On the Psychology of Self-Deception

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IT is easy to lose one's way in the subject of self-deception, so I will stay close to actual events as much as possible.

To begin with, an example, in which it seems that knowing something is not as simple and unambiguous a condition as one might imagine: A businessman is talking about his partner and friend of many years. He chooses his words carefully. With obvious reluctance, he says that it is "possible" that this man has been cheating him. He is silent for a moment, then he says quietly that he thinks he has known this "in a way" for a long time. Finally, he adds, "But you don't really know it until you say it out loud."

Thus we learn that there are two kinds of knowing: knowing "in a way" and "really" knowing. Furthermore, the transition from one to the other occurs upon "saying it out loud." The difference, in other words, is not a matter of acquiring additional information, but of conscious articulation of what was already in some sense known but not articulated. One might call it a process of consciousness raising. The earlier state was one in which the speaker did not know (and did not want to know) what he knew; the final state was one in which he realized what he knew, admitting it to his listener and to himself at the same stroke. It appears, therefore, that there is a distinction between what one feels or believes about something and what one imagines oneself to feel or believe.[1] A disjunction between these two is what we call self-deception.

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The Paradox

Self-deception can easily seem paradoxical. How can the knowing deceiver also be the unknowing deceived? How can one intentionally, knowingly, not know? The process clearly requires a selective monitoring of oneself, and that selectiveness is usually taken to imply both knowing what must not be known and at the same time being able not to know it. It is true that psychoanalysis offers a comparatively easy solution. But the psychoanalytic solution, at least in its traditional form, requires the assumption of an independent unconscious agency, the ego, which can intentionally deceive the conscious person, a "smart" unconscious. In this way, the problem of separating the deceiver from the deceived is accomplished, but only by reifying a descriptive concept.

Certainly, self-deception implies a self-monitoring process of some sort. But the assumption that this monitoring process must be smart, or knowing, is altogether unnecessary. Regulatory monitoring and even regulatory action do not necessarily require understanding, and intention does not have to be knowledgeable. We jerk our hand from the hot plate not because we are afraid of damage to the skin, but because it hurts. In other words, for the process of self-deception it is not necessary to know what we must not know; it is only necessary for its presence to be signalled in some way while it is still in incipient form. Such a regulatory monitoring system does in fact exist; it consists of the individual's character or personality. According to his character and its organization of attitudes, the individual will react with some form of discomfort to the incipient presence or an idea of feeling which is inimical to him.

The process of self-deception, of course, must include not only a system of monitoring, but also a way of forestalling consciousness of inimical ideas or feelings and doing so without self-awareness. What we call character or personality organization possesses capabilities of this kind as well. It is not

only that the individual reacts with discomfort to the vague sensation of ideas or feelings inimical to his attitudes. That discomfort in turn actuates certain processes that forestall conscious articulation of those ideas or feelings. I shall consider these processes later in some detail. For the time being, it is enough to say that the attitudes themselves, to which these ideas or feelings are inimical and discomforting, operate to prevent their further conscious development. The monitoring and the corrective systems are one.

For example, consider the businessman I cited before. Vague suspicions of his partner that arose earlier were presumably disturbing, perhaps even before they were recognized for what they were. That disturbing sensation of, say, disloyalty would in turn prompt a loyal assembling of reassuring ideas, obviating further conscious development of suspicions. The result of this quick and essentially reflexive process is a rift between what he believes and what he tells himself he believes.

Even if self-deception is not particularly paradoxical, it has to be said that it is a strange human capability in a way that the ability to lie to another person is not. Deceiving someone else is clearly advantageous in certain circumstances, sometimes even essential, but self-deception does not seem so at all. On the contrary, we count the existence of reasonably trustworthy judgment and feelings about reality as indispensable to our survival. They are not infallible, of course, and we understand that our best guess is only a guess. But surely our best guess is to be preferred to anything less. Yet, here we are confronted with the fact that a person's best judgment or genuine feeling about something can be overruled by that person himself. And this is no rare or even unusual phenomenon; on the contrary, it is apparently a universal susceptibility. In some individuals, in fact, there is reason to think that it is both regular and lasting. For it appears to be central to psychopathology.

Self-Deceptive Speech

In the 1950s, the innovative psychoanalyst, Hellmuth Kaiser, an early student of Wilhelm Reich, published an exceedingly interesting clinical observation: patients, he said, do not talk straight (Fierman, 1965). He explained that although they might be perfectly sincere, these people seemed without exception to give the impression of some artificiality or ungenuineness; what they said did not seem to express what they actually thought or felt. The tears sometimes seemed forced or worked up; the story of childhood sounded rehearsed; the angry account of yesterday's event, as one listened to it, had the quality of a public oration. It was artificial, but there was no suggestion of a conscious intention to deceive the listener. In short, what Kaiser observed was self-deceptive speech. Of course, it is not limited to patients in psychotherapy. As a matter of fact, his observation is the sort which anyone with sufficient interest and perhaps some training can easily make here and there.

