

Princeton Philosophical Society: Self-Deception

There is no singular concept of “self-deception”. Rather, the several psychological processes that we would classify as such are broadly similar but sharply at odds in structure and implication. To analyze the nature, consequences, and desirability of self-deception, we must analyze each of its disparate parts separately. But first, of course, we should have a general definition to clarify exactly what would fall under the rubric of self-deception. Ian DeWeese-Boyd offers such one definition: “self-deception is the acquisition and maintenance of a belief ... in the face of strong evidence to the contrary motivated by desires or emotions favoring the acquisition and retention of that belief”.¹

Given this rather broad definition, let us begin by specifying three general cases of self-deception.

- 1. The Genuine Liar:** One of the most noteworthy cases of self-deception is that of the truthful liar, who honestly believes the lie he is delivering. Consider the canonical case of Sally the saleswoman. Sally is hired by Megacorp to sell vacuum cleaners to potential clients. She begins with accurate and well-justified beliefs about these vacuum cleaners: they are overpriced and of mediocre build. Over time, however, she comes to believe the sales pitch that she delivers to customers. She forms an inaccurate and unjustified belief that these vacuum cleaners are competitively priced and extremely effective.

In abstract form, then, the genuine liar begins with a justified belief X at time t , and then has an unjustified (contradictory) belief Y at time $t + 1$.

Why might we become genuine liars? Biologist Robert Trivers famously used this type of self-deception to illustrate the evolutionary power of arms races. It is, to put it simply, evolutionarily beneficial to be an effective liar. It is, likewise, evolutionarily disadvantageous to be gullible. Thus, as Trivers argued, there was an arms race between the ability to lie and the ability to detect lies. As a poker player can tell you, liars exhibit clear tells that permit their target a very good chance of detecting their deception. Indeed, the most effective way to lie is not to be lying at all, which is why the genuine liar is evolutionarily advantaged. If Sally believes she is telling the truth, then no customer will ever detect her lying. Thus, by deceiving ourselves, we are able to deceive others far more effectively.

- 2. The Green Light:** “Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter -- tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. ... And one fine morning---” As Nick poignantly observes at the conclusion of *The Great Gatsby*, we are essentially characterized by what psychologists call an optimistic bias. We believe that our lives will be wonderful in the future, that our projects will turn out well, and that we have the power to accomplish whatever we want. We have a consistently inflated self-image and overrate our personal attributes across a large number of dimensions. Strikingly, the effects persist even when we're specifically told about our bias and instructed to control for it. We cannot seem to eliminate this sense of optimism and self-

¹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/self-deception/>

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superiority even when we become aware of it, at least not all of the time.² Rather, we then hold differing occurrent (conscious) and disposition (there to be recalled, but not in conscious awareness) beliefs. We tend to occurrently believe in our false optimism, and dispositionally believe in our true condition.

Why do we persistently, and perhaps futilely, reach for the green light in the horizon? Once more, the reasons are firmly strategic. As Geoff Miller argues persuasively, the human mind is at heart a product of sexual selection.³ Much of our cognitive machinery can be directly traced back to the problem of securing the highest possible quality mate. Our patterns and thought and action are therefore optimized for persuading potential mates of our own desirability. High self-esteem, overconfidence, and a belief in the ability of hard work to generate substantial future returns all contribute to this. They make us more productive, more risk-seeking, and generally more successful.

Consider, for instance, a recent finding that men are apt to perceive sexual interest in a large range of cases, even when the evidence of it is thin. Rather than rationally analyzing whether a given set of behaviors is an expression of sexual interest or purely innocuous, they simply assume the former. This is not truth-seeking behavior (and, indeed, they are often wrong!). It is, however, strategically advantageous. The benefits that accrue from consistently trying to pursue sexual advances vastly outweigh the costs of frequent rejection. By minimizing the error of missing a sexual advance, this pattern of overconfidence actually promotes reproduction. The same is true for many other self-deceptions of this type: they are evolutionarily adaptive, and thus we stubbornly cling to them even when informed that we're wrong.

- 3. The Bliss of Swine:** Finally, we arrive at the case of motivated ignorance. Unlike the prior two cases, there is no false belief being held. Rather, we are systematically interpreting our available evidence to fit one view (the pleasant view), dismissing evidence that goes against our preferred view, and avoiding evidence that would contradict the view. Consider the case of Larry the Limousine Liberal. Larry, like all of his friends, believes strongly in social responsibility, taking care of the impoverished, and not exploiting the powerless. Like all of his friends, though, Larry is also a big fan Inamra clothing. Unbeknownst to Larry, Inamra employs child slavery to produce its glitzy suits. Suppose Larry begins with no belief either way about whether Inamra is an exploitative firm. Now suppose Larry begins to see evidence that, indeed, Inamra forces young children to stitch his shirts. Larry refuses to read this evidence as evidence of misconduct; instead, he explains it away. He then goes out of his way to avoid seeing further evidence of child exploitation, and any new evidence he does see he dismisses.

