What is so Bad about Bad Faith?

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Introduction

Self-deception is a paradoxical concept that has been of interest to many philosophers. Sartre was also interested in the concept, preferring, in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), to call it bad faith (*mauvaise foi*).. [1] Heidegger, similarly, although not raising the issue directly, implies self-deception in his concepts of authenticity and inauthenticity. What philosophers have struggled with is the inherent difficulty of the concept: how can a person be both deceiver and deceived at the same time? The concept brings up other related issues such as intentionality, truth versus falsity, duality versus unity and anxiety. In this paper I will explore the varying views on self-deception and argue that self-deception is a product of interpretation, which is often undertaken in retrospect and in response to an individual's choice and their reluctance to accept the responsibility or consequences of these choices. I will also consider the implications self-deception has for psychotherapy and counselling.

The Paradoxical Nature of Self-Deception

In order to deceive someone, a person would typically lie to another in the hope that that person would believe the lie, i.e. getting someone to believe that something which is actually false is true. The problem with self-deception, which is usually defined as 'deceiving oneself', is that the deceiver (liar) and deceived (victim) are one and the same person. Guttenplan (1994) elucidated the problematic nature of self-deception,

> The idea of self-deception is problematic on two levels. First, there seems to be something superficially paradoxical about it from an analytical point of view. But, secondly, given that it seems to be a fundamental and pervasive feature of human life, there are much deeper questions about its rationality and its connection with agency and action. (Guttenplan, 1994: 558).

Guttenplan highlights the essential philosophical problem: self-deception seems to be part of what it is to be human, but how is it possible?

Duality of the Mind

A number of philosophers have sought to get round this problem by arguing that there are multiple

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[1] I will use the terms self-deception and bad faith interchangeably throughout this paper as I believe they refer to the same phenomena.

selves or some sort of compartmentalisation of the mind as advocated by Freud (1900). This duality is needed to account for the issue of the deliberateness or intentionality of self-deception. For if self-deception is to fulfil the conditions of deception then there must be a motivation to deceive. Guttenplan stresses the importance of the 'connection between how one acts and what one believes.' (Guttenplan, 1994: 558). What he means by this is that at some level the individual *knows* the 'truth' indicated in the way that they act (non-verbal behaviour) and yet verbally will hold a directly opposed view, i.e. Mrs Smith acts as if she knows that her husband is having an affair and yet when asked she would deny it vigorously. The important point to remember in this is that Mrs Smith actually believes that her husband is *not* having an affair.

Freud's model of the mind, which comprises of the Unconscious, Preconscious and Consciousness, does offer a way of overcoming the paradoxical nature of self-deception. The Unconscious would contain the deceiving system that is not available to consciousness and therefore awareness. In this way the individual would at the same time know and not know. However, there are a number of arguments against this view of self-deception. Sartre posited the view that if Freud's model of the mind is correct then there must be a barrier or censor which monitors what is allowed into consciousness and what must remain unconscious. The difficulty, as Sartre sees it, is: how does the censor make the decision about the information it is monitoring as it must be conscious or aware of everything? This implies that the censor would in some way have to be self-deceived. Sartre argues that having separate systems of the mind just moves the paradox of self-deception to a different level, i.e. to that of the censor, and re-establishes the duality of deceiver and deceived.

> These various operations in their turn imply that the censor is conscious (of) itself. But what type of self-consciousness can the censor have? It must be the consciousness (of) being conscious of the drive to be repressed, but precisely *in order not be conscious of it.* (Sartre, 1943: 53).

Johnston asks a similar question: what are the motivations and benefits of the deceiving system? Guttenplan warns against the compartmental view of the mind, as 'this would seem to rule out the judgement that Peter's actions were irrational; indeed it would remove the basis for saying that they were even in tension with one another.' (Guttenplan, 1994: 559). The compartmental view of the mind would suggest that there is more than one agency at

work in an individual and this brings up questions about multiple and integrated selves.

Temporality and Self-Deception

Guttenplan introduces a new dimension to the paradox, the notion of time. He notes that often cases of self-deception occur over a period of time rather than occurring simultaneously. As Guttenplan states, 'It takes time and a degree of careful, if devious, planning to get oneself to ignore what would otherwise be plainly admitted.' (ibid., 1994: 560). Guttenplan suggests that this temporal aspect of time would in some way lessen the paradoxical nature of self-deception. Johnston argues against this temporal nature of self-deception stating that self-deception does not always occur in stages, deceiving, forgetting and victim. Johnston's point is that it is only in retrospect that an act can be seen as self-deception, 'only the cooperation of future events made what one did deserve the name of *deceiving oneself*' (Johnston, 1988: 78).

