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Review article

Self-deception as affective coping. An empirical perspective on philosophical issues

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ABSTRACT

In the philosophical literature, self-deception is mainly approached through the analysis of paradoxes. Yet, it is agreed that self-deception is motivated by protection from distress. In this paper, we argue, with the help of findings from cognitive neuroscience and psychology, that self-deception is a type of affective coping.

First, we criticize the main solutions to the paradoxes of self-deception. We then present a new approach to self-deception. Self-deception, we argue, involves three appraisals of the distressing evidence: (a) appraisal of the strength of evidence as uncertain, (b) low coping potential and (c) negative anticipation along the lines of Damasio's somatic marker hypothesis. At the same time, desire impacts the treatment of flattering evidence via dopamine. Our main proposal is that self-deception involves emotional mechanisms provoking a preference for immediate reward despite possible long-term negative repercussions. In the last part, we use this emotional model to revisit the philosophical paradoxes.

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That evening, Sam was late again. He entered the room, kissed Mary, and apologized for the delay. It was like any other day, except for one thing. Unbeknownst to Sam, there was a red lipstick stain on the collar of his bright white shirt, a very salient mark. The truth is that he had just been kissing Sally, his secret lover of several months. It was almost impossible for Mary not to have seen the stain, this strong evidence of Sam's infidelity, but she didn't draw the obvious conclusion that her husband had been unfaithful. Rather, she surprisingly still believed that Sam was faithful. She trusted Sam's explanation that his being late was due to the usual unreliableness of the Brooklyn line, which was of course a lie. When asked by her friends the next day how things were going with Sam, she replied that everything was fine and that she loved him more and more every day. And the striking fact is that she was sincere in saying so and was not lying – except to herself. This example has been used as one of the self-deception paradigms in philosophy since it was first employed by Meiland (Meiland, 1980).

Experiments have revealed that self-deception is widespread (Kunda, 1990). People usually believe that they are good drivers (Lajunen, Hakkarainen, & Summala, 1996), professors typically believe that they are well above average (Mele, 2001), and seriously ill patients often believe that they will recover (Goldbeck, 1997), among other examples. As reality is less flattering, it appears that we deceive ourselves and that our desires significantly bias our cognition. How do we manage to avoid facing the facts when evidence speaks for itself? What is self-deception?

In the philosophical literature, it is agreed that self-deception involves at least three elements: (i) a cognitive state (ii) formed despite sufficient evidence to the contrary (iii) because of a subject's desire. Self-deception is thus a type of motivated cognition. Nonetheless, there are debates about self-deception: one is about the very process of deceiving oneself and the other is about the result of this process. Both controversies emerge from the traditional picture of self-deception, which conceives of self-deception as structurally analogous to interpersonal deception (Davidson, 1985). People deceive other persons by intentionally leading them to believe what they do not believe themselves. In deceiving Mary, Sam intends to induce in Mary the belief that the train is the cause of his lateness, while not believing this himself. Deception is thus an intentional process involving two simultaneous beliefs with contradictory content. If self-deception is deceiving oneself, it should involve an intention and two simultaneous conflicting beliefs (Davidson, 1985). As people deceive others by *intentionally* inducing in others a belief that they themselves do not hold, people deceive themselves by *intentionally* forming a belief that conflicts with another of theirs. To return to our example, Mary intends to believe that Sam is faithful and, as a result, believes so, while also believing that he is not faithful to her. However, as intuitive as it seems, this picture gives rise to two paradoxes (see Mele, 2001).

The *dynamic* paradox arises as soon as it is observed that deceiving someone implies that the deceiver intentionally hides the truth from the deceived person and knows that she is doing so. Unlike the case of interpersonal deception, it is notably difficult to understand how one can both know (or believe) the truth and intentionally hide it *from oneself* so as to "lie" to oneself. Indeed, knowing that one is hiding the truth from oneself makes this endeavor self-defeating. As a consequence, self-deception seems impossible, which collides with the fact that it is widespread. This puzzle is called the 'dynamic paradox' because it concerns the process of deceiving oneself. Several solutions have been proposed. To mention just two, the traditional picture appeals to an unconscious intention in understanding self-deception (Bermudez, 2000; Davidson, 1985), while aficionados of alternative views have renounced the appeal to intention altogether (Bach, 1981; Mele, 1997).

The traditional picture also gives rise to the *static* paradox, which concerns the state one is in when being self-deceived (the so-called "product" of self-deception). If self-deception is structurally analogous to interpersonal deception, self-deceived subjects should be in a contradictory state of mind. But it seems impossible to hold two simultaneous beliefs with contradictory content in a conscious manner. How can I hold the beliefs that it is raining in Central Park and that it is not raining in Central Park, at the same time and in a conscious way? This has motivated some authors to think of self-deception as involving an *unconscious* belief (Davidson, 1982; Davidson, 1985; Pears, 1984). Alternatively, some have argued that self-deception consists in avoiding thinking about certain distressing things (Bach, 1981). Others understand the product to be a mental state other than believing, such as pretense (Gendler, 2007). Finally, some have defended that deceiving oneself results in the deluded belief only: Mary merely believes that Sam is faithful *period* (Bermudez, 2000; Mele, 1997).

The philosophical controversy mainly revolves around the solutions to these paradoxes. As each solution comes with a price, the state of the philosophical debate seems to have reached an impasse, at least in the absence of further empirical evidence (more on this in part 1). Yet, despite these controversies, there is an important feature of self-deception that is accepted by all sides of the debate without controversy, and that immediately comes to mind when one thinks about self-deception: suffering and, more generally, affect. Indeed, it is plausible to think that people deceive themselves in order to avoid suffering from distressing truths. Some truths are difficult to live with and significantly impair one's well-being. As Price (1954) put it, there are beliefs we *cannot afford*: The fact that her husband is having an affair is too distressing for Mary to face, as it frustrates one of her strong desires. This natural explanation of why we deceive ourselves is taken for granted by the main models of self-deception (see part 1) and has been empirically tested (Erez, Johnson, & Judge, 1995). Moreover, the literature on the biological adaptiveness of self-deception (Hippel & Trivers, 2011; Van Leeuwen, 2007), its cognitive function (Johnston, 1988; Barnes, 2007) and ethical puzzles, such as whether self-deception makes us happy (Van Leeuwen, 2009), mainly makes sense on the assumption that the conflict between truth and happiness lies at the heart of self-deception. This being said, it is striking that, to our knowledge, very few accounts revolve around this idea and investigate its affective

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