What is interesting in Kaiser's observation is not only that self-deception is identified as a regular, probably central, symptom of all psychopathology. Quite apart from that, his observation makes it clear that self-deception is not a strictly internal process. That is to say, at least part of the process itself, not only its results, can be directly observed in speech. Nor is it, as such processes are generally considered to be in psychoanalysis, entirely unconscious. Although it obviously is not consciously and deliberately planned, it clearly involves some degree of conscious activity and even conscious effort.

This kind of speech is unusual in several respects. Above all, it does not seem to have the communicative aims one ordinarily assumes of speech. Its aim is not so much to communicate with the listener as to affect the speaker himself. For example, a man who has just made a difficult decision tries, unsuccessfully in this instance, to dispel his doubts: "I *know* I did the right thing! . . . (More quietly) I think." The

exaggerated emphasis in this example, particularly the emphatic assertion of conviction, is characteristic of this kind of speech. Frequently, repetitions ("I *know* I did the right thing! I *know* I did!") serve the same aim.

It is much the same with statements of feeling. They are often exaggerated in report while comparatively diminished in expression. The individual speaks of being furious ("I hate my father!"), but does not look furious. Or he describes his unhappiness, but the description and his gestures seem melodramatic and forced. In all these cases, one has the impression of an effort being made in the utterance itself; it seems that the self-deception actually receives its final construction in speech. Perhaps all self-deception is finally constructed in speech, either to oneself or to a listener; certainly it seems true for a large class. It would not be remarkable. If a genuine feeling or belief achieves its fully conscious form in speech, particularly in "saying it out loud," the same might be expected of self-deception.

There is another characteristic of this kind of speech, noticeable to the listener, which seems to confirm its essentially noncommunicative nature. When the speaker says, "I *know* I did the right thing!" or some such, with an exaggerated emphasis, one does not have a sense of being addressed. The speaker's voice is often louder than his normal conversational voice. He does not seem to be looking at one in the ordinary way. The listener does not seem to be in his focus; he seems to be looking past him. One feels tempted to wave one's hand to catch the speaker's attention. His attention seems inward, in the way of someone listening to himself, like a person who is practicing a speech.

In some instances, this inwardness has another expression which at first does not seem inward at all. Sometimes the speaker looks directly and searchingly at the listener's eyes. The response he sees, or thinks he sees, in the listener's eyes has a special importance to him; he is remarkably sensitive to it. A confirming response produces visible relief, while the

slightest hesitation is quite discomforting and often prompts the speaker to renewed efforts. It seems, however, despite his apparent concentration on the listener, that the speaker here, too, is actually addressing and listening to himself. His concentration on the listener's expression is misleading; he is watching the listener in the way one looks intensely in the mirror for signs of a blemish, losing awareness of the mirror itself. He is addressing himself through the listener.

Altogether, in self-deceptive speech it seems that the speaker has lost the normal awareness of the listener, the normal "polarity" (Werner, 1948) of speaker and listener. This is sometimes further confirmed when one happens to interrupt the speaker, and he reacts with an embarassed laugh, as if noticing the listener for the first time and, it seems, himself as well.

The Loss of Reality

To tell oneself that he does not see what is there is one thing, to actually persuade oneself of that is another. It speaks for a special relationship not only with oneself, but also with reality.

It is a common idea that a loss of reality, of a more or less objective sense of the world, is a defining symptom of psychosis, distinguishing psychosis from nonpsychotic pathology and certainly from normality. But it is not quite so. For instance, a dogmatic person, whose schematic observations are largely predictable, is surely in some sense out of touch with reality. Similarly, a suggestible person, whose ideas seem to change from one moment to another according to popular opinion, must be said to have a fainter sense of objective reality than most. A certain loss of reality is, in fact, demonstrable in every kind of psychopathology, and it is not absent in normals either.

Cognitive attitude and the relation it implies to external reality are not outside the dynamics of the personality in

general. To a large extent they are characteristic, but they fluctuate also in every person according to circumstances and momentary state of mind. Under certain conditions, such as conditions of anxiety or, more likely, the necessity to forestall anxiety, the normal, more or less objective attitude, an attitude, to put it simply, of consciously looking things over, can be inhibited and compromised. The individual's relationship with himself complicates and interferes with his relation to external reality.

