User-Friendly Self-Deception

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I

Since many varieties of self-deception are ineradicable and useful, it would be wise to be ambivalent about at least some of its forms.[1] It is open-eyed ambivalence that acknowledges its own dualities rather than ordinary shifty vacillation that we need. To be sure, self-deception remains dangerous: sensible ambivalence should not relax vigilance against pretence and falsity, combating irrationality and obfuscation wherever they occur.

The animus against self-deception has an honourable origin: the motto 'know thyself' was inextricably linked to the Socratic enlightenment project, to the systematic critical examination of belief, its clarification and justification.[2] But the dangers of self-deception were nevertheless magnified by those who misunderstood the fundamental conviction of the later Enlightenment that we shall know the truth, and the truth will make us free. Because

[1] One variety of self-deception: X is self-deceived about p when
(1) X believes that p at t (where t covers a reasonable span of time);
(2) Either (a) X believes not-p at t or
  (b) X denies that he believes p at t;
(3) X recognizes that p and not-p conflict;
(4) X denies that his beliefs conflict, advancing an improbable ad hoc reconciliation, making no attempt to suspend judgment or to determine which belief is defective.
Since conditions (1) and (2) are parallel to (3) and (4), the attribution of self-deception is regressive. It is typically justified by an inference to the best explanation, an account of what X would normally believe, perceive, notice, infer. For more elaborate formulations of these conditions, see Leon Festinger, *Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, 1957) and B. McLaughlin, 'Exploring the Possibility of Self-Deception in Belief,' R. Audi, 'Self-Deception, Rationalization and Reasons for Acting,' and A. O. Rorty, 'The Deceptive Self: Liars, Layers and Lairs,' in *Perspectives on Self-Deception*. B. McLaughlin and A. Rorty (eds) (University of California Press, 1988).

[2] After having raised the paradox of analysis in the *Meno,* and come to the brink of scepticism, Socrates says, '. . . we shall be better, braver and more active if we believe we should inquire than if we believe we cannot discover what we do not already know. That is something for which I am ready to fight in word and deed to my utmost ability.' (86B)

the narrow and naive interpretations of that project assigned a central role to self-consciousness and self-knowledge in the complex tasks of liberation through knowledge, self-deception seemed threatening to the primary tasks of rational inquiry. The denial of a systematic tendency towards various forms of irrationality, to self-deception, *akrasia* and the conservation of emotions is, in effect, the Enlightenment's attack on the epistemological remnants of the doctrine of original sin. It is finitude—the limits of our epistemological equipment—rather than constitutional malformation that makes us subject to error. Kant complicated the Enlightenment story: self-critical rationality can recognize but not prevent its disposition to self-deceptive illusions. Ironically, it is the fundamental project of rationality—its articulating the conditions that make experience possible—that lures it to treat its postulates as if they were possible objects of experience.

We cannot avoid self-deception. Even open-eyed ambivalence is subject to the self-deceived conviction that although we are conflicted, the appropriate attitude will emerge in the right way at the right time. But we should not wish to do without the active, self-induced illusions that sustain us. Nor can we do without second order denials that they are illusions, the second order and regressive strategies that we self-deceptively believe rationalize our various self-deceptive activities. The question is: how can we sustain the illusions essential to ordinary life, without becoming self-damaging idiots? Are there forms of user-friendly self-deception that do not run the dangers that falsity, irrationality and manipulation are usually presumed to bring?

II

The phenomena of self-deception are extremely various: they encompass an arbitrarily selected section of a spectrum of closely related activities of ritualized forms of self manipulation; their identification presupposes theories about normal patterns of perceptual, emotional and evidential salience, norms of rationality and transparency. We draw the lines between self-deception and its cousins and clones—compartmentalization, adaptive denials, repressed conflicts and submerged aggressions, false consciousness, sublimation, wishful thinking, suspiciously systematic errors in self-reflection—in whatever ways sustain our favourite theories.

And there is an evaluative element as well: The hidden politics of the attribution of self-deception and false consciousness masks their frequency and advantages. When we deplore what we regard

as misplaced loyalty or highly focused concentration that resists expansion or correction we pejoratively classify it as self-deception. But when we admire persistent and dedicated single-minded attention that systematically resists the distraction of fringe phenomena, we call it courage or purposeful resolution. The person who does not have our favoured reactions is open game for the charge of self-deception, if not of a more serious form of psychological abnormality, or worse, a culpable form of political subversion.

