

SELF-DECEPTION ENABLING IMMORAL BEHAVIOR: PATTERNS OF OTHER-DENIGRATING BIAS

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Abstract: The concept *self-deception* refers to a cluster of largely psychological processes by which people can be said to deceive themselves about some aspect of the world, sometimes through keeping information from their conscious awareness. The literature on bias illustrates how people actively select from the information around them, willingly maintaining a biased view in the face of evidence to the contrary. When this biased self-deception involves denigrating others and dehumanization, such as through sexism, racism, heterosexism, or religious denigration, it becomes a moral issue. This paper highlights the processes by which the self-deception involved in bias enables extraordinarily immoral behavior, making a critical self-awareness a moral necessity that is infrequently considered.

Keywords: Self-deception, moral engagement, flourishing.

Self-deception refers to a cluster of psychological processes by which, it is claimed, a person's subconscious is intentionally keeping things from conscious awareness, such that the person does not, at least for a time, recognize patterns or evidence in their environment that contradict or challenge the idea about which they are self-deceived (Ariely, 2012; Goleman, 1985). Research suggests that mild forms of self-deception may be common and widespread (Lesie, 2011; Sharot, 2012). However, frequently these kinds of self-deception are of little moral concern as the objectives are not malicious and the consequences are not severe. For example, you may know someone who seems to think that everyone at work wants to hear his stories, or see pictures of her grandkids, or that everyone wants to talk about what is happening in sports or politics. Despite things you see and hear in other people's responses that seem to contradict this person's assumptions, the person persists in their behavior and their belief, oblivious to what you are seeing. However, self-deception ranges from this kind of self-serving yet mundane over-valuation of one's popularity, artistic ability, or jokes on the

less offensive end of the spectrum, to self-deceptions justifying rape, economic exploitation, murder, concentration camps, and genocide on the more offensive end of the spectrum.

The relationship between self-deception and moral behavior is further complicated by the fact that there is a range of practices through which people engage in self-deception, in addition to a range of how profoundly people can deceive themselves, and a range of potential outcomes of self-deception, only some of which are amenable to external verification. I will argue that there is a positive relationship between the depth of one's self-deception (how great the lie) and the depths of one's potential moral depravity, with self-deception being the enabling process for violently immoral behavior. This will be the basis for calling for a *critical self-reflectivity* as a requisite moral capacity to counter our tendencies toward self-privileging bias (self-deception that makes us think unrealistically well of ourselves), and especially toward other-denigrating bias (self-deception that makes us think unrealistically negative thoughts about others).

Let me start with consideration of an inevitable question – how can we tell when someone is *deceiving themselves*, as opposed to simply being deceived? To presume self-deception, as opposed to someone simply holding a mistaken belief, we must provide evidence that they are actively doing something to maintain this mistaken belief in the face of contradictory evidence. In order to connect self-deception to immoral behavior in such a way that moral agents can be held accountable, I will review scholarship on bias, which establishes just such a link. This will show (a) first, that bias is an active mechanism by which information coming into a system is restricted in systematic ways; (b) that this process involves a systematic, and in some sense, voluntary skewing of perception that implicates moral agents as having responsibility for their biased beliefs; and that (c) biases that are self-privileging, and even more so, biases that are other-denigrating are of moral concern and directly tied to immoral behavior as an enabling process. This moral concern can be addressed through the development and deployment of a critical self-awareness, which I maintain is largely left out of accounts of moral development, character development, and positive psychology.

Bias as systematic skewing of perception

Research suggests that we tend to see what we *expect* to see (Arbinger, 2010; Goleman, 1985), an insight magicians and other *slight of hand* artists have utilized from time immemorial. Humans also tend to see what we *want* to see (Sharot, 2011; Steele, 2010), an insight long utilized by con men and others who specialize in deception. Tending to see what

we expect to see can be explained by concepts like automaticity, and inattention, recognizing that the brain must sort huge numbers of sights, sounds, smells, and sense of motion, as well as interpreting social cues and decoding conversations, and our consciousness just does not have time to notice every little thing. Humans can adjust focus in an instant if need arises, but being able to block out or ignore things around us that are deemed unimportant allows us more focus on the smaller number of things that really are important. This can be characterized as a *quantity* problem – there is just too much information available. In contrast, tending to see what we want to see is more of a bias, which is a *quality* problem – we are skewing the quality of the incoming data by selectively attending as characterized by the bias (von Hippel & Trivers, 2011).