Guttenplan goes further to propose that self-deception might actually be beneficial for the individual, particularly 'When what one believes is just too painful to acknowledge.' (Guttenplan, 1994: 560). Looking at self-deception from this perspective, as self-protection, the concept becomes more rational and understandable.

Self-Deception as an Irrational Mental Process

Johnston puts forward a similar theory, suggesting that deception is not always about being intentionally deceived and that sometimes an individual can be misled. He states that the self-deception theories tend to 'over-rationalise mental processes that are purposive but not intentional.' (Johnston, 1988: 65). Johnston calls these subintentional processes,

> then we can say that our over-rationalisation of self-deception consists in assimilating subintentional processes to intentional acts, where an intentional act is a process initiated and directed by an agent because he recognises that it serves a specific interest of his. (ibid., 1988: 65).

Johnston calls these processes 'mental tropisms' (ibid., 1988: 66). He claims that mental tropisms occur when an individual experiences a high level of anxiety. In order to reduce this anxiety our current beliefs are changed or a new belief is generated about the situation or event. However, this interpretative view of mental states or events relies on the concept of repression and the unconscious, i.e. in this situation an individual uses rationalisation, evasion or overcompensation to overcome the anxiety experienced; which brings us back to Sartre's critique of the censor and the paradox of repression.

Johnson concludes that self-deception is an intentional act, which is due to the anxiety that our desires will not be met. To reduce this anxiety the individual acquires a particular belief and then acts on this belief. Johnston believes that there is a protective system which works in the individual's best interests:

> One has been served by an automatic filtering process that is ordinarily inaccessible to introspection and which determines that what is salient in perception will be what answers to one's interests (ibid., 1988: 87).

Johnston draws a distinction between rational and irrational mental processes. He claims that when we are not self-deceived we use rational mental processes, of which there are three stages. The first stage is the recognition of reasons or evidence to support a certain conclusion. The second stage involves the individual willing that the conclusion is drawn or is true, and the third stage is that the conclusion is reached as a result of the individual willing it: 'he recognises that he has sufficient reason for an act and he wills that he perform the act in question and he does perform it' (ibid., 1988: 88).

However, in the case of self-deception, irrational mental processes are involved. Johnston believes that the difference between rational and irrational mental processes can be found in the first stage. It is the recognition of the reasons or evidence that makes it a rational act. For irrational acts, however, attitudes and beliefs can replace reasons, which would lead an individual to act intentionally on these attitudes. Johnston believes that it is not surprising that humans rationally act on their desires in order to gain satisfaction that an individual 'does better in others ways if its frequent and debilitating anxieties that its desires will not be satisfied are regularly dealt with by doses of hopeful belief.' (ibid., 1988: 89).

Self-Deception as Desire

Mele (1987) puts forward an alternative theory of self-deception. He claims that if we accept the established description of self-deception, then there follow two assumptions. The first is that many cases of self-deception are not self-deception because the individual is not lying to himself or herself. The second is that self-deception must involve lying although not all cases appear to do so. Mele suggests that one solution would be to reject this notion that a person must be lying to themselves, rather than accepting that the person could just be holding a false belief. However, by rejecting this definition the idea that self-deception is intentional is also lost. Mele argues that although self-deception may not be intentional it is also not accidental either.

Mele does not think that self-deception involves holding contradictory beliefs simultaneously but rather that 'Self-deception is commonly conceived of as something that occurs because (in part) the agent-patient *wants* something (to be the case).' (Mele, 1987: 125). He puts forward four ways in which self-deception can occur.

The first two ways in which self-deception occurs he terms *Positive Misinterpretation* and *Negative Misinterpretation*. This involves the misinterpretation of data in either a positive or negative way because of a strong desire for something to be true. However, without this strong desire the person would not misinterpret the data.

The third example is *Selective Focusing/Attending*, where a person finds his attention shifting whenever an unpleasant issue suggests itself to him. The fourth example is *Selective Evidence-Gathering*, where a person only considers evidence that supports their desire.

Mele states that for each of the four examples

> … there is a desire-influenced inappropriate treatment of data. The subject's desire that *p* leads him to fail to appreciate the gravity of some evidence that he has that not-*p*….If this manipulation of data leads in turn to the acquisition of the false belief that *p*, then we *may* have an instance of self-deception. (ibid., 1987: 126).

Mele believes that the paradox of self-deception can be resolved by seeing it as 'a display of desire-influenced irrationality' (ibid., 1987: 136). That a person acts against the evidence due to an overriding desire. Mele also overcomes the problem of intention, as he believes that although a person does not intentionally try to deceive him or herself, there is intentionality in the way in which the person interprets and acts on the evidence present.

