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Introduction: Self-deception. New Angles

Meylan, Anne

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DES POLITIQUES PUBLIQUES ET DES PRATIQUES SOCIALES.

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A MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL ON THE NORMATIVE
CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC POLICIES AND SOCIAL PRACTICES.

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DOSSIER

SELF-DECEPTION: NEW ANGLES

ANNE MEYLAN
UNIVERSITY OF ZURICH

INTRODUCTION

It is no wonder that self-deception has always sparked philosophers' interest. Self-deception is a very intriguing phenomenon from both the descriptive and the normative points of view. First, self-deception raises a number of descriptive problems. Should we model self-deception on others' deception and hold that the self-deceived subject *intends* to deceive herself? Or should we rather—granted that some motivational state must be part of the self-deceptive process—identify self-deception's motivational cause with a *desire*? Famously enough, the classical opposition between intentionalist (e.g., Davidson, 1986) and deflationist accounts (e.g., Mele, 1997, 2001; Nelkin, 2002) of self-deception revolves around these questions. Intentionalist and deflationist accounts face different sorts of worries and each seems to succeed where the other fails. For instance, deflationism has been accused of not faring as well as intentionalism with regards to the selectivity problem (Talbot, 1995). For its part, intentionalism—mostly because it does not allow the self-deceptive process to take place unknowingly—has been charged of raising paradoxes (the well-known “static” and “dynamic” paradoxes; see, e.g., Mele, 2001). Furthermore, self-deception typically involves a certain epistemic discomfort or tension (Funkhouser, 2005; Noordhof, 2009; Van Leeuwen, 2007). Subjects do not hold self-deceptive beliefs in the simple, wholehearted way in which they hold their other, non-self-deceptive beliefs. Most often, doubts nag at the back of their minds and prevent them from being completely at ease with their beliefs. Another descriptive problem is to explain this tension.

Self-deception is also *normatively* fascinating. Self-deception is often considered to be an irrational cognitive phenomenon. But what makes it irrational? Is it not, at least occasionally, acceptable to deceive oneself? According to Joseph Butler (1726/2006) and Adam Smith (1759/2002), self-deception is always morally reprehensible, mainly because we get used to casting a too-favourable light on the morality of our own actions by self-deceiving ourselves about them. This gradually corrupts our moral judgment and prevents us from correcting our moral mistakes. Much more recently, Van Leeuwen (2009) has claimed that self-deception is not even “egoistically good” since it does not make us happy.¹ In contrast, Barnes (1997) has argued that in some sufficiently difficult or costly circum-

stances, “the avoidance of a painful truth” (chapter 9, p. 165) is not always *prima facie* morally bad (even though, according to Barnes, the epistemic cowardice that goes along with self-deception is *prima facie* objectionable). Additionally, several psychologists and neuroscientists (see, e.g., Sharot, 2011; Taylor, 1989) have emphasized the positive effects that (positive) self-deceptive evaluations of ourselves have on our mental health. These evaluations even seem able to promote our ability “to care about others” and “to engage in productive and creative work” (Taylor and Brown, 1988, p. 193).

While the first four papers included in this special issue address some descriptive issues raised by self-deception, the last two articles deal rather with normative questions surrounding it.

Pedrini’s paper “Liberalizing Self-Deception: Replacing ‘Paradigmatic State Accounts’ of Self-Deception with a Dynamic View of the Self-Deceptive Process” suggests a change of paradigm. Philosophers should give up the “snapshot” conception of self-deception—that is, the currently prevailing assumption that self-deception is a stative phenomenon. Pedrini suggests that we should replace this classical conception with a dynamic and processual account. According to her proposal, self-deception is a process that is susceptible to including what she describes as “a multitude of highly tensive and unstable mental states” that are not only cognitive but also conative and affective.

The purpose of Hubbs’s contribution is also to illuminate the very nature of self-deception. In line with Barnes’s anxiety-avoidance account, he argues that self-deception results from the “tendency of the mind to avoid thinking unpleasant thoughts.” An additional, and to my knowledge, innovative element of Hubbs’s view is, however, as follows. When this tendency is satisfied—that is, when the subject holds the self-deceptive belief—she also takes the positive feeling (or pleasure) that comes with the self-deceptive belief to signify its warrant or its truth while it is, in fact, not the mark of truth but rather the mark of the believer believing what she wants to believe. In other words, the self-deceived subject confuses “the epistemic satisfaction of believing what is warranted” with “the thumotic satisfaction of believing what he wants to be true.” According to Hubbs’s paper, self-deception results from a phenomenologically describable confusion between two distinct feelings of satisfaction.

