction. Suppose I self-deceptively believe that my son is good at math. Obviously, I *want* my son to do well in school. But self-deceptively believing he is good at math might prevent me from getting him the tutor he needs. If the self-deception is about one*self,* it may prevent one from improving on one's weaknesses. Self-deceptively believing that I'm a good listener might prevent me from improving on how I listen to my partner, which damages my relationship and hence happiness.

The third problem comes from the structure of the self-deceptive mental state. Suppose you're self-deceived that you're popular. If that's the case, you're at some level aware of evidence to the contrary; otherwise it wouldn't be self-deception. This evidence to the contrary of the self-deceptive belief—perhaps in the form of low-level awareness of the little slights that suggest your lack of popularity—may eat away at you. Self-deceptive internal tension may provoke anxiety. In fact, Baumeister *et al.* (1996) find that people with falsely inflated (self-deceptive) self-esteem are more likely to respond with aggression to threats to the ego, which is evidence of negative emotion—not happiness.

This discussion should make one thing clear: understanding self-deception conceptually and psychologically is essential to evaluating whether self-deception promotes happiness. Without understanding self-deception conceptually, we might conflate self-deception with "blissful ignorance." Without understanding the psychological structure of self-deception, we might miss the fact that the information internally ignored by the self-deceiver can still produce anxiety.

The Inherent Normative Problem of Self-Deception

Self-deception seems more likely to be implicated in morally base action than morally praiseworthy action, as the case of Jeff the politician illustrates. The virtuous agent has nothing to hide from others or herself; but the villain has much, and self-deception may further the hiding and even help *sustain* the villainy. Furthermore, empirical studies support the connection between self-deception and moral hypocrisy, or the judging of others' actions by standards to which you don't hold your own (Valdesolo and DeSteno 2008). So the following conditional conclusion seems reasonable: if we want to be moral agents, we should seek to avoid self-deception (*see* PRACTICAL CONDITIONALS).

But the conclusion so far is only that self-deception is often *instrumental* to morally blameworthy acts. The question to be addressed now is whether self-deception is *intrinsically* bad. Think of two possible worlds that are alike in levels of happiness and *prima facie* just behavior, where one has lots of self-deception and the other has little. Is there any reason to think that the world of self-deceivers is a *worse* place than the other world, given their equality in other respects?

One reason for thinking so would be the view that knowledge is intrinsically valuable. As the Delphic oracle more particularly suggests, self-knowledge is intrinsically valuable. But self-deception necessarily—not just contingently—undermines knowledge; self-deception *is* an undermining of knowledge. Thus, if knowledge is good, self-deception is in itself bad.

But there is another, and perhaps deeper, reason why self-deception may be intrinsically bad: it may be corrosive to moral agency itself. Stephen Darwall (1988) helpfully distinguishes three approaches to moral theory: approaches based on independent conceptions of what is *good*, approaches based on independent conceptions of *duty*, and approaches based on the *constitution* of the moral agent. On the third approach, which Darwall thinks is represented most forcefully by Kant, an action is morally right when it comes from an agent with the right constitution—one that is set up to appraise actions fairly and (in some sense) impartially. What, on such a view, is wrong with self-deception? "Self-deceptive rationalization is not only a misuse of judgment, it

threatens the very capacity for judgment. Constitutionalists must regard it, therefore, as both wrong in itself and a threat to the very possibility of moral integrity" (424-5).

Conclusion: Room for More Work

There is room for much more work in ethics devoted to self-deception. As suggested, it is likely that much morally culpable action is perpetrated under the auspices of hazy and self-deceptive justifications. Our understanding of exactly what's gone wrong in such cases should be informed by a detailed moral theory, as well as a detailed philosophy of mind describing the psychological structure of self-deception.

Cross-References

BAD FAITH AND THE UNCONSCIOUS; DESIRE; FREUD, Sigmund; HAPPINESS; INTENTION; LYING AND DECEIT; PRACTICAL CONDITIONALS; RESPONSIBILITY.

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