
Words

Self-deception

D W Hamlyn *University of London*

According to some people, self-deception is part of the web of life. It is a technique which human beings use to protect themselves from themselves, and from the various things which may threaten them. The motivation for self-deception may vary, but includes such things as fear of death and pain. The patient who represents to himself that death is not an immediate possibility despite all the signs to the contrary may well be guilty of self-deception. But two things at least need to be remarked on with regard to that observation.

First, self-deception is not simply pretence, not even a pretence to oneself. For pretence seems to imply that the person concerned is conscious of what he is doing, while if we speak of a person as self-deceived we normally imply that he or she is by no means conscious of that fact. The concept of self-deception is close to the Freudian or psychoanalytic concept of repression. Freud defined repression as a putting out of consciousness, but an act which was itself unconscious; and he came to posit various mental mechanisms which might make that possible. If one reacts to a difficult situation by putting out of consciousness one's fears or anxiety on a certain score, and if that putting out of consciousness involves no conscious intention, 'pretence' seems the wrong word to use, because pretence involves too much consciousness and has no suggestion that when the job is done the person has succeeded in keeping whatever it is out of consciousness and so is self-deceived.

Second, we are liable to say, as I have done, that self-deception is something that one might be *guilty* of. If we are driven to self-deception we are driven to what is in some sense a failure. But what kind of failure? Maybe human beings are such that often enough life is possible only through some form of protection of themselves (compare the Freudian concept of 'defence'). It would demand too high a standard of rationality and self-control to suppose that life should be entirely free of self-deception – an impossible ideal. So why do we think that self-deception is something that we may be *guilty* of? Do we really think it better that in all situations a person should be alive to and

prepared to face reality, even the reality of his own extinction? Should a doctor think this, or should he connive in a patient's deception of himself? If he does, are what he does and what the patient also does forms of moral failure? Ought they both to abstain from that, or should people in some situations seek to conceal the truth from themselves as the price of survival?

There are of course occasions when a person's self-deception will lead to harm to others. Someone may fail through self-deception to tell a doctor something that is material to the well-being of another person – something that may, for example, reflect on his or her fitness to carry on a job, to drive or to carry out an occupation that is potentially dangerous to others. There can surely be no argument over the question that in such circumstances self-deception is wrong, and if a doctor becomes aware of this in a patient, it is his duty to speak out – provided, of course, that doing so does not make the self-deception even more acute, and that must be a matter for judgement. But what of the occasions on which self-deception has bearing only on the welfare of the self-deceiver, and is arguably only a form of self-deception? Ought self-deception to be tolerated in such cases? Is there a case for saying that self-deception ought actively to be pursued in such cases?

But 'ought', we are told, implies 'can', and it is not entirely clear at first sight that deceiving oneself is something that one can do. If I am to deceive another person I must bring it about that he believes as true what I know to be false (or at least that is the normal case). By parity of reasoning, if self-deception is anything like deception of others I must, if I am to deceive myself, bring it about that I believe as true what I know to be false. How is that possible? For it seems that I must thereby believe it as true and also believe it to be false (for knowledge surely normally entails belief). Or at all events that must be my eventual situation – for if I simply forget my original knowledge-belief or simply change my mind there can be no question of *deception*. For that to occur I must somehow retain the original belief but also have the contrary one. As a consequence of this sort of reasoning some philosophers and many other people have thought that self-deception is impossible, and that what goes by that name in ordinary parlance is really

Key words

Self-deception; repression.

something else. We use the term 'self-deception' in that case, perhaps, for purely dramatic effect. Is that likely?

In fact the reasoning that seems to lead to that conclusion does not lead there at all. It leads merely to the conclusion that for self-deception to be the case I must have conflicting beliefs – a belief, say, that I shall survive the forthcoming operation and a belief that I shall not. However difficult it is to think how people might retain both beliefs, the supposition that they do does not involve a contradiction. One thing that this makes clear, however, is that self-deception essentially involves conflict and something of a divided self. Self-deception is *not* the same as wishful thinking, which need involve no such conflict – merely a belief that a person holds because he wants to.

That is not the end of the logical difficulties, since the deception of oneself is not normally something that is consciously carried out. It must be very rare that someone sets out consciously to get himself to believe that something or other is the case. Nevertheless the deception must be intentional. It is not self-deception if a person ends up believing something, simply because something else has made him do so. To believe something simply because something or someone has made or caused one to do so may not be the height of rationality, but it is not self-deception either. But if self-deception involves some kind of intention on the part of the deceiver, if not necessarily a conscious one, the carrying out of the intention seems to involve a

certain kind of rationality – a rationality, one might say, used for irrational purposes, in that the purpose is to obscure from oneself the truth. One thing that Freud has shown us is the ingenuity that may be devoted to that end.

So I return to the question what kind of moral failing is involved in using or condoning the use of such ingenuity to such ends. The outcome is certainly a failure, perhaps a refusal, to look the facts in the face. To say that implies a recognition in some way that that is what the facts are, but at the same time an unwillingness to accept that recognition. If the self-deception is successful the facts may be banished from consciousness, and there may come a time at which we are prepared to say that the self-deception has been so successful that there is no likelihood of the facts returning to consciousness. And then perhaps we no longer say that the person concerned recognises them as what they are. But up to that point knowledge of the truth and belief to the contrary remain together. The failure is, one might say, one of integrity. But is it clear that integrity in this sense is an overriding virtue? I have suggested that in some cases self-deception may be the price one pays for survival as a person at all. Could one's survival as a divided self be preferable to one's integrity? Or has one an obligation, if the fact of self-deception is recognised, to free oneself from it? Why?

D W Hamlyn MA is Professor of Philosophy at Birkbeck College, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HX