To be sure, if the pronouncements of common opinion and ordinary speech are at all clearly identifiable and reliable, there are constraints and directions on the analysis of self-deception. Like virtually all the concepts that concern us ('self,' 'belief,' 'conflict' and even 'rationality'), self-deception elusively moves between latitudinarian ordinary speech and a strict, theory-and-value dependent technical vocabulary.[3] Enlightenment philosophers attempting to explain the possibility of knowledge focus on the privacy of cognition and construe their analyses of other psychological activities in the terms set by those concerns. To be sure, all the phenomena must be accounted for in one way or another: but the exigencies of elegant theory construction play a large role in categorizing and describing fringe phenomena that are not, in the first instance, a philosopher's primary explanatory concern. An ambitious philosophy of mind, designed to conjoin and support a theory of knowledge, does not initially propose a theory of self-deception or *akrasia*. It classifies these as deviant phenomena and explains them in the terms that best suit the directions of its primary theory.

If we characterize self-deception narrowly, as requiring the strict identity of deceiver and deceived about beliefs in propositional form, the phenomena of self-deception seem to evaporate. After all, the conditions for strict personal identity are so stringent as to cast doubt on the continued temporal identity of the self, let alone the identity of a self deliberately lying to itself. As strict constructionists working with a technical vocabulary, we may get some understanding of the mind as an epistemic instrument, but little understanding of its psycho-social functioning and the popu-

[3] See 'Persons and Personae,' pp. 27–98, A. O. Rorty, *Mind in Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988) and A. Mele, *Irrationality: An Essay on Akrasia. Self-Deception and Self-Control* (Oxford, 1987) and his 'Recent Work on Self-Deception' *APQ*, 1987; D. Pears, *Motivated Irrationality*, Oxford, 1984; M. Martin, (ed.), *Self-Deception and Self-Understanding*; (Kansas, 1985); M. R. Haight, *A Study of Self-Deception* (Sussex, 1980) and Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes* (Cambridge University Press, 1983.)

larity of other presumptively deviant activities like weakness of will and the irrational conservation of emotions. If, on the other hand, we characterize these phenomena inclusively, with the broad latitudinarian hand that encompasses common practice and common speech, the phenomena that appear on the fringes of our presumptive rationality play a significant role in virtually all our activities. Beyond the constraints set by constructing a comprehensive theory of intellectual and psychological functioning—one that explains extremely diverse cognitive, motivational and affective phenomena—there is no fact of the matter about whether we should be strict or latitudarian constructionists about the criteria for the identity of the deceiver and the deceived or about the conditions that identify cases of deception. Because we typically position ourselves dialectically, emphasizing the conceptions that have been neglected by our immediate predecessors, we can expect a continuous (re)cycling of latitudinarian and strict characterizations of self-deception.

We are in the awkward position of stipulating definitions that will satisfy our technically exacting colleagues in the cognitive sciences, while also carrying on with what passes for common sense and ordinary language. In analysing and evaluating self-deception, we are engaged in the method of reflective equilibrium, attempting to balance our (common) considered judgments and practices with our principle-laden theories, as if our ordinary judgments and practices are not already theory-laden.[4]

III

Like deception, self-deception is a species of rhetorical persuasion; and like all forms of persuasion, it involves a complex, dynamic and co-operative process. Successful deceivers are acute rhetoricians, astute seducers who know how to co-opt the psychology of their subjects. They begin with minute and subtle interactions designed to establish trust, with a manner of approach, certain gestures and intonation patterns, intimations of directed and redirected attention. Astute deceivers like Iago engage the co-opera-

[4] Ordinary language is Protean in this area: it has incorporated the terminology of psychoanalysis and popular cognitive science. And as it becomes increasingly cosmopolitan, it adds '*mauvaise foi*' and 'false consciousness.' We can expect that considered judgments derived from French ('*Je me trompe*' for 'I made a mistake,' '*Je m'en fiche*' for 'I don't care') would not coincide with those influenced by languages that are less generous with reflexive pronouns.

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tion of their victims. Othello's psychology—his sensitivity, his pride, his sense of being a stranger—was a collusive instrument in his being deceived, and eventually in his being self-deceived. These strategies reveal the political complexity involved in drawing the boundaries between deception and socially induced self-deception. Deception and self-deception are not merely detached conclusions of invalid arguments: they are interactive processes with a complex cognitive and affective aetiology.

1. What Self-Deception is Not

It is illuminating to track self-deception negatively, characterizing its varieties by noting what it is not. By exposing common misconceptions about self-deception, we shall arrive at a better understanding of its dynamics and its popularity.

