

A relational theory of self-deception

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Abstract

The authors argue that the fragmentary model of consciousness implied in the term ‘self-deception’ has provided the chief metaphor for explaining the apparent discrepancies that can arise between the evaluation of a motivated observer and the evaluation of a less interested external observer. Though self-deception models have explained these discrepancies in terms of both a dualistic opaque consciousness and in terms of cognitive and affective processes, all of these accounts seem to rest on the same essential fragmentation of the psyche. The authors argue that a relational model of consciousness, one that claims the indissolubility of cognition and affect, object and perception, and of past, present, and future can account for the apparent discrepancies involved in the paradigmatic cases of self-deception in a more parsimonious and phenomenologically faithful way than more objectivist and fragmented accounts of self-deception.

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1. Introduction

The possibility of self-deception has always been a difficult and provocative issue for any theory of human consciousness and so it has attracted a good deal of comment in both psychological and philosophical literature. The core of such literature has usually been the attempt to explain why, or at least how, a motivated observer’s subjective evaluation of a situation and the evaluation of an external observer could come to be radically divergent. Most theorists have explained this discrepancy in terms of the fragmented psyche

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postulated in 19th and 20th-century psychology. Unfortunately, this model of consciousness entails theoretically problematic, non-parsimonious constructs that are counter to lived experience. Though more recent accounts of self-deception have moved towards a more process-oriented explanation, these accounts are still firmly rooted in the same fragmentary metaphor for consciousness. It is our argument that an analysis of the paradigmatic cases of self-deception that eschews these fragmentary metaphors in favor of a relational conception of consciousness produces a more parsimonious and phenomenologically faithful account of those cases termed self-deceptive.

The general form of the current paper will adhere to the boundaries of that argument, outlining, first, the prevailing theories of self-deception. We will begin with those traditional models of self-deception that are based on a fragmentary consciousness and then briefly consider the more process-oriented models, outlining along the way some of the difficulties inherent in both of these theoretical traditions. We will then present our own relational model of self-deception and show how it is more theoretically consistent, more parsimonious, and more phenomenologically faithful than those previous accounts. We will also show that this increased consistency, parsimony, and phenomenological fidelity do not reduce the theory's capacity to explain apparently self-deceptive behavior (using emotion regulation as a case example).

2. Self-deception theory and the fragmentary consciousness

Though the self-deception literature is by no means unitary, the various accounts of this phenomenon have for the most part been framed in terms of a fragmented model of consciousness. The very choice of terminology already implies a division within an individual consciousness—the deceiver and the deceived inhabiting the same self—and, though this division has been articulated in various ways, it has remained the core of most attempts to explain apparent examples of self-deception. The notion of a fragmented consciousness—most notably in the form of the unconscious—has long been a part of psychological theorizing, particularly in psychoanalytic modes of thought. In fact, [Gergen \(1985\)](#) has claimed that the very term ‘self-deception’ has been absorbed into everyday language from psychoanalytic terminology, though this is almost never acknowledged in the philosophical and psychological literature on the subject. Instead, the term is usually taken to be part of the natural vocabulary of the English language and thus worthy of conceptual analysis.

Some of the earliest work that explicitly focused on self-deception rested firmly on this notion of a fragmented consciousness. In a paper that set the stage for much succeeding debate, [Demos \(1960\)](#) put the interpretation of ‘deception’ in the term self-deception squarely into the province of lying. He believed that the meaning of ‘deceive’ need not necessarily include the intention to mislead but he nevertheless made the choice to define self-deception as an intentional process in which a person “lies to himself, that is to say, persuades himself to believe what he *knows* is not so” (p. 588, emphasis in original). For Demos, then, self-deception is a term applied to someone who “believes both p and not-p at the same time” (p. 588). Demos also made a distinction between delusions and self-deception, insisting that in the case of delusions the person “experiences no conflict; there is no countervailing belief, as there is in self-deception” (p. 590). Such a conflictual account of self not only implies but requires the postulation of a fragmented psyche. For Demos to insist that two contradictory beliefs “exist in the consciousness of the person” (p. 592) he

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