For example, obsessively conscientious people live with numerous dutiful rules and imperatives ("shoulds") which restrict and direct their interest. Where someone else might make a decision by looking at what is on the counter, these people are obliged to turn inward, calculating "shoulds" and "should nots," supporting internal argument with selected pros and cons. The final decision does not reflect a judgment of or response to the external reality; it reflects instead what is necessary to forestall or dispel moral discomfort.

These people often think that they want to do something that actually they only feel they should do. They think they want the dessert that comes with the dinner when really they cannot bring themselves to waste it. They think they want to read the book when actually they want only to have read it. In these cases, an internal idea of the external object has been created out of the calculations I have indicated. It is quite different from the reality of the book or the dessert and takes precedence over it. That idea seems to its subject to be a response to the external situation, but actually it is not. A self-deception has been created, but it does not involve the substitution of one reaction to an external reality for another. It involves the displacement of a reaction to an external reality by an anxiety-forestalling formula. At the moment of self-deception, the person who deceives himself cannot consider the situation before him in the ordinary objective way. He is driven instead, by his relationship with himself, to show something, to prove or disprove something, to feel something

or be something, in relation to that situation. The formulations which he produces are not expressions of what he feels or believes in regard to that situation. They are discomfort dispelling formulas. It is for this reason that these utterances are so often self-reflexive ("I feel . . . ," "I think . . . ," "I know . . . ," "I hate . . . ").

Louis Sass (1992) has suggested that the schizophrenic's relation to his delusion is not so much a matter of belief as suspension of disbelief. I think he is right, but the notion of a suspension of disbelief has a more general significance and a wider application than that; it applies to all self-deception. It is a suspension of the normal objective interest in reality.

Such a suspension does not seem to be a fixed and stable condition, existing without tension and effort. Notwithstanding what one may think one feels and believes about something, what one actually feels and believes remains at the edge of awareness. Sometimes it spontaneously intrudes into awareness ("I *know* I did the right thing! . . . I think"). In that sense, self-deception is never completely successful. That is why self-deceptive statements are usually repeated, and why they are marked by artificiality and exaggeration. That also is why self-deceptive statements are not reliable predictors of action. It is well-known, for instance, that dutiful people by no means actually do all that they say, and think, they want to do.

For example, a recently divorced woman reproaches herself severely for failing to make arrangements for a trip she insists she had "really wanted" to take. She blames her "inertia." Shortly, she relaxes somewhat. She then says something quite different about her plan: that she thought "it would be good for me." Finally, more quietly, she says that actually she hates to travel alone and knows no one where she had planned to go.

The emergence of this person's actual feelings is, of course, inseparable from the emergence of the external reality that is the object of those feelings. The polarity of the self and the external world is re-established.

Another familiar kind of self-deception is a slight variation

of the one just cited. In the former case, the individual imagines that she wants to do something, but fails to do it; it is just as common that people think they do not want to do what in fact they do, often regularly. People often say that they drink or eat "more than (they) want to" or "lose (their) temper" and do things they "did not mean." They often continue relationships while insisting that they want to end them. Such self-deception, whose common theme is, "I cannot help it," admits the lesser crime of weakness, rather than the greater one of intention. It is often supported by vague ideas of external provocation or irresistible urges or compulsions.

In these cases also the relaxation of the self-deception—as may happen, for example, in the course of psychotherapy—has a dual result. The recovery of the individual's actual feelings is accompanied by the emergence of a clearer picture of the object of those feelings. The man who disapproves of his relationship and thinks he wants to end it begins, perhaps, to recognize the reasons he does not do so. At the same time that he becomes aware of his actual feelings, he draws a clear picture of the object of those feelings. The polarity of a real self and a real external figure emerges from a vague, anxiety-driven, and tendentious construction that had mainly expressed his disapproval of himself.

Self-deceptive statements and constructions are not judgments of reality; they are actions done for the effect on the self of doing them. Sometimes this is made particularly clear: a man who is involved in a difficult contest declares, with an effort at conviction, "I'm going to win! I know it!" The listener remarks that he sounds more determined than convinced. The man is surprised, initially displeased but then amused. He says, "I say it to myself all day. Like a mantra."

A mantra is no false belief. It is something altogether different, a different kind of thinking, from belief. It is, therefore, not remarkable that the two, mantra and belief, can exist in the same mind—but not side by side, not both accessible to awareness at the same time.