(1) Self-deception is typically not episodic: it rarely occurs as a single, momentary event, a kind of epistemic sneeze. The popularity of self-deception is not explained by its episodic propositionalized structure but by its functional activity as a magnetizing disposition. A disposition is magnetizing or tropic just when 'it promotes and even constructs the occasions that require its exercise.'[5] For instance, a person who self-deceptively denies the estrangement of her affection typically does not insist on affirming or proclaiming it. Her self-deception consists largely in her active disposition to produce the occasions—the scenarios and events—that elicit the conventional expressions of affection: a term of endearment, a caress. Similarly, the Roman Catholic who denies that she has lost her faith sustains her self-deception by following routine habits, attending Mass, continuing the rituals of religious observance. In both cases, the evidence for self-deception is a pattern of behaviour: the caress is unconvincing, participation in the ritual of the service is wooden. But one abstracted caress or absent-minded Credo does not mark a self-deceiver. Self-deception is characterized by a continued and complex pattern of perceptual, cognitive, affective and behavioural dispositions.

(2) Self-deception is typically not a solitary activity. Like other intentional activities, it works through sustaining social support.[6] As standard ordinary beliefs are elicited and reinforced by our fel-

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[5] Cf. 'The Two Faces of Courage,' *Mind in Action*, (Boston: Beacon, 1988) p. 301.

[6] Cf. W. Ruddick, 'Social Self-Deceptions,' and R. Harré, 'The Social Context of Self-Deception' *Perspectives on Self-Deception*.

lows, so too are our primary self-deceptive strategies. The canny self-deceiver puts herself in situations where her deflected attention will be strongly supported by her fellows. 'How wonderful that you are beginning your Spiritual Retreat (or going to Lower Slobovia)' the world says to the uncertain and frightened traveller. Though she may be aware that she is more apprehensive than pleased by the prospect of her journey, she attempts to block her resistance by using conventional social forms to distract or submerge her attention.

(3) Self-deception need not involve false belief: just as the deceiver can attempt to produce a belief which is—as it happens—true, so too a self-deceiver can set herself to believe what is in fact true. A canny self-deceiver can focus on accurate but irrelevant observations as a way of denying a truth that is importantly relevant to her immediate projects.

Moreover, self-deception need not involve any belief at all: the process and the outcome can be proto-intentional or sub-doxastic.[7] When someone systematically deflects the natural direction of her gaze, ignoring phenomena that she would normally find salient, her ignorance can be an instance of self-deception as well as an instrument designed to achieve it. Systematic, persistent resistance to correction can be internal to the processes of believing: it can indicate the functional role of a relatively trivial belief or a subdoxastic intentional disposition, rather than its epistemic status.[8]

Further: stylized or ritualized actions—culturally specific actions that conventionally express complex attitudes—can deceive. We adopt certain postures and gestures to show a self-confidence that we do not actually possess. The inclination of the head, a way of gazing, an intonation pattern can deceptively sug-

[7] See Annette Baier, 'Ignorance and Self-Deception,' *Deception*, R. Ames and U. Dissanayake (eds), forthcoming and M. Johnston, 'Self-Deception and the Nature of Mind,' *Perspectives on Self-Deception*. Since many pre-intentional activities can sometimes function in a fully intentional form, I prefer to speak of *protointentional* rather than subintentional activities.

[8] Following the model of analyses of justified belief, analyses of self-deception typically specify necessary and sufficient logically distinct conditions—reified as independent psychological states—whose conjunctive presence constitute cases of self-deception. If the conditions of justified belief can be condensed in one activity, so can those of self-deception. 'The same liberty may be permitted to moral, which is allowed to natural philosophers; and 'tis very usual with the latter to consider any motion as compounded and consisting of two parts separate from each other, tho' at the same time they acknowledge it to be in itself uncompounded and inseparable' Hume, *Treatise* 493.

gest intimacy.[9] Similarly self-deception can be expressed in gesture and action: the gestures of an aging coquette—the head at angle, the languorous eyes, the flirtatious smile—are not only designed to help create and sustain an illusion: they can also be its primary expression. While the beliefs that are implicated in such action—beliefs that such gestures retain whatever charm they might once have had—are sometimes mistaken without being self-deceived, the coquette's anxious look in the mirror as she applies layer after layer of lipstick and rouge indicates that she also knows better.

(4) Self-deception need not focus on important matters: it can range from the momentous to the minute, from the sublime to the ridiculous. It can focus on the primary projects of a life (those of a politician or a parent) . . . or on a new hairdo.

(5) Self-deception need not be self-centred. To be sure, self-deception is—along with other epistemic and psychological attitudes—explained largely by the deceiver's system of beliefs, habits and desires; but although it is of course always *by* the self, self-deception is not on that account always *for* or *about* the self: a person can be self-deceived about the honesty of her distant political allies or opponents.

