

Review of: "A Dispositional Account of Self-Deception: A Critical Analysis of Sartre's Theory of Bad Faith"

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This interesting essay has two aims, one descriptive and the other theoretical: it first develops a contrast between Freud and Sartre's theories of self-deception and then advances its own alternative theory which seeks to explain self-deceptive activity as a product of a "disposition" which emerges when the self is put in "challenging situations" and has "fewer resources with which to function effectively" (ms. 9). My aim here is twofold: first, I want to raise some questions about the relationship between the descriptive and theoretical elements of the essay and, second, to express a preliminary reservation about the effort to conceive of self-deception as a product of varying "self states." In so doing I hope to help clarify and deepen the author's account so that he can continue to develop this most promising project.

Before advancing his own proposal about the nature of self-deception the author reconstructs Sartre's critique of Freud, showing how the theory of "bad faith" can be understood as a critical response to Freud's understanding of self-deception. Now is probably a good time to confess something which will likely become evident anyway: my understanding of these thinkers is rather superficial – my own interest is in 17th and 18th century theories of self-deception – and so I found the author's account of their differences to be extremely helpful. Their central disagreement appears to center on the question of the agent's awareness of his own mental phenomena: where Freud claims that we, as a general matter, are unaware of the unconscious drives which motivate us to act and thus engage in self-deception without realizing it, Sartre insists that we *are and must* be aware of them, or else we would be unable to repress them effectively. For Sartre, then, self-deception is the intentional act of a rational agent rather than the result of a motivated misunderstanding of one's own mental states.

The author pushes back -- in my view rightly -- against this aspect of Sartre's view, noting that his theory of bad faith is "not congruent with recent advances in psychological research" and is based on the dubious "proposition that we need conscious access to our motivations and thoughts at the same time as we are denying them" (ms. 7). I think the author can strengthen this critique still further, as it seems to me that *Sartre himself* provides reason to wonder whether such access is indeed necessary in order to engage in self-deception. On this point, the author calls attention to Sartre's claim that self-deception occurs within and is given structure by purposive activities called "projects" (ms. 5-6). One important feature of a Sartrean project is that, though it is a goal-directed form of action whose pursuit requires agents to behave in discriminating and intelligently selective ways, it is nonetheless pursued without much thought or attention: "one can engage in a project without much thought" (ms. 5). If Sartre recognizes that human behavior is as a general matter characterized both by thoughtlessness and intelligence – by a lack of awareness and by relentless purposiveness – then

why does he find it so implausible that the Freudian agent could suppress certain kinds of drives without realizing it? Surely it's at least possible that self-deceptive activity has the same general structure as other human projects. And insofar as this is true there is nothing especially problematic about accounting for cases of self-deception – it, as Fingarette (1998) has argued, needs no explaining.

Though the dialogue between Freud and Sartre is presented in an interesting and well-informed way, I am not convinced that it motivates the turn to the author's own theory of self-deception as effectively as it might. I'd like, that is, to see more connective tissue between the descriptive and theoretical parts of the paper, so that it's clearer the author's own "dispositional" account of self-deception serve to resolve the puzzles that emerge out of Sartre's engagement with Freud. To that end, I'd like to raise a question about the dispositional account of self-deception which I hope will help the author continue to develop his view. First, I wonder how the author's theory accounts for familiar cases of self-deception. On this point, the author rightly notes that self-deception is a context-dependent phenomenon more likely to emerge in some circumstances than others, namely when one's "self-state" is "contracted" or has "fewer resources with which to function effectively in challenging situations" (ms. 9). I think the idea here is we are more susceptible to deceive ourselves under circumstances in which we are uncomfortable or believe ourselves to lack the competencies relevant to success, however defined. But given the human proneness to self-enhancement bias (see, e.g., Lafreniere et al. 2015), it strikes me as at least possible that people are far more likely to self-deceive in an "expanded" self-state, i.e., under circumstances where they believe themselves, however foolishly, to be equipped for success. Consider the case of the American voter: his staggering ignorance of basic political processes does not diminish his confidence in the veracity of his views. He, perhaps, *should* be in a contracted self-state, but – due to his absurd overconfidence – is not. Or consider the aging athlete who explains away his diminished performance by blaming his coaches, teammates, etc. Here again, it seems that the self-deception isn't clearly related to a self-state of any particular kind; it is, rather, rooted in the agent's strong desire to believe that his athletic prowess is undiminished and by a general willingness to selectively interpret evidence in ways that track his desire. I'd like to know a bit more about how these more familiar cases are explicable on the author's own theory. It strikes me that the author is right to suggest that self-deception is a context-dependent activity, but it seems to me that the context in which we'd expect self-deception to emerge would have more to do with whether a fundamental interest of the self's has been threatened or compromised than with rather the self's state is "contracted" or "expanded."