Bad Faith

Sartre has also written about self-deception, which he prefers to call *bad faith*:

> It is best to choose and to examine one determined attitude which is essential to human reality and which is such that consciousness instead of directing its negation outward turns it towards itself. This attitude, it seems to me, is *bad faith* (mauvaise foi). (Sartre, 1943: 48).

For Sartre bad faith is not a case of a person being mistaken, rather it is more to do with falsehood (ibid., 1948: 49). Sartre believes that an individual who is in bad faith is being false to themselves and that at some level they realise this. Sartre states that there is also an intention to be in bad faith. Therefore the individual not only knows that they are in bad faith but intentionally acts in this way. 'There must be an original intention and a project of bad faith; this project implies a comprehension of bad faith as such and a pre-reflective apprehension (of)

consciousness as affecting itself with bad faith' (ibid., 1943: 49).

The deception of bad faith for Sartre is about the meaning of a person's behaviour or conduct; the individual can understand his or her behaviour in concrete terms but fails to grasp the truth of his or her conduct. Sartre gives the example of a young woman in the café who is talking to a male companion. The young woman knows that her companion has certain intentions towards her and that at some point she will have to make a decision, however, at the present moment she is enjoying his company and does not want to think about the decision she will have to make. He then takes her hand, which brings the decision to the fore and she needs to act. If she withdraws her hand she will disrupt the moment and will not be able to return to it; however, if she leaves her hand there she is signalling that she is consenting. In order to overcome this situation, '… the young woman leaves her hand there, but she *does not notice* that she is leaving it. She does not notice because it happens by chance that she is at this moment all intellect' (ibid., 1943: 55). In this way, Sartre states, the young woman is able to create a split between her body and her mind or soul; however, by doing this she is in bad faith. This account of Sartre's echoes that of Mele's in that the evidence is interpreted in such a way so that the individual's desires are met. The young woman is able to continue enjoying the moment whilst postponing the inevitable decision.

To understand Sartre's concept of bad faith we must look at his views on the self and freedom. Sartre believes that existence precedes essence and that fundamentally we are nothingness. What Sartre means by this is that we are not concrete selves in the same way that objects are. Sartre believes that as human beings we are obliged to create and recreate ourselves through our interactions with the world and others. This obligation is due to the freedom of having no fixed self and being able to be whatever we choose. However this freedom to choose ourselves results in anguish and it is this anguish in turn which reveals our freedom.

> When I constitute myself as the comprehension of a possible as *my* possible, I must recognise its existence at the end of my project and apprehend it as myself, awaiting me down there in the future and separated from me by a nothingness. In this sense I apprehend myself as the original source of my possibility, and it is this which ordinarily we call the consciousness of freedom (ibid., 1943: 41).

Sartre believes that bad faith is a way in which we can escape the anguish of freedom. There are different ways in which an individual can escape the anguish of freedom and one of which is to objectify oneself. Sartre gives the example of the waiter in the café who acts as if he is a waiter and nothing else: 'All his behaviour seems to us a game.….He is playing at *being* a waiter in a café' (ibid., 1943: 59). Sartre gives another example of the homosexual

and his friend who is his critic. Sartre asks the question, who is in bad faith, is it the homosexual who denies that he is a pederast or the critic? The homosexual is accused of bad faith because although 'acknowledging all the facts which are imputed to him, he refuses to draw from them the conclusion which they impose.' (ibid., 1943: 63).

However, the critic is also in bad faith, as he demands that his friend constitute himself as an object or thing so that he can pretend that his friend has no freedom and therefore he is able to judge him. There seems to be two modes of bad faith for Sartre, the first is where a person denies his or her freedom and acts as if they are a thing or an object, the second mode is where a person misinterprets the evidence presented and does not draw the implied conclusion.

Cannon elucidates Sartre's two modes of bad faith as, 'I fall into bad faith if I take one or both of two dishonest positions about reality: If I pretend either to be free in a world without facts or to be a fact in a world without freedom.' (Cannon, 1991: 46).

There is also another problem with bad faith for Sartre and that is the *faith* of bad faith; or rather the problem is one of belief. The self-deceived person believes their version of the truth. Sartre comments 'That faith is decision and that after each intuition, it must decide and *will what it is.*' (Sartre, 1943: 68). Therefore the individual is continually interpreting evidence in a particular way which may or may not coincide with the person's desires: 'If I *believe* that my friend Pierre likes me, this means that his friendship appears to me as the meaning of all his acts' (ibid., 1943: 69).