Indeed the individual need not always initiate his self-deception: Like the members of any sports team, the President's Cabinet can collectively acquire grandiose attitudes that they could not sustain as individuals. Affected by one another's influence, by the luxurious appointments of the Cabinet room, and supported by the army of their secretaries and assistants, they so collude in magnifying one another's tendencies to self-importance that the memoranda on which they consensually agree are stronger than the views that they would accept individually, in isolation. And yet it was as distinctive individuals that they participated in the work of the Cabinet.

(6) Self-deception need not be motivated by a desire or a wish. A man who self-deceptively believes that his wife's professional success far outshines his own might be moved by a chronic, painful, envious disposition, rather than by a desire for her flourishing. Indeed self-deception is not always directly motivated. Like many of our psychological activities, it can continue as an entrenched habit long after its original impetus has been extinguished. The nervous, novice teacher who self-deceptively ignores the boredom of her students can retain the habit of ignoring their reactions long after she has become a self-confident and even self-important, but still boring teacher. We can also acquire specific

[9] Cf. B. Wilshire, 'Mimetic Engulfment and Self-Deception,' *Perceptions on Self-Deception.*

self-deceptive habits in just the same way that we imitatively acquired other psychological and intellectual habits. Fearful about their health, our parents self-deceptively ignored or denied their ailments. Without the same fears, we can acquire the same strategies of denial.

(7) Even when manipulative deception is morally suspect, its outcome is not always harmful. Indeed, deception and self-deception are often benevolently and insightfully motivated. By convincing themselves that a desired self-transformation is within relatively easy reach, canny self-improvers can use self-deception as an energizing instrument.

2. Strategies of Self-Deception

Clever deceivers rarely tell outright falsehoods. It's too risky. The art of deception is closely related to the magician's craft: it involves knowing how to draw attention to a harmless place, to deflect it away from the action. Deeply entrenched patterns of perceptual, emotional and cognitive dispositions serve as instruments of deception. A skilled deceiver is an illusionist who knows how to manipulate the normal patterns of what is salient to their audience. He places salient markers—something red, something anomalous, something desirable—in the visual field, to draw attention just where he wants it. The strategy of perceptual self-deception is identical: the trick is to place oneself where patterns of salience are likely to deflect attention away from what we do not wish to see. The best way for a gambler to deceive herself—to avoid noticing her lover's roving eye—is to schedule their assignations at the casino or the race track instead of at the disco.

Opacity, vagueness and over-determination are the deceiver's friend. Just as we use the ambiguity of polite ritualized speech to mislead others, ('I had a wonderful time.' 'I've been hoping to run into you so we could arrange to have lunch.'), so we fuse the multiple functions of speech acts when we talk to ourselves.[10] In hopes of levering ourselves to our desks, we gloss a vague thought as if it were a firm intention, we say 'I'll spend the weekend finally getting to all those letters I must write.' The more publicly such pronouncements are made, the more force the lever can exert.

Any experience is open to an indefinite number of true and even relatively salient descriptions. To recommend a brash and hostile student, we call attention to her energetic initiative in discussion.

[10] Cf. Iris Murdoch, 'The Idea of Perfection,' *The Sovereignty of Good*, (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1970).

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In the interest of maintaining our loyalty to our unreliable or treacherous friends, we praise their originality. While such cases do not involve lying, we typically do intend to deceive by distraction. Of course we might well have a second order policy that rationalizes and justifies strategies of this kind. But they are none the less deceptive for having been rationalized and justified.

Shifting the level of generality of descriptions and explanations is also an excellent strategy of deception and self-deception. To deflect attention from the sordid, exasperating and frustrating details of our major projects—parenting, teaching, political action—we move to general abstractions, lumping these details together under the heading of, 'No pain, no gain. It's all worth it in the end,' forgetting that when we are making important decisions, it is often this—whether there is something about the activity that outweighs the trouble it brings—that is in question. Or we move in the other direction: we can deceive someone (including ourselves) into accepting an undesirable job by focusing on a few genuinely attractive details, drawing attention away from a general, all things considered evaluation.

Second-order policies that legitimate specific self-manipulative strategies are sometimes also canny instruments of self-deception:

(1) We rationalize compartmentalization as a generally efficient and efficacious way of advancing the diversity of our competing and potentially conflicting projects. (But we are half aware that we don't—indeed that we cannot—compartmentalize as thoroughly as our projects require. If the subsystems don't actually overlap, they are certainly in close communication. However great their differences, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde both knew their way home. More significantly, if Dr. Jekyll hadn't been so righteous, Mr. Hyde might well not have been so venial.)