People often speak as if their beliefs are simply a conclusion they have come to by observing the world around them. In this view they may be mistaken in their interpretation of the reality around them or the causes of that reality, but besides possibly being mistaken they are blameless. This may be true of mundane factual things, such as when a bus is scheduled to stop at a certain location or the current price of milk. People may be simply mistaken about *facts* by believing something that does not comport with the bus schedule or the pricing in local stores. The kinds of beliefs I wish to highlight here, however, are not simple facts but complicated interpretations. People are not as free of responsibility for their conclusions regarding interpretations as they may be perceived to be regarding belief in simple facts.

Willful blindness is a term used to describe situations where people claim not to have seen or been aware of things that they should reasonably have seen and can reasonably be assumed to have known. In her book *Willfull Blindness*, Heffernan describes people as being willfully blind when they are ‘denying truths’ that are ‘obvious’ to others (2011, p.1). She describes the case of a sick child in a hospital afraid of dying, who denies that the other children disappearing from the hospital ward around him are in fact dying, because that acknowledgement is too frightening and “too painful” (2011, p. 1). She goes on to illustrate how people can also use willful blindness in other less healthy and more self-serving ways. Heffernan quotes the judge at the trial of Jeffrey Skilling and Kenneth Lay, CEO and Chairman of Enron as giving the following instruction to the jury regarding a legal understanding of *willfull blindness*:

You may find that a defendant had knowledge of a fact if you find that the defendant deliberately closed his eyes to what would otherwise have been obvious to him. Knowledge can be inferred if the defendant *deliberately blinded himself to the existence of a fact*. (Heffernan, 2011, p.1 italics in original).

Other terms associated include: ‘willful ignorance’, ‘conscious avoidance’, ‘deliberate indifference’, and ‘connivance’. While most of us are not criminal in our negligence, research suggests we all filter the information around us in self-serving ways, typically “[admitting] the information that makes us feel great about ourselves, while conveniently filtering whatever unsettles our fragile egos and most vital beliefs” (Heffernan, 2011, p. 3).

Other psychological terms have been used for variations on what is kept from consciousness and how. In addition to self-deception, processes of *evasion* of responsibility and *denial* of reality are also described (Glover, 2000 p. 351). Another form of willful blindness involves simply not thinking about the consequences of the part you play in a bureaucracy, being metaphorically only a small cog in that machine – only doing your job. In this process the sub-conscious keeps the conscious mind from attending to certain facts or events that might make it difficult to maintain emotional equilibrium and be able to live with yourself.

Other-denigrating self-deception: objectification and dehumanization

I now turn to the processes outlined in the literature on extreme violence that describe how perpetrators tend to psychologically distance themselves from their potential victims by using various forms of self-deception to denigrate the intended victims. One form of disconnection from other people is rendered in the term *objectification*. Feminist literature on sexualized violence, such as rape and sexual exploitation, developed the concept objectification to characterize the perpetrator’s way of conceptualizing and relating to their victim as an ‘object’ for their own gratification rather than a full human being (Brownmiller, 1975; Griffin, 1971). We need to challenge the notion that a person can simultaneously see another person as a whole human being and yet choose to relate to her in a significantly more truncated fashion – as an object for one’s own sexual pleasure, for the exploitation of free labor, or as an object of psychological abuse. As the truism suggests: actions speak louder than words. If you behave toward someone as a *thing*, you can be said to see them as a thing, otherwise your actions would appear to you to be discordant with your perceptions. However, the other person is not, in fact, an *object* regardless of how you treat them or conceptualize them or the language used to label them as such. Rather, in order to *see* someone as an object you need to intentionally ignore other important aspects of them that are readily available for inspection. No honest appraisal about the existential value of half the human race could come to these conclusions. Objectification, then, is primarily a process by which the perpetrator (or

would-be perpetrator) intentionally steps out of reality to be able to engage in behavior that would otherwise seem so very wrong, so immoral, so brutal even to you that other aspects of yourself would stop you from doing it (conscience, gut reaction, empathy). Convincing oneself that something that is so obviously wrong is, in fact, morally acceptable seems a clear case of self-deception with devastating consequences.

