

## PHIL 5983: Rationality Seminar

University of Arkansas, Fall 2004

**Topic:** Self-Deception III: Believe What You Want

**Readings:** Bernard Williams “Deciding to Believe”; Eric Funkhouser “Do the Self-Deceived Get What They Want?”

“Deciding to Believe”

\*Background: This paper is concerned with the (in)voluntariness of belief. David Hume claimed that, for strictly empirical reasons, we cannot directly will to believe. Bernard Williams provides a conceptual argument for our inability to will to believe. This is a much stronger argument, because, if successful, it shows that it is impossible to will to believe.

Others have argued that belief is under our voluntary control. Consider, for example, Pascal’s wager (though, it is not at all clear that Pascal thinks we can *directly* will ourselves to religious belief). Some may think that, just as we are not morally responsible for that which we do not freely perform, we are not morally or epistemically responsible for that which we do not voluntarily believe.

The (in)voluntariness of belief has obvious connections to self-deception and rationality more generally. The self-deceived, some have argued, have a motive to believe something—but can they voluntarily believe what they want, or must they use less direct methods? Also, as Williams argues, some may think that for conceptual reasons having to do with rationality, we cannot directly will to believe. Believers necessarily respect truth-conducive reasons and evidence, in apparent tension with the motives of self-deceivers.

\*Williams provides 5 “characteristics of belief”:

1. Belief aims at truth.
2. Assertion is the most basic expression of belief.
  - The assertion has the content ‘It is raining’, for example, not ‘I believe it is raining’.
  - Other animals, and non-linguistic creatures, can have beliefs, but only in an impoverished sense. For, how do we determine the contents of their beliefs, or the concepts that they possess?
3. An assertion that *p*, however, is neither necessary nor sufficient for believing that *p*.
  - However, his reasons for thinking that assertion is not sufficient for belief is simply that one can insincerely assert. But cannot one sincerely assert that *p* and still not believe that *p*? (It seems that Williams takes ‘sincerity’ to mean

‘represent accurately’, so that a sincere assertion accurately represents what one believes. But is this how the word is commonly used?)

4. Factual beliefs can be, and in fact often are, based on evidence.  
--Williams has an extended discussion of rational and causal connections among beliefs. (142-143)  
--Doesn't the top of p. 144 sound like Davidson?
5. Beliefs, in conjunction with our projects, explain our behavior.

\*A machine can satisfy conditions 1, 2, and 4, but its failure to satisfy 3 will prevent it from having beliefs. (145) Yet, Williams claims that such a machine could have knowledge! (Williams makes some very interesting comments on knowledge, on pp. 146-147.)

\*Williams: We can decide whether to assert something that we believe, but we cannot decide what to believe. Here is Williams' argument:

“Belief cannot be like that; it is not a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I believe something, as it is a contingent fact that I cannot bring it about, just like that, that I'm blushing. Why is this? One reason is connected with the characteristic of beliefs that they aim at truth. If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not. If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a 'belief' irrespective of its truth, it is unclear that before the event I could seriously think of it as a belief, i.e. as something purporting to represent reality. At the very least, there must be a restriction on what is the case after the event; since I could not then, in full consciousness, regard this as a belief of mine, i.e. something I take to be true, and also know that I acquired it at will. With regard to no belief could I know—or, if all this is to be done in full consciousness, even suspect—that I had acquired it at will. But if I can acquire beliefs at will, I must know that I am able to do this...” (148)

\*This discussion connects with the topic of self-deception:

“Why, if we're going to bring it about that we believe something in this kind of way, do we have to use self-deception; that is, what, if anything, is wrong with the idea of a conscious project to make myself believe what I want to believe?” (149)

--On p. 150, Williams makes a distinction that foreshadows Funkhouser's distinction between world-focused and self-focused motivational accounts of self-deception.

--Williams distinguishes forgetting what is unpleasant from not believing what is unpleasant. Also, Williams notes that self-deception is unsavory because it can involve much work to avoid evidence. Williams holds that self-deceivers, due to such avoidance behavior, do know the truth (compare with Funkhouser, below).

“Do the Self-Deceived Get What They Want?”

\*Funkhouser attempts to clarify the motivational content of self-deception, as well as the end-state in virtue of which one becomes self-deceived.

\*Q: Is the motivational state aimed at something in the world, or something in themselves?

--Twisted self-deception cases show that the self-deceived do not always desire that the world be such that p. Should we then offer different motivations for twisted and straight cases of self-deception? Or, instead, should we look for a, perhaps less obvious, motivation that is common to both varieties? The self-focused alternative is such a candidate.

--Funkhouser claims that self-deceivers have non-truth-conducive motivations to believe that p (e.g., because the belief is intrinsically pleasant, the belief is desired out of caution, etc.). The nature of deception, be it interpersonal or of the self, consists in a motivation to change someone’s mind, not change the world.

--If this suggestion is correct, then there is a third category of self-deception—apathetic self-deception.

\*Funkhouser argues that the self-deceived avow one thing, while believing another. Why does he privilege non-linguistic behavior, however, in attributing this belief? In defense, Funkhouser cites two features of beliefs—their necessary connections to behavior and the non-simplistic (e.g., holistic?) nature of psychological explanation.

--Note the first paragraph on p. 8, and the following passage in particular: “By asserting “I am not bald” Mitchell is not jeopardizing his goal of so believing. If anything, such repetition would further that goal. However, by allowing his wife to tussle his hair Mitchell is jeopardizing this goal. It would be quite difficult for Mitchell to refuse to acknowledge his baldness were that to happen.” (8)

--Also note the great weight Funkhouser gives to avoidance behavior, when attributing beliefs.

--Funkhouser contrasts *self-deception* with *self-delusion*. With the latter, the agent succeeds in believing as he desires—there is no longer any tension or avoidance behavior that is characteristic of self-deception. In self-deception, by Funkhouser’s stipulation, the agent does not believe as he desires. Self-delusion has an interpersonal delusion/deception analogue, but self-deception does not.

\*Funkhouser claims that self-deception involves a kind of practical irrationality, which he terms *Mistaken Ends Irrationality*. (13)

--On his view, the end-state of self-deception is a false second-order belief, so it is a failure of self-knowledge. He lists 4 abilities associated with second-order beliefs in general, and applies this to self-deception in particular. The first two abilities are first-person and phenomenological in nature, while the latter two abilities are third-person aspects.

--This account supposedly accounts for what Funkhouser calls the *opacity of self-deception*. (17)

--Funkhouser concludes with a sketchy analysis of self-deception, on p. 18.