Cannon states that an individual's interpretation or decision is based on that individual's values and beliefs, 'In the sense that I have already chosen the values on which I will base my deliberations.' (Cannon, 1991: 47).

Sartre's view of bad faith shares similarities with ideas from some of the other authors presented in this paper and therefore also suffers from the same criticisms. Both Sartre's theory of bad faith and Mele's account of self-deception involve some kind of misinterpretation of reality. Both authors suggest that this misinterpretation has an intentional nature, i.e. a manipulation of perception in order to satisfy a deep desire or need, or to overcome the anxiety of our freedom. Their theories also highlight the issue of how much access do we have to our minds and their processes. Are we fully conscious of everything that goes on in our minds? Although Sartre is saying that we are embodied consciousness and therefore fully aware, he also talks about how we are able to fool ourselves into thinking that we do not know, and therefore the paradoxical nature of self-deception remains.

Implications for Psychotherapy and Counselling

What can we conclude about bad faith from the above? There does seem an element of agreement between the authors mentioned in this paper that self-deception or bad faith is a phenomena which occurs in our daily life. There is also broad agreement that self-deception has a certain intentionality about it and involves an individual's beliefs, values and desires. Some of the authors cited here argue that self-deception has a protective element, reducing anxiety in the individual. This self-protective element may also cause individuals to misinterpret data so that their desires are fulfilled. What still seems open to debate is whether the individual is actually deceiving himself or herself or whether some other process is occurring. What also comes across in these discussions about self-deception is the implicit value judgement that the authors place on it and the *truth*. Even the words used to describe the phenomena, deception, *bad* faith, indicate that this is something which should be avoided or at best monitored for. If self-deception is something that we should avoid, what are the implications for psychotherapy?

Jopling raises similar questions about the truth and self-knowledge and its use in philosophical counselling,

> But what exactly do philosophical counsellors mean by the term 'self-knowledge'? What is the self that reflective self-inquiry (in the context of philosophical counselling) is about? Does truth matter in this process? And if clients are given a set of philosophical tools, is it possible that they wield them incorrectly – to construct, for instance, a philosophically sophisticated mansion of self-deception? (Jopling, 1996: 298).

He argues that self-knowledge is an achievement rather than a given and that to a large extent our self is unknown to us. He cites two reasons for this: psychodynamic barriers (that our deepest beliefs and desires tend to be the most elusive) and, more importantly, that the conventional notion of the self-concept is usually oversimplified. When asked the question 'who are you?' an individual will tend to respond with one or two sentences and these will represent a summary of 'a rich and heterogeneous lode of information into a few compressed phrases' (ibid., 1996: 301).

Jopling not only states that it is virtually impossible to understand ourselves fully, he also asks: what is the value of truth, and can we ever know what the truth is? Jopling highlights the fundamental flaw of philosophical counselling and its pursuit of the truth. If the philosophical counsellor maintains that the client has autonomy in how they describe or see themselves, then it is difficult to make a judgement about what is true or false: 'the grounds for distinguishing between *coherent false* (or self-deceived) formulations, and *coherent true* formulations, become blurred.' (ibid., 1996: 303).

Jopling believes that what philosophical counselling can really only hope for is to help the client gain 'an accurate self-understanding with respect to which desires are really motivating them, which beliefs are really well-founded, and which character traits they really have.' (ibid., 1996: 308).

With this in mind, Sartre's view of bad faith can be helpful when working with clients, by helping us to put value judgements aside and look purely at the choices made and the possibilities open to the client. As Cannon states, 'In the end, I will have done what I intended to do'(Cannon, 1991: 48) and the psychotherapist may be more useful in helping the client to understand why they had made that particular decision and what had motivated them to do so.

> It implies that discovering the structures of bad faith in a client's fundamental project has nothing at all to do with judging one's client, which would obviously be inappropriate. In other words, whereas it is always possible to choose how one lives a particular situation, it is not always possible to have a *viable* choice. (ibid., 1991: 45)

What emerges is that often instances of self-deception are actually an avoidance of the consequences of certain choices. The young woman in the café did not want to deal with the consequence of having her hand held by her companion. Similarly the waiter would rather believe that he *was* a waiter rather than accept the consequence that he could do something else. Even the examples given by Mele of misinterpretation of evidence suggest an avoidance of one kind or another. So self-deception is really an avoidance of reality, a reality that we manipulate to suit our current thinking and ourselves. A recent client, who had just been through a break up of a long-term relationship, sums up this notion of self-deception perfectly. She had been describing her relationship and the fact that although she maintained that the break up had been a complete shock to her, she had seen signs that things were not going as well as they could be:

Therapist   Did that not set off warning bells for you that there might be problems in the relationship?