A second similar form of disconnection from other humans that facilitates doing great harm to them is the process of *dehumanization*. This is a concept developed in the literatures addressing war crimes and genocide, first in the European context following the terror of the Nazis, and then around the world to describe perpetrator's relationships to their victims (Lifton, 1979; Lifton & Markusen, 1990). The central idea is that perpetrators come to see potential victims, usually with social support, as comprising a natural group (Jews, Gooks, faggots, untamed women, physical or mental 'defectives') who are both existentially and morally inferior to the perpetrators group and dangerous to the social order because of their deviance from the dominant group (Glover, 2000; Lifton & Markusen, 1990; Sherblom, n.d). Like objectification, dehumanization happens or doesn't happen largely in the mind of the perpetrator because no perpetrator has the power to actually change another human's existential status or revoke anyone's membership in the human race – it's all in the perpetrator's head. Dehumanization, then, is above all a particularly audacious form of self-serving self-deception – a voluntary removal from reality.

Staub notes that “The Nazis recognized the importance of making victims seem less than human. Inmates were kept hungry and helpless; they were forced to live in filth and urinate and defecate on themselves.... [one] purpose was to diminish the victims and help the SS [officers] distance themselves from them” (Staub, 1985 p. 137). The commandant of the Nazi concentration camp at Treblinka is quoted as explaining that the purpose of the cruelty was “to condition those who actually had to carry out the policies – to make it possible for them to do what they did” (Staub, 1985 p. 137). In other words, brutality was used in part to assist in the guards' ability to deceive themselves regarding the humanity of their victims and thereby the true consequences of their actions, allowing them to engage in genocide. It is some small comfort that the human race must go to such great lengths to be this evil, removing ourselves from reality, and from our true selves. This suggests perhaps that this kind of violence really is not in our nature, and we must develop strategic 'work-arounds' to allow ourselves to do this.

Toward a critical self-awareness

In order to honestly question whether we are deceiving ourselves about the full humanity of another person or group we probably need to have some uncomfortable conversations, first with ourselves, and then with members of the group in question, and later again with ourselves in an iterative fashion. In my own experience, Psychology of Women courses at college, and anti-racism workshops in the community were where I was first powerfully confronted with the cluster of self-deceiving beliefs that constitute sexism and racism in my society and in my up-bringing. We can begin by identifying, even to ourselves, which people we ‘look down on’ or disapprove of as a group. The groups of whom we disapprove, and any ‘out-group’ for that matter, are a likely place where we focus on negative attributes to the exclusion of positive ones and toward whom we might not work as hard to be moral. Groups subject to disapproval may extend beyond the ‘usual suspects’ based in differences in social class, skin color, national origin, religious status, language group, sexual orientation, or political affiliation. Once we have identified groups toward whom we are more likely to have a bias (those of whom we disapprove in some way) we have a place to begin to question our assumptions and seek more authentic information regarding these people *as* people, and their experience of the world.

Organizations and movements of many kinds have had to address people’s conscious and unconscious beliefs, assumptions, gut reactions, biases, and self-deception (Rex Foundation, 2012). The anti-racism movement in the United States has worked through workshops and encounter groups to help Caucasians and African-Americans better understand their own biases and assumptions with regard to race and ethnicity (Heinze & DeCandia, 2011). Part of the objective is to teach cultural awareness and sensitivity, and part is to allow participants a safe place to explore their as yet not-fully-conscious negative assumptions about Black people, race relations, and White superiority (Henry & Closson, 2010).