(2) We often justify epistemically dubious cognitive, emotional and behavioural habits by policies assigning high priority to the social utility that such habits are meant to serve. (But in their details, such policies are often manifestly no more defensible than the strategies they are meant to support. Moreover, a person's self-deceptive strategy can be a way of specifying his ends rather than a method for achieving them. For instance, Pascal's Wager—the gamble of faith—can express and reinforce rather than assuage the horror of infinite spaces.)

(3) We construct general philosophical theories about human nature, specifying intrinsically valuable activities or activities that we declare to be 'essential to a fully human life' as a way of helping ourselves through some of our more difficult and onerous activities. Or we invent something we call our identity, resting our self-

respect on our engaging in its projects, independently of any other measure of their merits. (In such cases, it is typically not the theory or the commitment that is self-deceptive, but the belief that philosophic theories or projects of identity-engagement justify or ground rather than express our fundamental choices.)[11]

(4) Recognizing the distance betueen our best intentions and the activities that actually engage us, between the expected and the actual outcomes of our activities, we deflect our attention away from the horrors of contingency, away from the moral luck that attends everything we do. We characterize what we are pleased to think happens for the most part. (But we disguise from ourselves the extent to which contingency surrounds intentional activity, and the extent to which 'standard or normal' experience embeds questionable but self-fulfilling normative claims.)

(5) For the sake of promoting cherished ends, we rationalize self-manipulative strategies designed to produce beliefs, desires or habits that we do not initially possess.[12] (But we are often self-deceived about the strength of our commitments; and when responsibility is weighty, we have reason to magnify or diminish the indeterminacy of the power of our agency.)

Is all this necessarily self-deceptive? Can we not maintain and indeed justify tactfully manipulative strategies without actually deceiving ourselves? We often deliberately mimic confidence and wholeheartedness in the hope of acquiring them; and indeed we can sometimes succeed in internalizing an attitude that was initially only mimetically expressed. But even the most successful of such manipulations often preserve traces of the original attitude in disguised or repressed ambivalence: the sarcastic remark, the verbal slips, the taut and guarded manner, the submerged hostility. Ambivalence of this kind is not necessarily self-deceptive: but the more we are intent on achieving a self-transformation, the more likely we are to deny traces of older attitudes. In any case, since Method acting requires finding the projected character within oneself, the profoundly diffident are ill-equipped to help themselves to confidence by that method, particularly when their lines are not provided by a playwright. As a strategy for self-transformation, self-deception is often more efficient and effective than Method acting.

[11] See Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, (London: Methuen, 1962); *Existentialism and Humanism, Anti-Semite and Jew*, (Grove Press, 1948).

[12] Cf. William James, 'The Will to Believe'; Pascal, *Pensées*; Bas van Fraassen, 'The Peculiar Effects of Love and Desire,' *Perspectives on Self-Deception*.

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Taking a very different tack, we might, in the interests of high minded Enlightenment, attempt to persuade our fellows that openly acknowledged ambivalence may be at least as reliable as forced wholeheartedness. Practically speaking, however, we are often better served by self-deceptively undertaking to be whole-hearted (by whatever the going standards are), than by attempting to persuade our fellows that ambivalence is a mark of reliability. All things considered, we are probably better served by acceding to the irrational desire for self-deceptive wholeheartedness rather than by attempting the quixotic and self-deceptive project of curing our fellows' irrationality.

3. The Benefits of Self-Deception

Self-deception is sometimes construed as an effective measure against the despair of global scepticism. To be sure, we have, as Bas van Fraassen has argued, other ways of dealing with generalized uncertainty about the worth of our projects, about the reliability of those on whom our welfare depends.[13] van Fraassen charts the advantages of the voluntarist strategy of affirming the trust or faith that he argues is implicit in every observation. Hume omits the voluntarist step: he observes that we just *naturally do* believe beyond strict evidence; we trust beyond strict proof of reliability; we actively persist in our manifestly questionable projects. Despite our philosophic doubts about the continued existence of objects or the legitimacy of philosophic arguments, hunger guides us out of the study and out of sceptical philosophy at mealtimes; and after dinner, we are sociable and even affectionate, despite our clear-eyed assessment of the foibles and follies of our fellows. Some interpreters take Hume's solution to mark a final ironic sceptical turn: the operations of nature are identical with those that philosophers call self-deception. Others see it as evidence of Hume's pragmatic naturalism: nature has so attuned us that what some philosophers call self-deception is actually a trustworthy sign of the natural health of the mind. At this point, we have returned to the rhetorical politics of philosophical terminology. The result is the same: some forms of self-deception are by-products of the standard operations of belief and the imagination. Although they run serious dangers, we could not do without their contributions to our intellectual and psychological activities. But it is natural psychology rather than a second order rational policy that prompts

[13] Bas van Fraassen, 'The Peculiar Effects of Love & Desire' in *Perspectives on Self-Deception*.

accepting the self-deceptions that accompany standard modes of imagining and believing. We would engage in these activities even if we did not approve of our doing so.