Coercion

The kind of self-deception I have considered so far is driven by individual anxieties. Its content is determined by the nature of those anxieties. There is also a kind of self-deception that is enforced by external threat or coercion: the confessions produced by Chinese "thought reform" or Soviet-style show-trials; the "recovery" of doubtful "traumatic memories" at therapeutic insistence or the "remembering" under duress of criminal acts never committed; the admission by the bullied wife of deficiencies which are none too clear to her. Where there is coercion, mere submission, the decision to give them what they want, does not require explanation. For that matter, a new viewpoint, a new conviction, may not require explanation either; people change their minds. But these are not cases either of submission in the ordinary sense or of new beliefs; they are, again, another form of thinking, another frame of mind altogether.

In all these cases, I believe, the objective relation to external reality, the normal attitude of judgment, is suspended or disabled, at least within the relevant area, in some cases consciously so. Sometimes a suspension of critical judgment or "rational thinking" is explicitly required. For example, in a widely publicized case of alleged sexual abuse of children, one of the accused, under intense pressure to remember and confess, was instructed to "not try to think about anything" (Wright, 1994).[2]

Probably more often, the normal attitude of judgment is simply inhibited and disabled in the face of coercion. In any case, it appears that the various forms of coercive "thought control" or "brainwashing" do not operate in a direct and simple manner, but rather through a mediating process of loss of the normal interest in reality, the normal attitude of judgment. Existing ideas cannot be directly expunged from the mind and new ones simply inserted; these things cannot be accomplished by coercion. But the disabling or inhibition of

active judgment apparently can. What one knows, one knows and there is no way to not know. But knowing the answers is not enough if there are ways to prohibit asking oneself the questions.

The evidence is strong that the subject of coercion never does come to believe in the ordinary sense that he did what he did not do. But he can be brought to the point where he is unable to sustain disbelief. To be more exact, he cannot sustain the capacity to consider the matter, to believe or disbelieve. The bullied and intimidated wife does not dare even to look at her angry husband. Much less can she consider what he is saying and, perhaps more to the point, what he is doing, clearly. From her standpoint, merely to consider him, to look at him objectively, is an act of brazen defiance. In these circumstances, only acceptance and agreement can dispel anxiety. It therefore happens that the coerced subject joins the coercive effort. The intimidated wife finally reminds herself of her supposed failings, perhaps even of failings that are not entirely clear to her.

In much the same way, the accused sex offender cited previously finally agreed that he remembered the acts he had initially denied. It was noted by a detective present at the time, however, that the language of his confession was filled with "would've"s and "must have"s. At the conclusion of his confession, the accused man said: "Boy, it's almost like I'm making it up, but I'm not." Another of the accused, in the same case, also recovered "memories" of acts she had initially been unable to remember. She remarked that this memory was, however, "different" from her "normal memory."

The experience seems to be identical to that reported by Lifton (1963) of subjects of Chinese "thought reform": One such person says: "You begin to believe all this, but it is a special kind of belief . . . " Lifton speaks in this connection of a "surrender of personal autonomy" and describes its mental state as one of "neither sleep nor wakefulness, but rather an in-between hypnogogic state." He notes also the peculiar

manner of speech of those still influenced by their "reform" experience. He describes his subjects as "speaking only in cliches, "parroting . . . stock phrases," and such. It is clearly not a conversational manner of speech, speech aimed at communication with the listener. It is ritualistic speech.

A diminished sense of personal autonomy or agency as well as some loss of an objective relation to external reality are aspects of all psychopathology (Shapiro, 1989). These are general effects of "defense" processes, restrictive processes which diminish self-awareness and in that way forestall anxiety. In the case of psychopathology, defense processes are triggered by internally generated anxiety. The rather generalized and enduring kinds of self-deception that we see in psychopathology are expressions of these processes. So, for that matter, are the more transient self-deceptions of essentially normal people. It seems that these same defense reactions are activated also by anxiety whose source is external. In other words, coercion and external threat engage the characteristic dynamics of the individual. One might say that the sorts of self-deception that appear in these circumstances constitute a kind of situational psychopathology. If all this is so, we should be able to identify in these cases the same psychological processes that we observe in psychiatrically familiar psychopathology. I believe we can do this.

For example, certain neurotic individuals, usually described psychiatrically by the old-fashioned term "hysterical," are characterized by a much diminished sense of personal authority. For reasons that are not difficult to understand, they are predominantly women (Lakoff, 1977). They carry very little weight with themselves and for that reason are easily intimidated. They often feel and act somewhat childlike. Their locutions tend to be vague, full of "sort of"s and "ish" suffixes, and their voice is sometimes artificially soft. In particular, these people seem to shrink from independent judgment or serious, deliberate opinion. They are known to be highly suggestible, easily influenced ("Everybody says . . . ," "He says . . . "). Their

thinking and their ideas are often described as superficial or "shallow" and inconstant, highly colored by the mood or circumstance of the moment. In short, their beliefs seem not to be deeply believed.