Anti-sexism movements around the world have also worked tirelessly to educate males and females regarding issues of deeply enculturated bias against women (Brownmiller, 1975; Herman, 1992). These include the unrecognized extent to which male advantage has been institutionalized, the unadmitted extent of male violence against females, and the unconscious acceptance of gender stereotypes that constrain, insult, and debilitate (Burgess, 1988; Lisak & Roth, 1988). The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (LGBT) movement has developed strategies to help those interested to explore their not fully conscious culturally supported biases and unconscious reactions to persons with differing love-orientations or gendered self-presentations (GLSEN, n.d.). This is not to say that all discomfort with or non-acceptance of people who are different from us in these ways is

necessarily self-deceptive; there are other consciously acknowledged ideological and religious-based beliefs that support these reactions as well. It is commonplace, however, for people who come to know openly gay men, lesbians, or a transgender person to realize that these persons are not what they had thought they would be.

A host of recent popular books report on research addressing aspects of our self-deception, collective and individual, that can offer insight into how and where to improve our self-awareness. Steele (2010) reports on how people's sometimes unconsciously held stereotypes about their own group - expectations for people *like themselves* - can undermine their ability to perform up to their ability. Becoming more aware of our beliefs about people like us - other women, men, blacks, whites, Christians, Jews, Muslims, working class, college educated, etc. - whichever of these apply to us, can only help shed light on our biases toward others not matching our demographic profile. Ariely (2012) reviews myriad examples of self-deception, 'fudging,' and outright cheating in everyday life. He illustrates how incentive structures and organizational culture can lead to an increase in self-serving perceptions, leading to increased dishonesty and cheating. If certain kinds of incentive structures and power structures can be shown to cause increases in self-deception among employees and public officials, a careful adjustment of those incentive structures and power structures can be made to lessen self-deception, to the betterment of society. Sharot (2011) reviews evidence that humans tend to be irrationally optimistic, believing what we wish in the face of evidence to the contrary, which involve many seemingly harmless self-deceptions, but may be practice for ever more audacious self-deceptions. Limitations of space preclude a more thorough explication of the resources for crafting a program to support such reflectivity and self-awareness. This could well be integrated into existing programs supporting positive youth development and character formation. Despite the possible benefits of certain kinds of self-deception, it can be argued that being more aware of the ways in which we characteristically deceive ourselves and coming to see through these deceptions is necessary if one's goal is maturity, including moral maturity, and not simply feeling good about oneself.

Conclusion

The research and theorizing presented here suggests the need for a more robust and imaginative critical self-cultivation than is currently articulated in conceptions of strengths or virtues needed for flourishing. We need to educate ourselves and our children about the dynamics described here as we all participate in self-deceptions in at least small ways. We need to make it *hip* to be undeceived, to recognize the ways in which we diminish other

people's value in our minds when we are angry, when we feel threatened, when we feel unappreciated ourselves, or when others are rude or dismissive of us. We need to recognize that at those moments, and in those ways in which we allow ourselves to be deceived, we are removing ourselves from reality in ways that are largely indefensible, if understandable. Despite positive psychology's desire to focus only on healthy development, if we don't understand and address our self-deception and the immoral behavior that self-deception enables, we will not have healthy development. Critical self-reflectivity is an essential ability contributing to moral maturity and flourishing, and without it we remain mired in self-delusion with potentially horrendous consequences.

Self-awareness is a venerable personal achievement – perhaps all the more so because we apparently fear the knowledge that self-awareness might bring, and we frequently avoid it at some cost. We need to name this avoidance as fear, and name the work to become self-aware as courage, liberation, insight, wisdom, growth, and maturity – and as a moral necessity. As Alcoholics Anonymous says, the first step in addressing any problem is admitting you have a problem. The literature suggests we have not yet reached that point – moral theorists and educators do not adequately recognize or address the human propensity for self-deception as a serious problem. Perhaps I should have started the paper along the lines of an AA meeting: Hi, my name is Steve, and I've realized I have a problem with self-deception.

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