

Practical Self-Deception

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ABSTRACT

Philosophical accounts of self-deception almost invariably treat it as a phenomenon concerning belief. But this article argues that, in the very same sense that we can be self-deceived about belief, we can be self-deceived about matters that concern our practical identities – e.g., our desires, emotions, values, and lifestyles. Given that our practical identities are at least as important to us as are our beliefs, philosophical accounts of self-deception should accommodate such practical self-deception.

1.

The philosophical literature on self-deception has, by and large, treated it as a phenomenon concerning belief.¹ That is, the self-deceived are almost always described, defined, or theorized as being deceived with respect to a belief. This is probably because philosophers who discuss psychological matters tend to have a heavy bias toward belief in general, perhaps because it has clear connections to theoretical reasoning. Self-deception is supposed to be a type of irrationality, and beliefs are particularly well-suited for rational evaluation in terms of their standing with respect to evidence and other epistemic norms. Since epistemology is squarely within the field of philosophy, such a characterization of self-deception makes it appropriate for philosophical investigation as well.

However, I think that we should expand our conception of self-deception and our corresponding philosophical theories so that they cover a wider

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¹ Mele 2001, one of the most prominent book-length treatments of self-deception in recent years, does not consider self-deception about anything but belief-like attitudes. Almost all other philosophical treatments of self-deception have been similarly narrow in their focus.

assortment of attitudes, states, and actions with respect to which one can be deceived. In particular, I offer our desires, emotions, values, and lifestyles as additional respects in which we can be self-deceived. Of course, we could be deceived about these things in virtue of being self-deceived about beliefs that mislead us into acquiring the wrong desires, emotions, values, or lifestyles. For example, I might desire to give a public speech on a topic – or simply make a blog post – because I have deceived myself into believing that I am an expert on that topic. But this is not what I have in mind. Here the desire is an effect of the deceptive belief, and this desire would be appropriate were the belief accurate. Rather, my claim is that we can be directly self-deceived about these things in the same sense that we can be directly self-deceived when it comes to our beliefs. Further, philosophical attention should be given to this broader range of self-deception. In contrast with the theoretical nature of belief, I call such cases *practical self-deception* because of their close connections to action.

2.

I will begin by providing some justification for this expansive understanding of self-deception. These are reasons for thinking that a theory of self-deception should concern itself with more than just the psychological state of belief.

1) Scope.

Other things being equal, or at least for some explanatory purposes, explanations and theories with wider scope are to be preferred over those with more limited scope. For example, a theory of self-deception that covers deception about both self-affirming and self-negating beliefs should, other things being equal, be preferred over a theory that covers only one of these categories. Likewise, a theory of self-deception that covers deception about our beliefs, desires, emotions, values, and lifestyles, should be given precedence over a theory that covers only one of these categories.

2) There are interpersonal analogues to practical self-deception.

Puzzles about self-deception are often introduced by comparing it to interpersonal deception. In interpersonal cases, it is often said, we want to deceive someone into believing some falsehood and we take steps so as to trick them into believing that falsehood. This is often true. But there is nothing about the notion of deception that tethers it to belief. We also

deceive or trick people into acquiring certain desires, emotions, values, and lifestyles. It is perhaps a stretch to call the resultant desires, emotions, values, or lifestyles *false* (even though some people do commonly speak this way). But there is some negative term – such as *mistaken*, *inappropriate*, or *inauthentic* – that applies to such cases. We then have some reason to look for parallel varieties when it comes to self-deception.

3) Self-deception about belief often uses means that can be applied to acquiring desires, emotions, values, and lifestyles as well.

Some philosophers might think that we should limit our understanding of self-deception to belief because, as philosophers, we advocate certain standards (e.g., truth) and we advance norms of good reasoning that are violated in self-deception about belief. Further, those who self-deceive about belief are often seen as engaging in an activity that is paradoxical. Consider a man who deceives himself with respect to his wife's infidelity. How can he know or suspect that his spouse is having an affair (as seems required for pulling off the trick of consistently avoiding the decisive evidence in favor of her infidelity), but also *not* know or suspect the truth (which seems required for the trick to succeed, so that he nevertheless believes that she is faithful)?