The more interesting forms of self-deception are local rather than global. Without some species of self-deception, our dedications, our friendships, our work, our causes would collapse. In deciding to have children, we ignore the travails of parents, obliterating our otherwise keen awareness of the typical relations among parents and children; in devoting ourselves to writing philosophy, we conveniently forget how little philosophy we are willing to read; in the interest of sanity and joy, we sidestep our deep ambivalences about our kith and kin.

The benefits of individual self-deception are obvious to its practitioners; the benefits of its socially induced forms are often more compelling.[14] The appearance of earnest and wholehearted conviction about our projects—developing a philosophic position, proposing a curricular reform, raising funds for a cherished cause—is commonly taken as an indication of trustworthy reliability. Disguising and submerging the ambivalence that is natural to most of our enterprises not only brings us the energy, verve, style and ease that successful action requires; it also helps to assure the social co-operation that is equally essential to our individual and collective projects. A good deal of the polite conversation of social life,—the public description of the joys of our social roles and functions (friend, mother, teacher, scholar)—channels and streams us to play our parts without the mess, confusion and upheaval that would occur if we openly expressed our natural and sensible ambivalence about these roles. It is virtually impossible to imagine any society that does not systematically and actively promote the self-deception of its members, particularly when the requirements of social continuity and cohesion are subtly at odds with one another and with the standard issue psychology of their members.[15] Socially induced self-deception is an instrument in the preservation of social co-operation and cohesion.

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[14] Cf. 'Some Social Uses of the Forbidden,' *Psychoanalytic Review*, 1972.

[15] Since they do not involve beliefs in propositional form, such conflicts are not, of course, technically speaking contradictions. (Cf. R. Marcus, 'Moral Dilemmas and Consistency,' in C. W. Gowans, *Moral Dilemmas* (Oxford, 1987). Other essays in this volume provide a useful background for understanding some of the motivation for self-deception. See also L. Festinger, op. cit.

4. The beneficiaries of self-conception

Who is served by socially induced self-deception? And who bears the primary responsibility when an individual's self-deception depends on social collusion? It is no news post-Hegelian post-Freudian post-Marxists post-Wittgensteinians that the individual is not always the primary epistemic agent: like all epistemic activities, self-deception occurs within a social frame, one that not only defines but actively channels patterns of categorization, salience and motivation.[16] But while we recognize the social influences on individual belief, we do not have a clear account of how they occur and where they stop. Locating epistemic responsibility with the individual—the last in a network of contributory of epistemic agents—derives from a forced parallel to voluntary behaviour. Despite their repudiating Cartesian philosophical psychology, contemporary epistemologists still treat belief as voluntary: the individual is presumed to be a responsible epistemological agent, capable of identifying—and suspending assent to—any and all unwarranted beliefs.

Distinctions will help us. We can, to begin with, distinguish the *immediate*, the *contributory* and the *primary* agents of deception and self-deception. The work of deception—and indeed of belief—is not always carried out by individual persons. Its agents can be subsystems of the self or superpersonic groups with which individuals identify. Although neo-Freudians,[17] cognitive psychologists,[18] and

[16] See T. Burge, 'Individualism and Psychology,' *Philosophical Review*, 1986 and 'Intellectual Norms and the Foundations of Mind,' *Journal of Philosophy*, 1987. Burge argues that the individuation of intentional states essentially refers to social practices. See also A. Goldman, 'Varieties of Cognitive Appraisal,' *Nous*, **13**, 22–38 for a useful discussion of the variety of criteria by which beliefs are assessed.

[17] See Freud, 'Repression,' 'The Unconscious', SE 1915 and 'Splitting the Ego in the Service of Defence,' SE, 1938; R. Schafer, *A New Language for Psychoanalysis*, New Haven, 1976; D. Sachs, 'On Freud's Doctrine of the Emotions,' *Freud*, R. Wollheim (ed.), (New York, 1974); H. Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self*, (New York, 1977); R. Wollheim, *The Thread of Life*, (Harvard University Press, 1984).

