

Alfred Mele
Self-Deception Unmasked

Chapter II

Garden-Variety Straight Self-Deception: Some Psychological Processes

The Goal:

___ To show that what happens in garden-variety straight self-deception is consistent with the anti-agency view and is both more subtle and less problematic than interpersonal models imply.

§ Desires and Biases

Our desiring that p can contribute in a variety of ways to our believing that p in instances of straight self-deception.

*** Four examples:**

1. *Negative misinterpretation.*
2. *Positive misinterpretation.*
3. *Selective focusing/attending.*
4. *Selective evidence-gathering.*

[Negative misinterpretation]

Our desiring that p may lead us to interpret as not counting (or not counting strongly) against p data that we would easily recognize to count (or count strongly) against p in the desire's absence.

[Positive misinterpretation]

Our desiring that p may lead us to interpret as *supporting* p data that we would easily recognize to count against p in the desire's absence.

[Selective focusing/attending]

Our desiring that p may lead us both to fail to focus attention on evidence that counts against p and to focus instead on evidence suggestive of p .

[Selective evidence-gathering]

Our desiring that p may lead us both to overlook easily obtainable evidence for $\sim p$ and to find evidence for p that is much less accessible.

Mele:

In none of these examples does the person hold the true belief that $\sim p$ and then intentionally bring it about that he or she believes that p . But they show how a desire that p can trigger and sustain each of the four processes and lead to a biased belief that p .

§ Motivated vs. Unmotivated Biased Beliefs

*** Three sources of unmotivated or “cold” biased beliefs**

[1] Vividness of information

A datum’s vividness for an individual often is a function of individual interests, the concreteness of the datum, its “imagery-provoking” power, or its sensory, temporal, or spatial proximity.

[2] The availability heuristic

When we form beliefs about the frequency, likelihood, or cause of an event, we “often may be influenced by the relative availability of the objects or events, that is, their accessibility in the processes of perception, memory, or construction from imagination.”

[3] The confirmation bias

People testing a hypothesis tend to search (in memory and the world) more often for confirming than for disconfirming instances and to recognize the former more readily, even when the hypothesis is only tentative. The phenomenon has been observed in the interpretation of relatively neutral data as well.

e.g. facial expression reading

The point:

Because favorable hypotheses are more pleasant to contemplate than unfavorable ones and tend to come more readily to mind, desiring that p increases the probability that one’s hypothesis testing will be focused on p rather than $\sim p$.

In at least some stock examples of self-deception, the false beliefs acquired in the fact of weightier evidence to the contrary may be produced or sustained by motivated phenomena of the kinds described.

§ A Model of Everyday Hypothesis Testing

* [PEDMIN] – primary error detection and minimization

___ Friedrich argues that “detection and minimization of crucial errors is in fact the central organizing principle in lay hypothesis testing.” People are “pragmatic reasoners more concerned with minimizing crucial errors or mistakes than with testing for truth.”

⇒ the Friedrich-Trope-Liberman (FTL) model

Friedrich:

“[PEDMIN] does not presume that such computations generally take place in a kind of conscious, thoughtful manner.”

§ Some Key Notions of LFT

* “Confidence Threshold” – “Threshold”

Two thresholds are relevant to each hypothesis:

[The acceptance threshold]:

___ The minimum confidence in the truth of a hypothesis that one requires before accepting it, rather than continuing to test it.

[The rejection threshold]:

___ The minimum confidence in the untruth of a hypothesis that one requires before rejecting it and discontinuing the test.

⇒ The lower the threshold, the thinner the evidence needs to be.

Friedrich:

“Self-deception might... occur out of a .. method of testing that reflects a reasonable lack of concern for errors associated with giving oneself the benefit of the doubt.”

Q: Do we generally give ourselves more benefit of the doubt than we give to others?

* Relevant Costs:

1. [The cost of information]

___ the resources and effort required for acquiring and processing hypothesis-relevant information.

2. [The cost of false acceptance of a hypothesis p]

___ a measure of the subjective importance to the individual of avoiding falsely believing that p .

3. [The cost of false rejection of the same hypothesis]
___ a measure of the subjective importance of avoiding falsely believing that $\sim p$.

The FTL model adopts a “pragmatic perspective” according to which “hypothesis testing is motivated by the cost of inferential errors (false acceptance or rejection of a hypothesis) relative to the cost of information.”

Q: Do we do this kind of “cost/benefit” analysis consciously or even unconsciously?

Q: Do we have different confidence threshold for different issues? What explain the differences?

Mele:

Motivational biases do not involve intentional deceiving oneself.

Sometimes we do things that *are* means to certain ends without doing them *as* means to those ends.