However, when we look at many of the psychological mechanisms employed in self-deception about belief, they also can apply to self-deception about desires, emotions, values, and lifestyles. In all these areas we can ignore alternatives, suppress doubts, be motivated to misinterpret contrary considerations, or simply remain unreflective. Also, there are practical paradoxes that parallel the paradoxes about self-deceptive belief – e.g., How can one know or suspect the value of some career (as seems required for pulling off the trick of consistently avoiding the considerations that make that career appealing), but also *not* know or suspect the value of that career (which seems required for the trick to succeed, so that one values an alternative career instead)?

4) Practical self-deception is of fundamental importance.

Philosophers are often passionate about truth, even for its own sake. But whatever importance there is in having true beliefs – and as a corollary, whatever importance there is in avoiding self-deception about belief – is at least equaled by the importance of getting our desires, emotions, values, and lifestyles right. Of course there is some uncertainty as to what “getting it right” means in these cases or if there even is such a standard. Regardless,

our desires, emotions, values, and lifestyles are at least as important to us in practice as are our beliefs. As such, we should be at least as concerned about practical self-deception as we are about our beliefs.

5) Practical self-deception occurs.

It is a simple fact that we sometimes are self-deceptive with respect to our desires, emotions, values, or lifestyles. As such, and given the previous reasons, we should be interested in theories that cover practical self-deception. In the next section I will make a case, through examples and distinctions, for self-deception of these varieties.

3.

Let us start with a case of self-deception with respect to desire. Suppose that a young man finds himself naturally inclined to have sexual thoughts – desires – about other men. For whatever reason, he is motivated not to have these desires and to have heterosexual desires in their place. The motivation here is not simply for a belief. It is true that he does not want to believe that he is a homosexual, but this is because at a more fundamental level he does not want it to be true that he is a homosexual (i.e., has a certain set of sexual and otherwise intimate desires directed at men). The primary motivation in this case is for certain kinds of desires. Of course, there are other cases in which people are motivated simply to repress or hide their desires rather than replace them. This is not the case, however, with our young man. He deceives himself into having his thoughts involving sexuality and intimacy directed at women. As a consequence the bulk of his conscious thoughts about sex do not mesh with his more brute, biological desires for men. This is, unsurprisingly, not a great success, and he remains celibate.

Next imagine someone who genuinely is not happy, perhaps for good reason. Her mother recently died, say, and she also lost her job. But she wants to be happy. She forces smiles. She repeats to herself that things are fine. She focuses on the more pleasant parts of her life, however minor they are. She is trying to be happy. But this is only a partial success. She will be doing fine for a while, but then she suddenly breaks down into tears seemingly out of nowhere.

Or consider a boy who was passionately attracted to the arts and found great value in them. He loved drawing and painting more than anything else. But his father taught him that the arts were impractical and feminine, and that there is nothing of value (at least for a man) in pursuing or appreciating them. So the

boy focused his attention on more practical business interests and suppressed his value judgments about the arts. He strained to value practical matters instead. Echoing his father, he now claims that the arts are a waste of time. But he still catches himself engaged in extensive doodling from time to time as well as being moved, against his declarations, by the arts.

Finally, consider a case of self-deception with respect to lifestyle. Suppose that a girl is raised by parents who have pushed her from an early age to be a medical doctor. She grows up, goes to medical school, and becomes a medical doctor. She works at her profession with care and great competence, but she lacks real passion for her work. She knows that other people find much pleasure and fulfillment in their work, or that a certain job was “meant to be” for them, but she experiences no such feelings herself. She has doubts from time to time, doubts that first started back in her teenage years, about whether a medical career is for her. But the influence of her parents and the years of schooling carry great weight. She suppresses any thoughts about a change in career – the will of her parents as well as a great educational investment have provided her with reason to do this. She instead focuses on the objective value of helping the sick. She deceives herself into accepting this lifestyle, this career.

I offer each of these as an example of practical self-deception. I think that each of these four types can exist independent of the others, though they often will come bundled together – e.g., those who are self-deceived about their lifestyles often engage in desire self-deception as well. Some might challenge the independence claim by arguing, for example, that whenever there is lifestyle self-deception there is also desire self-deception. But I do not believe that is correct. Our doctor need not deceive herself into desiring to be a doctor – she just continues to go to work and go through the motions. Our doctor also need not deceive herself into losing her desires for a change of career – these desires could persist, but she simply discounts or ignores them. Because desire and lifestyle can come apart, it is worthwhile to consider these as two different categories of self-deception. The repressed homosexual deceives himself with respect to his desires, but this need not result in a heterosexual lifestyle. The doctor deceives herself with respect to her lifestyle, but this need not result in a change in her career desires. And each of our 4 examples is different from the standard philosophical examples of self-deception about belief, at least in its motivation and target state.