[18] Cf. D. Dennett, 'Three Kinds of Intentional Psychology,' in *Reduction, Time and Reality* R. Healy (ed.) (Cambridge, 1981); articles in H. Kornblith, (ed.) *Naturalizing Epistemology*; D. Davidson, 'Paradoxes of Irrationality,' *Philosophical Essays on Freud*, J. Hopkins and R. Wollheim (eds) (Cambridge University Press, 1982) and 'Deception and Division,' reprinted in *Action and Events*, E. LePore and B. McLaughlin (eds), New York, 1985; M. Johnston, 'Self-Deception and the Nature of Mind,' *Perspectives on Self-Deception*; S. Stich, 'Beliefs and Subdoxastic Systems,' *Philosophy of Science*, 1978 and *Fragmentation of Reason*, MIT Press, 1990. See also footnote 9, in 'The Deceptive Self,' and pp. 217–219 in *Mind in Action*.

social theorists[19] differ in their analysis of the components that constitute the self; they characterize it as constituted by relatively independent subsystems whose interaction is often only precariously integrated. For them, the explanation of the phenomena of self-deception lies in our complex psychological organization: the immediate agent and presumptive beneficiary of self-deception is a subsystem of the self. Social psychologists join many neo-Freudians in identifying the subsystems of the self as the internalized representatives of the social personae who have formed—and who continue to influence—individual psychology.

In the interest of avoiding such regressive homuncular explanations, many cognitive psychologists have introduced subpersonic subsystems, capable of nonpurposive but intentional operations. When a subsystem is (by some measure) central to an aspect of a person's identity, its strategies are considered to be *self*-deceptive, though the self neither is, nor has a central panoptical scanner or manipulator. There is no need for reductive zeal here, no need to determine—as if there were a theory-neutral fact of the matter—whether the subsystems engaged in self-deception are all homuncular or sub-homuncular, whether they are all intentionally deceptive or subintentionally misleading, or whether self-deception reduces to subsystem deception.[20] When the deceiving and the deceived subsystems are interdependent extensionally intersecting 'parts' of a psycho-biological individual, the problem of whether self-deception is coherent becomes a verbal puzzle.

The immediate agents of self-deception—whether they be individuals, subsystems or superpersonic agents—typically require *contributory agents* in their work. It is extremely difficult to sustain self-deception without a little help from our friends, often rendered by observant but tactful silence. (And so too, in a parallel way, for the varieties of collusively deceiving sub-personae.) Active co-operation in self-deception is more readily assured when it brings secondary gains. Normal science is, for instance, served by training scientists to follow a conservative epistemic policy, one that makes them susceptible to self-deceptive denials of evidence contrary to dominant theories.[21]

[19] For an account of the distinctive aspects and features of identity, see Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers*, esp. 16–18, 221–2; G. H. Head, *Mind, Self and Society*, esp. 144–5, 149–52, (University of Chicago Press, 1934); A. O. Rorty and D. Wong, 'Aspects of Identity and Agency' in O. Flanagan and A. O. Rorty, *Identity, Character and Morality*, (MIT, 1990).

[20] See Mark Johnston, op. cit. and Brian MacLaughlin, in Ames and Dissanayake, *Deception* for discussions of the presumed incoherence of self-deception as incoherent and its reduction to other-deception.

[21] See Adam Morton, 'Partisanship' in *Perspectives on Self-Deception*.

The *primary agents* of self-deception need not be canny individuals acting on behalf of a dominant class, Society or Science. Sometimes self-deception just happens. A pervasive pattern of self-deception can preserve and sustain a society's form of life even when no one initiates or colludes in it, and no one benefits from it. The explanation of self-deception is often global and structural: it does not lie in its occasions, but in its being an unintended by-product of functional activities.[22]

5. Why the best solution is not available to us

In a way, the virtues required for astute self-deception are those required for astute and righteous lying: deception in the right way at the right time for the right reason. But what does *phronesis* about self-deception require? How do we determine the properly attuned balance between persistence and fallibility, one that deflects correction only as long as closure is beneficial, generating self-deception in love and work but not in self-defence?

In principle, an acute philosophical logician could formulate a context-sensitive set of policies for determining the cut-off points for beneficial self-deception, specified for distinctive measures of benefits, distinctive agents and beneficiaries, time spans, etc. But while the theorist can distinguish benign from maladaptive cases of self-deception and other irrational psychological activities, the practitioner is not, in the very nature of the case, in a position to do so. If the practitioner always cast herself as theorist, scanning and testing her psychological activities for their legitimacy, she would not be in a position to benefit from their exercise. Complex psychological activities best function at a pre-critical and pre-reflective automatic or autonomic level. The utility of many of our presumptively self-deceptive responses—like those moved by fear and trust, for example—depends on their being relatively undiscriminating, operating at a deeply entrenched habitual pre-critical level.[23]

6. Ambivalence in the Service of the Enlightenment

Having argued that self-deception is inevitable and distinguished its layers and beneficiaries, have we joined the ranks of post-mod-

[22] Cf. Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes.*
[23] Cf. 'Fearing Death,' *Mind in Action*, pp. 202–207.