Abstractly: motivated ignorance occurs when we refuse to believe p even though all available

² And, needless to say, when we're depressed. Interestingly, depressed individuals hold a much more accurate view of themselves and of the world around them. This lends weight to the cognitive view of psychological disorder, which argues (specifically) that we become depressed because our beliefs about ourselves and the world become less pleasant.

³ Miller, Geoff. *The Mating Mind*. 1999.

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evidence indicates that p is true.

Why does motivated ignorance exist? There is no good biological answer (yet, that I'm aware of), so let us speculate with a just-so story. We know that we like to be happy. We also know that some beliefs make us unhappy (e.g. you have terminal cancer). In order to continue to be happy, we are motivated to set aside and reject beliefs that make us unhappy. When the personal cost of rejecting a true belief is small (e.g. Larry won't be personally affected by Inamra's labor practices), we reject the belief in order to feel good.

Given these three cases, we can now analyze self-deception. First, let us ask if it is intentional or unintentional. More specifically, do we consciously choose to deceive ourselves, or are we simply victims of our psychology?

- 1. Intentionalism:** Intentionalists argue that self-deception results from conscious, willful efforts to get ourselves to believe things that we know are false. This immediately leads to a problem, known as the static paradox: it seems incoherent for us to accept a belief and its negative in conscious thought at the same time. Intentionalism offers two ways out of this problem. Some intentionalists temporally partition our beliefs, arguing that we deliberately exploit memory loss to change our beliefs over time. Others psychologically partition our beliefs, arguing that we actually have two autonomous intentional faculties, one of which (the self-deceiving part) actually overrides the other in order to suppress an unpleasant belief. Both versions have come under criticism, though. Temporal partitioning encounters the strategic paradox: if we know that we intend to deceive ourselves, and deception requires unawareness of the deceit, how can we ever successfully self-deceive? Psychological partitioning forces us into bizarre and counterintuitive notions about how the mind works, which do not correspond well with the empirical evidence.
- 2. Non-intentionalism:** Non-intentionalists argue that self-deception results from non-conscious psychological processes that we are not aware of. They acknowledge that it may be possible to intentionally deceive ourselves, but that almost all actual cases of self-deception are not of the intentional type. They argue that self-deception consists of a false belief motivated by some form of emotion, whether it be desire or anxiety or something else entirely. Larry's desire to enjoy Inamra clothing, for instance, influenced his interpretation of the evidence that Inamra used child labor. Sally's desire to make money caused her to believe the lies that she peddled. Under non-intentionalism, the mechanism of self-deception is an insidious change the way we frame, analyze, and integrate evidence.

We now arrive at the ultimate question of inquiry: under what circumstances, if any, should we deceive ourselves? I'd like to highlight four views that I believe delineate the spectrum of possible responses.

- 1. Socrates dissatisfied:** John Stuart Mill wittily objected to the notion that pleasure is the only valid goal in life by observing that 'tis "better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied". Ignorance may be bliss, but it is an inferior and despicable state. According to this view, no amount of self-deception is acceptable. The pursuit of truth trumps the pursuit of contentment. We ought to do everything within our power to be epistemically virtuous.

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2. **See no evil:** As the old proverb goes, we have a tendency to ignore morally objectionable acts to which we contribute. Larry's motivated ignorance allows him to be contentedly complicit in the exploitation of children, an activity he considers morally wrong. It is his successful self-deception that allows him to do this; without it, he would most likely be forced by guilt into changes clothes producers. Thus, in this view, self-deception is wrong if and only if it causes us to behave immorally or ignore moral abuses.
3. **The autonomous self:** Many philosophers, Kant in particular, believe that the essence of being human is the exercise of autonomous agency. We are human because we have control over our lives and the ability to make informed decisions. Any psychological process that impedes our autonomy is therefore harmful of our natures. This view says that self-deception is wrong if and only if it reduces our ability to act as autonomous agents. It is perhaps less strict than the absolutist view that self-deception is always and everywhere wrong, but nevertheless frowns upon most self-deception, given that it undermines the ability to reason.
4. **Consequentialism:** The consequentialist believes that the only factors that determine what we should do are the consequences of our actions. We should do *A* if and only if *A* maximizes preferences (or, loosely, utility) over the world. Thus, simply, we should deceive ourselves if and only if it is advantageous in consequence to do so.