At the same time, it should be noted that this style is never completely consistent, even in the most extreme cases. The vaguest, most impressionable, and seemingly childlike individuals will from time to time show themselves to be capable of acute judgments and sharp, quite definite opinions, and when these are uttered, it is invariably in a stronger and more genuine voice. In general, however, an attitude of considered judgment—not necessarily the judgment itself, but the attitude that it embodies—is clearly discomforting.

My point is simply that a passive, uncritical state of mind is a familiar anxiety-forestalling defense reaction. It is the state of mind that exists in a more or less stabilized form in hysterical character, and it appears to be the state of mind we find in cases of "recovered memory." Among its features in either context is a readiness to defer to authoritative opinion, to accept ideas, eventually to "believe" them. One could characterize both these conditions, also, as involving a "surrender of autonomy," although in the hysterical case of comparatively moderate degree.

Other defense processes familiar from psychopathology are also discernible in some coerced confessions. I referred earlier to the efforts by rigid, compulsive people not only to do, but also to think and even feel what they "should" think and feel. The weight of authoritative, usually moralistic rules or "shoulds" can be oppressive, of course, but the only security for the person who lives with such rules lies in obedience, and that obedience is sometimes carried to extremes. This, too, might be considered a "surrender of autonomy." It is a life that resembles that of a rigidly dutiful soldier, for whom independent judgment is suspended in favor of a literal adherence to regulations. Accordingly, these people are well-known in psychiatry for their tendency to arrive at

conclusions which are "logical" but unrealistic to the point of absurdity. Their speech is full of far-fetched "must be"s and "might be"s (the tiny red spot on the pizza "might be" blood, it "might" have come from an infected handler . . .).

It is quite clear that these ideas, once again, are not matters of conviction or belief; they are not judgments of reality in the ordinary sense. Certain aspects of reality must be sought out and extreme constructions made of them in order to forestall the possibility of negligence. These constructions are not believed, but they cannot be dismissed or even admittedly doubted without great anxiety. They are typically stated not as certainties, but as serious possibilities. Such statements, like the precautionary acts that may accompany them, are ritualistic acts done for the effect on the self of doing them.

I believe that the processes I have just described operate also to produce the "confessions" that are a common outcome of the Soviet-style political show-trials. I do not mean merely that these are similar or analagous processes, but that they are the same. The anxiety or terror of the situation can be dispelled only by the suspension of interest in reality and the acceptance of, even conscientious participation in, the accuser's "logic." The resulting confession is, again, a ritual.

Artur London, who describes the conditions ("You must trust the party. Let it guide you.") that led to his confession of political crimes in Czechoslovakia in his book "The Confession" (London, 1971), says: "It was no longer a matter of facts or truth, but merely of formulations, a world of scholastics and religious heresies." London's wife, who eventually accepted her husband's guilt, says: "It was not possible for me to be right and the party wrong." In other words, she did not dare but to suspend judgment.

Limits of Self-Deception

Some writers have argued that the capacity for self-deception is, after all, adaptive: man must have his illusions.

They are thinking, I assume, of so-called "positive illusions," illusory hopes, which sometimes, like placebos, contribute to their own fulfillment. I think those benefits of self-deception are small and would not weigh much against its costs. No matter; it is an unavoidable byproduct of a capacity which is of enormous adaptive advantage, namely, self-awareness.

The dynamics of self-awareness complicates our relationship with the external world. Anxiety, or rather the reflexive inhibitions that forestall anxiety, turn our interest in reality to self-centered and reassuring ends. It is true that there are limits to self-deception in the specific sense that it is never completely successful. It does not achieve complete conviction; genuine belief remains present, only for the time being out of reach. And, in fact, coerced self-deception evidently does dissipate when coercion ceases. But the case of self-deception driven by internal anxieties is different. It can be momentary or it can last a lifetime, and no one is qualified to recognize it in himself, much less correct it. No one is really abreast of himself. The one who is conscious of his humility cannot at that moment recognize his self-congratulations. For that sort of thing, we have to rely on some help from our friends, and they cannot even count on our gratitude.

Notes

[1] The distinction I am making is essentially the same as the one Fingarette (1969) makes between thoughts that are "spelled out" and those not, and the distinction Bach (1981) makes between "thinking" and "believing" something.

[2] I am told that methods of induction of hypnotic trance also commonly include the request to avoid critical thoughts.

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