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ern social constructionists? Certainly not. Masked as a presumptively egalitarian attitude to the various personae of the self, a laissez faire attitude towards self-deception runs the danger of giving intrapsychic power politics full and unchecked play: it endorses the actions of the self's most powerful, rather than those of its most justified personae. Self-deception is only as good as the person who has it.

If the difference between deception and self-deception is arbitrary, if the deceived typically collude in their deception and the self-deceived depend on the complicity of their fellows, the allocation of responsibility for the harms of deception seems arbitrary. We might well be uneasy that such an open-handed latitudinarian way of subscripting the various agents, benefits and beneficiaries of self-deception runs the danger of blaming the victim. Self-deception does not monitor its own use: it doesn't know when or where to stop. It is specifically constructed to ignore and resist correction. The danger of self-deception lies not so much in the irrationality of the occasion, but in the ramified consequences of the habits it develops, its obduracy and its tendency to generalize.

But this is equally true of many of our other, more superficially rational intellectual activities.[24] Consider the various Platonic recommendations for dialectical analysis offered in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*: the method of division is designed to construct a taxonomy of genus, species and varieties to 'catch the meanings of general terms.' When that method is astutely used, it charts the geography of a conceptual field. But it is clear—it was certainly clear to Plato—that when the method of division is globally or grossly applied, when it is entrenched as a primary and exclusive mode of analysis, it can be deceptive and even self-deceptive. Like Socratic self-knowledge, the Platonic method of division is only as good as the mind that uses it.

It was for reasons like these that Descartes wanted to find a method so simple that any mind could use it, a method that presupposes no ability or knowledge beyond the capacity to test its ideas for their logical consistency, using reductive proofs, moving only a step at a time. Here again, a method which is rational if any method is, brings the fruits of rationality—a clearly demonstrated knowledge of the world—only when it is supplemented by a wide range of other, shadier intellectual and psychological activities.

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[24] Cf. Roy Sorensen, *Thought Experiments* (Oxford University Press, 1992). Sorensen remarks that the standard modes of argumentation have their short-comings as well as their strengths. He recommends what he calls a 'diversified portfolio' of argument forms.

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Without the generous support of suspect non-rational intellectual and psychological activities, Descartes' method is sterile and useless.

Even though its authority rarely carries executive power, it is the active, permanent possibility of asking critically evaluative questions that preserves us from dangerous folly. 'When is self-deception self-defeating? What is really beneficial and to whom?' There are, to be sure, a variety of context-dependent criteria for such evaluations; and each subsystem has its own claims for special privilege. Still, at any given level, for any subscripted measure of utility or rationality, intrapsychic might does not make intrapsychic right or even intrapsychic utility. Socratic inquiry—actively pressing for self-critical evaluation—is the only safeguard against the damaging uses of self-deception, or indeed of any of our intellectual or psychological devices. But intrapsychic right does not assure intrapsychic might.

In evaluating the self-deception of our friends and enemies, in retrospectively gauging our own, we are directed by judgments about the merits of the ends it serves, as well as judgments about whether those ends could have been better served by other means. In making such evaluations, we need to think laterally as well as linearly, systematically as well as episodically. We need to consider the global effects of all our epistemic and psychological activities—their addictive qualities as well as their immediate benefits. When they are successful, psychological and intellectual activities typically tend to become rapidly entrenched, ramified and generalized.

But we have very little latitude in monitoring our psychological activities, and still less in forming them. Our epistemological strategies become habitual before we are aware of their patterns and consequences. As philosophers, the best thing we can do about self-deception is what we should do about our other psychological and intellectual activities: engage ourselves in the task of understanding the minute details of its operations. Since we are highly susceptible to socially induced self-deception, the wisest practical course is to be very careful about the company we keep. But it is no easy task to determine where our best protection lies. On the one hand, prudence counsels avoiding the company of charismatic rhetoricians who might mislead us. On the other hand, it is not easy to identify epistemic seducers, particularly when we benefit from hospitality to a wide range of opinions, each with a distinctive critical perspective on our favourite illusions. Unfortunately self-deception is just the thing that prevents us from seeking its best therapy: it does not know when to expand, and when to limit its epistemological company. Fortunately, we have many other kinds

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of reasons for being astute about the company we keep. With luck, a canny self-deceiver's other psychological and intellectual habits—a taste for astringency and a distrust of hypocrisy, for instance—can prevent the wild imperialistic tendencies of self-deception from becoming entrenched and ramified.

But that is a matter of luck; and as we know, ambivalence is the best attitude towards luck.[25]

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