Some might object that even in these cases of practical self-deception belief still plays a privileged role. Namely, one might argue that in order for practical self-deception to succeed one needs to have the right kinds of beliefs. For example, in order for effective practical self-deception about his sexual desires he must believe that he is heterosexual.² If true, this could justify the focus on belief in philosophical discussions of self-deception. I do not think that belief plays such a privileged role, however. First note that the motivation and target state of practical self-deception is not belief, but some practical identity instead. At best, then, self-deception about belief would be a necessary step toward acquiring this practical identity. But acquiring such beliefs is not necessary for practical self-deception. Rather than being a means to practical self-deception, such beliefs are often a consequence of practical self-deception. This is clear in some of our examples. Someone can deceive themselves into being happy not by means of believing this, but by doing things like forcing smiles and selectively attending to the evidence as described in our example. She engages in these activities while not yet believing that she is happy. In fact, she engages in these activities in part *because* she does not believe that she is happy. If she eventually succeeds to some extent in making herself happy, it is true that she will likely believe herself to be happy as a consequence. But that belief is not self-deceptive; it reflects the actual success of her practical self-deception in bringing about some happiness.

4.

Practical self-deception is similar to other types of practical irrationality that have received philosophical treatment, such as Mill's notion of a *life of custom*. In writing of custom Mill had in mind those who are unreflective and dogmatic with respect to their desires and lifestyles. To live a life of custom is to passively accept a set of desires or a manner of living without any rational scrutiny.

[...] though the customs be both good as customs, and suitable to him, yet to conform to custom, merely *as* custom, does not educate or develop in him any of the qualities which are the distinctive endowment of a human being. The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice. He who does anything because it is the custom, makes no choice. (Mill, 1993, p. 67)

² I would like to thank Patrizia Pedrini for raising this objection.

Such people are *lazy*, at least when it comes to their practical reasoning. They are irrational in virtue of not even reflecting or trying. They do not question their desires or lifestyle, nor do they consider alternatives to them. They are passive, either out of pure laziness or out of a false belief that they have been assigned a role to play in life (e.g., the feminine role or the waiter role).³

But one can also be actively irrational with respect to one's desires, lifestyle, emotions or values. I here have in mind those who are *perverse*, rather than merely lazy, when it comes to their practical rationality. This perversion is a motivated misuse of reasons or reasoning, rather than simply a failure to engage with reasons or reasoning. Thus, it is a perversion of rationality. This lazy/perverse distinction can also be found in the theoretical realm. The lazy believe (if they believe at all) dogmatically, passively accepting some belief as if it has been assigned to them by the press, their peers, their parents, or nature itself. The perverse, on the other hand, are the self-deceivers who are motivated to misuse reasons or reasoning. They ignore (due to their motivation) reasons for one belief, and they sometimes actively abuse reasoning by selectively attending to the evidence or rationalizing their favored alternative. The examples of practical self-deception in the previous section are all supposed to involve perversions of rationality in this sense. They are motivated to have heterosexual desires, be happy, value the practical life of business, or be a doctor. But they have good reasons for being otherwise. Their body pushes them to desire the same sex; their situation is anything but a happy one; they recognize little value in business and find much value in the arts; or they feel alienated from their career. But by suppressing these reasons and putting a positive spin on the alternatives, they push for the alternatives they desire. This active engagement with reasons and reasoning makes them perverse practical reasoners.

Those who merely live a life of custom are often wholehearted in their desires, emotions, values, or lifestyles. They need not feel any tension or uncertainty about how they live or how they want to live. Perhaps they *should* feel seem tension or uncertainty, but they do not since they are unreflective or simply inactive in this regard. Practical self-deceivers, in contrast, often experience tension or uncertainty. Tension results from the recognition, or simply the fact, that things are not as they want them to be. And while self-

³ Bad faith is similar to a life of custom, but I will avoid discussing it as Sartre represents it as too psychologically sophisticated and metaphysically loaded for my simpler purposes here.

deceivers sometimes are fully successful at eventually bringing about the desire, emotion, value, or lifestyle that they want, they frequently are only half-successful in this regard. Like a self-deceiver about belief who “half-believes” both that her husband is faithful and that he is having an affair, practical self-deceivers will frequently “half-desire” something, be “half-happy”, “half-value” an activity, or “half-identify” with their career. The ambivalence here is a result of reasons conflicting with motives, and the ambivalence remains because many of us cannot overcome the force of these reasons no matter how much we may want to.