Ohlhorst’s article focuses on a specific form of self-deception, which he calls *tragic self-deception*. In tragic self-deception, Ohlhorst claims, the self-deceived subject holds a belief that is immune to all pieces of evidence, even compelling ones. But is it possible to dismiss compelling evidence? *Does this not amount to madness or deep irrationality?* Ohlhorst defends the possibility of tragic self-deception by bringing in the Wittgensteinian notion of hinges or certainties. Briefly, hinges are acceptances (for instance, that the earth exists) that constitute the necessary rock-bottom of our knowledge and, most importantly, that lie beyond evidential justification. Hinges have, according to Ohlhorst, their analogue in the affective domain. These are iHinges, acceptances that are so

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susceptible to including

crucial for our affective balance (for instance, the acceptance that your daughter is not a persistent murderer) that they also lie beyond evidential justification. Finally, iHinges are what makes genuine cases of tragic self-deception possible.

For some time already, discussions surrounding self-deception have included findings from empirical science. For instance, significant inspiration has been found in the psychological studies addressing our “bounded rationality” (see, e.g., Mele, 1999 and Scott-Kakures, 2001). Lauria’s affectivist filter view of self-deception extends this trend but also innovates on it by introducing specific results from neuroscience into the picture of self-deception. More precisely, Lauria’s paper defends an account on which affective mental states (e.g., emotions like fears, shame, etc.) play a crucial role in the self-deceptive process at the stage of the appraisal of the evidence. His view is supported by, among other things, the fact that such an appraisal is accompanied by a certain neurobiological mechanism—mainly, dopaminergic activity that takes precedence over neural structures, such as frontal activation and negative somatic markers. This neuroscientifically informed account of self-deception has the advantage furthermore—Lauria argues—of solving the problem of selectivity (Talbot, 1995) and of unifying “straight” and “twisted” self-deception (Lazar, 1997; Mele, 1999), while other affectivist accounts do not score as well on these two problems.

Deceiving yourself is generally considered to be irrational. But what makes self-deception irrational? Sarzano’s paper focuses on this question. She gets part of her inspiration from the epistemological literature on pragmatic encroachment. “Pragmatic encroachment” refers to the cluster of views according to which the possession of epistemic states like knowledge and justified beliefs does not exclusively depend on truth-related factors. Pragmatic considerations—most famously the costs and benefits of knowing/believing something (de Rose, 1992)—also seem to have an influence on whether one really knows or holds a rational belief. For instance, in some cases, the *costs* of being wrong about *p* are such that the right attitude to hold is, for instance, to suspend judgment about *p*. Now, as Sarzano writes, not only are the costs/benefits of holding a belief part of the mechanism that initiates self-deception, but the influence of such practical considerations on the production of the self-deceptive belief also make the latter irrational. How could practical considerations be responsible for the *rationality* of our doxastic attitudes (at least, according to the pragmatic Encroachers) while explaining their irrationality in the case of self-deception? In the last part of her article, Sarzano suggests various answers to this question in order to differentiate right and wrong ways in which practical considerations might influence our doxastic attitudes.

Another important normative question is whether we are responsible for deceiving ourselves; van Loon’s paper addresses this issue. According to McHugh’s account of doxastic responsibility (see, e.g., McHugh, 2017—which is currently one of the most influential accounts), our being responsible for our beliefs is a matter of these beliefs being responsive to our reasons. In her paper, van Loon

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Modifier:
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She
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shows that one implication of Mele’s account of self-deception is that self-deceptive beliefs are always reasons responsive. According to van Loon, self-deceptive beliefs “à la Mele” always fulfil the crucial necessary condition for doxastic responsibility.

As it should now be clear, the six articles included in this special issue approach self-deception from different angles, bringing in notions, tools, and results from distinct research areas. The outcome, hopefully, is a collection of essays that renews the traditional debate surrounding self-deception and that opens several original lines of research.

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I would like to thank Jean-Philippe Royer for his remarkable work in the preparation of this special issue and Sophie Keeling for the proofreading of the introduction. Funding was provided by Schweizerischer Nationalfonds zur Förderung der Wissenschaftlichen Forschung (Grant No. PP00P1_157436).

NOTES

¹ See also Baron (1988) for some other charges against self-deception.

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