

PHIL 5983: Rationality Seminar

University of Arkansas, Fall 2004

Topic: Self-Deception II: Mele's Account of Self-Deception

Readings: *Self-Deception Unmasked* (Chapters 3-6)

*Jennifer will present on Chapter 3, and Ryan will present on Chapter 5.

*What is self-deception? I think we can all agree that it is some kind of epistemically irrational, motivated (by either desire or emotion) manipulation of belief, or belief-like, states. But, here is a list of some of the disputes that remain open:

Questions about the dynamics:

- Is self-deception an intentional action (either conscious or unconscious), or is it not? Is self-deception something people *try* to do?
- What is the content of the motivation? Is it concerned with how the world is, or is it concerned with how the world is represented?
- What is the role, if any, of emotion in motivating self-deception?

Questions about the state:

- Do those who are self-deceived about p both believe that p and believe that not-p?
- Do the self-deceived know, or even believe, the truth?
- What should be privileged in determining the beliefs of the self-deceived—their avowals or their non-linguistic behavior?

General Questions:

- Is self-deception much like inter-personal deception?
- Is self-deception a homogenous kind, with a unified explanation?
- Is self-deception a continual process, or does it have an end state?
- Is self-deception ever justified? Is it ever rational in an inclusive, non-epistemic sense?

Chapter 4

*Chapter 4 is concerned with attempted empirical demonstrations, by psychologists, of self-deceived agents who believe both p and not-p (so-called “dual belief”). You might wonder whether this is the kind of thing that can be empirically demonstrated. Of course, if you think that, for conceptual reasons, no agent can believe both some proposition and its negation, then you will obviously hold that this cannot be empirically demonstrated. But Mele concedes that this is possible. He just does not think it is true, or at least it need not be true, of self-deceivers. (Here is another question: Who is a better authority, the philosopher or the psychologist, when it comes to interpreting the mental states of these study subjects? Who is the expert in attributing beliefs—the one who studies rationality??)

--Alternatives to the dual belief claim could use belief-relevant verbs like *suspects* or *doubts*. E.g., self-deceivers believe that not-p, but suspect that p.

*The main experiments that Mele discusses are Gur and Sackeim's voice recognition study, and Quattrone and Tversky's cold water study.

--In the G&S study, subjects avow one belief, though giving off physiological symptoms indicative of an opposing belief. While this result is interesting, in regards to the voice recognition example, examples of the same form are common in many other domains. We have already discussed many examples in which people's avowals and non-linguistic behavior part ways, and we are left deciding which to privilege. The G&S position is that we should take each seriously, and attribute the contradictory beliefs. But, Mele (correctly it seems) points out that the physiological evidence is by no means sufficient for attributing a belief. (Mele could have said the same about the avowal, couldn't he?)

--The cold water study is a little more difficult, because Q&T attribute dual beliefs with the following contents: a) I did not try to shift my tolerance, and b) I did try to shift my tolerance. Again, Mele argues against the need and legitimacy of attributing these beliefs. And he further argues that there is no reason to suppose that the agents tried to shift their tolerance. Here, recall Mele's anti-agency stance.