There is a large literature discussing the reasons for such disconnect – between our reasons and motives – when it comes to belief. Because belief aims at the truth, it has been argued, it is impossible to believe at will.⁴ More generally, reasons for belief have a tendency to prevail over, or at least frustrate, our reason-independent motives. But one might be skeptical about there being such built-in obstacles to our motives for particular practical identities. That is, one might claim that there is nothing analogous to the built-in norm of truth when it comes to desire, emotion, value, or lifestyle. This would undermine the comparison of practical self-deception to theoretical self-deception, as well as the necessity of engaging in any kind of *deception* in order to satisfy our practical aims.

I will not argue for the claim that desire or value aims at the good, or that our emotions and lifestyles have their own constitutive aims. However, such a strong claim is not necessary to establish a conflict between reasons and motives for these practical identities, nor for the necessity of engaging in deception to satisfy these practical aims. All that is needed is that there are reasons for or against these practical identities and, at least as an empirical fact, there is some difficulty in flatly discounting (consciously or not) the force of these reasons. The difficulty in simply avoiding the force of these reasons would then explain the need to resort to deceptive measures. And I think it is manifest that there are such obstacles, aptly described as reasons, to satisfying our motives to desire, feel, value, or live in a particular way. His natural inclinations provide him with reasons to desire men, reasons that cannot be dismissed at will. One might object that these inclinations *constitute* his homosexual desires, rather than serve as *reasons* for these desires. Even so, they at least are reasons that speak against him desiring, and attempting to

⁴ See, for example, Williams 1973 and Velleman 2000.

desire, to have sex with women. His motivation is for an all-things-considered preference (desire) to be heterosexual. But his natural inclinations provide reasons against such an all-things-considered preference. And this point generalizes. Recall our unhappy woman, whose unpleasant circumstances provide her with reasons to be unhappy. These are reasons that she cannot dismiss at will. Such reasons are forceful even if we do not consciously reflect on them. Our self-deceivers then need to resort to deceptive measures to overcome their force – e.g., they suppress their natural inclinations or focus on the (few) positives.⁵

5.

We are now in a position to consider the conditions that are characteristic of both theoretical and practical self-deception. I offer the following 5 conditions that are at least close to being necessary and jointly sufficient for either theoretical or practical self-deception with respect to some psychological state or behavior X.

- 1) Motivation: A is motivated to X.
- 2) Frustration: A is in a state that directly conflicts with X.
- 3) Insufficient Rational Support: A does not have adequate reason to X.
- 4) Deception: A employs some deceptive strategies, often involving perversions of rationality, to further X.
- 5) Success: A has some success in furthering X.

Let us discuss each of these 5 conditions, with special consideration given to their application to practical self-deception.

1) Motivation.

Here ‘X’ can be one of a variety of mental states or behaviors concerning which an agent A can be self-deceived. As previously discussed, the motivation can be for belief, desire, emotion, value, or lifestyle, and this list is not intended to be exhaustive. Certainly most people do have motives with respect to each of these categories from time to time – e.g., people want to be hopeful or they want to be a lawyer. This motivation itself often has its own psychological explanation, and such explanations can be quite varied. A woman might want to be hopeful

⁵ Millgram 1997, Ch. 2, argues that desires possess such backward-looking commitments (i.e., reasons) that make it impossible to desire at will.

for its own sake, for example, but want to be a doctor simply in order to please her father. As the latter case is supposed to show, the motivation here might not reflect what we would naturally describe as what the agent “really desires”. She desires to be a doctor, but she prefers that her father were not so overbearing or that he at least favored a career path more in line with her temperament. In that sense, while she does have a motive to be a doctor, it is not what she “really desires”. The motivation for self-deceptive belief can similarly have varied psychological explanations, these differences accounting for the distinction between straight and twisted self-deception for example.⁶ Straight self-deceivers typically desire a belief for its own sake or for the peace of mind that comes with it, but twisted self-deceivers – whose motives do not accord with what they want to be true – often have a more complex motivation.

2) Frustration.

The agent is in a state that conflicts with their motivation. This means that they do not have what they want. But more than this, they are in a state that frustrates their desires. He desires to be heterosexual, but he finds himself with homosexual desires. She wants to be a writer, but she is a doctor. He wants to believe that the ship is seaworthy, but he has doubts or outright believes that it is not seaworthy. In cases like these the conflict is obvious and direct. In order to prompt deception, the conflict should be straightforward and obvious enough to cause psychic tension or be evident to a neutral observer. The existence of this conflict is largely due to condition 3.

