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Self-deception as pseudo-rational regulation of belief[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Self-deception is a special kind of motivational dominance in belief-formation. We develop criteria which set paradigmatic self-deception apart from related phenomena of auto-manipulation such as pretense and motivational bias. In self-deception rational subjects defend or develop beliefs of high subjective importance in response to strong counter-evidence. Self-deceivers make or keep these beliefs tenable by putting prima-facie rational defense-strategies to work against their established standards of rational evaluation. In paradigmatic self-deception, target-beliefs are made tenable via reorganizations of those belief-sets that relate relevant data to target-beliefs. This manipulation of the evidential value of relevant data goes beyond phenomena of motivated perception of data. In self-deception belief-defense is *pseudo-rational*. Self-deceivers will typically apply a *dual standard* of evaluation that remains intransparent to the subject. The developed model of self-deception as pseudo-rational belief-defense is empirically anchored. So, we hope to put forward a promising candidate.

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1. A distinction: auto-manipulation vs. self-deception

1.1. Pluralism

Peter believes that he and John, a famous and celebrated actor and (in reality) a quite distant friend of Peter, are involved in a very deep friendship. They do know each other, and John has even invited Peter to some of his parties. But Peter has never even come close to John's inner circle. Nevertheless their recent interaction has motivated Peter to believe that he is John's favorite. However, no one else, including John himself, would come to the conclusion that he and Peter are close friends.

Examples like this illustrate that self-deception is a familiar phenomenon. But the analysis of self-deception has proven to be a tricky endeavor. There is little consensus on the proper analysis of the cognitive state and the cognitive dynamics of self-deception. The two basic reasons for the high diversity in theory are, firstly, that there are various ways in which motivation can influence acceptance and, secondly, that the pre-analytic folk-intuition of self-deception is heavily under-determined. To put things right, we suggest a distinction between motivational dominance on acceptance in general and a more constrained notion of self-deception in particular. Most people are willing to call a subject *S* a 'self-deceiver' in loose, ordinary folk-talk, if the following is true of his or her mind and behavior:

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1.1.1. Pattern of Motivational Dominance (PMD)²

- (1) **S** is of normal intelligence and has normal rational capacities.
- (2) **S** is strongly motivated to evaluate *p* as true.
- (3) **S** has access to a sufficient amount of relevant information about the subject matter *SM* and this information is supportive of not-*p*.
- (4) **S** honestly accepts the proposition *p*.
- (5) If **S** had been neutral towards *SM*³, the same evidence would have led **S** to accept not-*p* instead of *p*.

A few preliminary remarks about what makes those conditions intuitively necessary: Condition (1) says that there can be no general absence or breakdown of **S**'s rational capacities, including **S**'s ability to draw simple inferences. **S** is in that sense *sufficiently rational*. Condition (2) pragmatically excludes cases in which subjects come to be deceived that *p* without having any motivation to believe that *p*. The typical motivational source of self-deception is that the subject matter at stake is of high individual importance to **S**. Furthermore, as a potential self-deceiver, **S** cannot be completely blind to the relevant evidence. If **S** did not access the evidence, **S** could not be blamed for anything like self-deception, and this is why we need (3). Additionally, **S** has to accept *p*. Here 'acceptance' is a liberal notion of belief. **S**'s acceptance of *p* need, e.g. not entail that **S** always consistently acts on *p*. The degree or nature of acceptance is left open here. Finally, (5) claims that it is motivation which causes *p*-acceptance. **S** would judge not-*p* in similar cases when he is neutral with regard to *SM*.⁴ Note that (1) and (3) should imply that self-deceivers are evidence-sensitive and *in principle* capable of rational belief-adjustment with regard to the subject matter. This excludes belief-like phenomena like pathological confabulation and various forms of delusion from the realm of everyday self-deception.

PMD provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for a pre-analytic folk-notion of self-deception in a broad sense. But PMD—as it stands—only says that motivation dominates acceptance of *p* in a rational subject **S**. PMD is a coarse-grained pattern; it does not specify how the motivational impact on acceptance is accomplished. Therefore PMD is compatible with nearly all the established theoretical analyses of self-deception.⁵ There are multiple ways motivational dominance in the sense of PMD could be implemented in **S**. If we do not want all of these equally to go through as 'self-deception', it is clear that the pre-analytic inclination to label a given case of motivational dominance as 'self-deception' will not yet tell us whether this type of cases actually captures proper self-deception in contrast to other forms of PMD. The differences between forms of motivational dominance are remarkable. The debate on self-deception has produced various more-or-less appealing psycho-philosophical stories about how motivation contributes to **S**'s acceptance of *p*. We can choose freely between models that analyze self-deception as a form of intentional deception, as a case of motivational bias, models which describe self-deception as a gap between belief and avowal, as a form of attention control, as a form of pretense, a form of repression, as a phenomenon related to confabulation or as false meta-belief, just to name a few. This variety of phenomena requires us to specify all of the PMD-conditions given above and see what additional criteria need to be provided. The underdeterminacy of PDM clearly suggests a methodological limitation to a simply example-based approach to self-deception. Example-based approaches look for what is sufficient to explain cases we would pre-theoretically label as 'self-deception'.⁶ This method thereby takes it that the pre-analytic intuition is sufficient to identify those cases that are examples of 'real self-deception'. However, the above considerations show that all it might finally do is to pick one of various types of PMD-cases. Thus, more work needs to be done. Going beyond PMD we will fix 'self-deception in a narrow sense'⁷ by dint of further reasonable constraints.

The basic distinction we propose is the distinction between *auto-manipulation*⁸ in general and *self-deception* in particular. PMD is a general model of auto-manipulation in sufficiently rational subjects in all of its varieties, and it is basically an empirical question as to which different forms of motivational dominance actually occur. Auto-manipulation occurs in any case where motivation dominates acceptance of a proposition *p*. 'Self-deception' refers to a class of special phenomena within the broader frame of auto-manipulation. In what follows, we will show that this distinction is useful and argue that being a case of PMD is, while necessary, *not* sufficient for being a case of self-deception. We intend to show with regard to two examples that self-deception in a narrow sense is clearly different from other forms of motivational dominance. In the next section, we introduce three fundamental criteria of adequacy for self-deception.

² Convention for the rest of this paper: "*p*" designates the content of the target belief, favored by the subject **S** but unsupported by evidence; "not-*p*" is the content of the belief actually justified by evidence.

³ I.e. if condition (2) is not fulfilled.

⁴ This comprises the counterfactual claim that, if **S** had been neutral towards the subject matter, **S** would have judged not-*p*, as well as the claim that typically **S** will judge not-*p* in parallel cases on the basis of equivalent evidence if those cases are not evaluated by **S** as being of any subjective importance.

⁵ In particular, the conditions of PMD do not even address the question that has driven the debate among philosophers: What's the subject's or the self's very own contribution to the manipulation of his or her attitude? PMD, as it stands, is neutral between what the intentionalist and the deflationist camps disagree on.

⁶ An example-based approach explicitly receives methodological preference by Mele (2001, p. 5f).

⁷ Simply "self-deception" in the following.

⁸ The term 'auto-manipulation' is supposed to be neutral between different theories of self-deception and implies no intentionalist preference.

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