Client   I guess it did deep down, but I didn't want to think of the consequences of being alone and on my own. Staying in that relationship, however bad it was, was better than the alternative.

What is so Bad about Bad Faith?

So back to the question posed at the beginning of the paper, maybe self-deception is not such a bad thing after all, it protects us from the stark reality of life and from things that we are not ready to face. Although it is good to face up to the challenge of life, the freedom to choose and all the consequences that that brings, this requires a certain amount of inner strength and vigilance that we don't have all the time. Being constantly aware of our freedom could in fact be very debilitating. The enormity of being able to choose ourselves and our lives could lead to a type of paralysis, a fear of making the wrong choice and therefore not wanting to choose at all. Alternatively we become so aware of our freedom that we also become aware of our nothingness which in turn makes us too anxious to act. Ultimately being aware of our freedom highlights the temporal nature of our being and the fact that our life is finite and we are going to die.

Heidegger posits that although we know at some level that we are going to die, our normal way of being is to conceal this fact from ourselves. This can be done in a number of ways, by being involved with the everyday nature of things and through idle talk with others (Heidegger, 1962). Heidegger calls this *falling*, which means we fall in with the They within ourselves and become pre-occupied with everyday concerns rather than being focused on living our life to our full potential. Heidegger states that this fallenness tranquillises the anxiety of our being-towards-death.

Although this way of being is not what Heidegger would call 'authentic' being and it leads to alienation and the closing off of possibilities, he concedes that:

> A specific kind of *forgetting* is essential for the temporality that is constitutive for letting something be involved. The Self must forget itself if, lost in the world of equipment, it is to be able 'actually' to go to work and manipulate something. (ibid., 1962: 354).

So maybe some *forgetting* is a necessary part of being a human being.

There is also a case to be made that bad faith allows us to deal with what we are able to cope with at that time. Rather than seeing it as a deception it should be seen in terms of self-protection, as Guttenplan advocates. Why would we intentionally deceive ourselves if it weren't in our best interests? The fact that most people are only aware of self-deception after the event also lends weight to this argument. Normally we act in a way that feels right at that point in time. In retrospect this action could be seen as self-deception; however, at the time the act seems a perfectly logical thing to do.

Self-deception or bad faith is an inevitable part of what it is to be human. Sartre believes we are constantly living in bad faith and that even living in good faith is bad faith as you are ignoring the possibility of being in bad faith. It is inescapable and

also essential as it makes us move forward to new projects, new ways of life, it allows us to create and recreate ourselves, to make choices, to have values and beliefs. It seems that self-deception goes hand-in-hand with freedom. In order to be free to make choices we have to be in some way deceived about our freedom.

Recognising that self-deception is an essential part of human life reduces its paradoxical nature. It is almost impossible not to be in bad faith at any one point, as there will always be some 'truth' or fact that we are not aware of and which is not included in our decision making process. In addition to this we also have our needs and desires to consider, and there is often an internal battle between what we want and what we can have.

Conclusion

Guttenplan, Johnston and Sartre all suggest that self-deception is part of what it is to be human. They have highlighted the paradoxical nature of self-deception and gone some way towards explaining how it is possible. Some of the arguments put forward include self-protection, irrational mental processes and misinterpretation of the evidence presented. Sartre posits a similar idea in that self-deception is about taking a dishonest view of reality to escape the anguish of freedom. In the main all the authors have suggested that self-deception involves some type of mental manipulation, misinterpretation or forgetting.

I have argued that far from being a concept that is to be viewed negatively, self-deception allows us as individuals to continue in our daily lives. That constant awareness of our freedom and the ever-present possibility of our death may lead to inaction and a type of paralysis. Self-deception allows us to move forward to new projects, admittedly in a self-deceived way. However, it also gives us strength to face life by making it seem less anxiety provoking and difficult. In these moments we may be able to grasp some awareness of or insight into how we have become self-deceived and have acted in bad faith and this will give us the possibility to change.

Self-deception is indeed a part of what it is to be human. If we want to try to overcome our self-deception we need to become more aware of the choices and possibilities available to us; to examine the consequences of our choices and to look at how we may have acted in bad faith. By opening ourselves up to the inevitable anxiety of life we may get some deeper understanding of ourselves. However, we would be deluded to think that we could ever rid ourselves of self-deception. We are self-deceived and to view the concept in a positive way, as self-protection, may make it easier to look at how we deceive ourselves.

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