3) Insufficient Rational Support.

Deception results from a conflict between motivation and reasons. While A is motivated to X, the reasons available to her do not support X or they support a state that straightforwardly conflicts with X. The most well-developed accounts of rational support apply to belief, which likely explains why discussions of self-deception have focused on belief. Skeptics about practical self-deception will probably attend to this condition, arguing against the applicability of rational support to desires, emotions, and the like. But we often are capable, if pressed, of justifying such states by citing considerations on their behalf. I view these considerations as reasons, though some will likely insist on a division between genuine reasons (such as for belief) and aptness conditions or the like (such as

⁶ See Mele (2001) for a characterization of the distinction between these two different kinds of theoretical self-deception.

for desires). Regardless, I take it that it is practically undeniable that there are conditions that speak to the appropriateness of a desire or lifestyle. The fact that you have no interest in a particular career or that you have no aptitude for it, for example, are considerations that speak to the inappropriateness of that career for you. Such conditions are likely not produced by a faculty of reasoning, but they still are considerations for or against these states. Further, these considerations, like epistemic considerations that count as reasons for belief, cannot be resisted at will. We cannot simply decide to have a career for which we have neither interest nor aptitude.⁷ The fact that the considerations speaking against this career also prompt deceptive tactics further suggests that they are reasons, as such tactics are employed to manipulate their rational force.

4) Deception.

Reasons have force that often cannot be straightforwardly denied. This is particularly clear with belief, with some arguing that it is a conceptual or psychological necessity that we cannot ignore such reasons and simply will to believe. Hence, theoretical self-deceivers must employ tactics like suppression, biased evidence gathering, rationalization, and the like. These same tactics are employed when it comes to our practical identities as well. Our unhappy woman suppresses her unhappy thoughts and feelings. She selectively attends to the meager evidence that shows things are going well for her. She attempts to rationalize away her unhappy thoughts and feelings – e.g., they are merely the product of a bad night's sleep or indigestion. Such efforts, aimed at acquiring the emotion of happiness, clearly amount to a deception. The fact that she has to deceive in and of itself strongly supports the claim that the considerations she manipulates are reasons for, and not merely causes of, her unhappiness. She is not merely addressing an impediment to her happiness; she is doing so in a way that amounts to a perversion of rationality.

5) Success.

Some degree of success is required to be self-deceived, rather than merely self-deceiving. Full success, however, is not required. That is, the self-deceived do

⁷ Some will think that lifestyle is different from belief in that it is conceptually impossible to believe at will, whereas at best it is psychologically impossible to pursue a certain lifestyle at will. In Funkhouser (2003) I argued that our inability to believe at will is similarly a mere psychological impossibility, at best. Regardless, there are reasons that provide psychological obstacles to our ability to acquire desired practical identities at will.

not have to fully acquire the belief, desire, emotion, value, or lifestyle that they desire. A partial success can be good enough to count as self-deception. Such is often the case, as when the subject remains ambivalent and continues the self-deceptive enterprise because the rational force behind the contrary belief, desire, etc. remains. Our woman must keep thinking happy thoughts, as the reasons for her unhappiness intrude every now and then and cause her to cry. Outright delusion, in which the agent fully satisfies his motivation, is the extreme that terminates the process of self-deception.⁸ But in some cases it might not even be possible for the agent to fully satisfy his desire through a process of self-deception. Such might be the case for the homosexual who wants to have heterosexual desires.

6.

I have argued that there are cases of practical self-deception that share the same structural features, the 5 conditions discussed in the previous section, with the common examples of theoretical self-deception. Theorists of self-deception should investigate and treat these practical cases as well. Practical self-deception deserves treatment because it exists and is of importance. Whatever virtue there is in getting our beliefs right is likely matched, if not exceeded, by getting our desires, emotions, values, and lifestyles right. Considering such cases can also shed further light on the nature of rationality itself, as they show us the diversity of reasons and, on the perverse side, the diversity of deception.

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⁸ Funkhouser (2009) and Noordhof (2009) mark this distinction between ambivalent self-deception and full-fledged self-delusion. Both accounts of self-deception focus more on the cases involving ambivalence and instability, in which self-deceptive pressures persist.

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