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More on Self-Deception: Reply to Hellman

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In his recent critique of my account of self-deception,¹ Nathan Hellman² seems content with my resolution of the paradoxes of self-deception but charges that I have “either ignored or skillfully downplayed” certain deeper problems (113). He finds me “oblivious” (120) to certain counterexamples to my analysis but graciously allows that I do “not seem to be completely opaque” (117) to the puzzles that remain. In this reply I wish to answer his two main objections and show that my analysis can handle his alleged counterexamples. I cheerfully concede that puzzles still remain. However, they are not specific to self-deception but are raised by various psychological phenomena. This makes them no less puzzling, but since they are pervasive it is unreasonable to expect them to be addressed by an account of self-deception in particular.

Details aside, the main idea of my account is that self-deception is not a matter of getting oneself to believe the opposite of a proposition p one believes or has patently strong evidence for but is something weaker than that: avoiding the thought that p , at least on a sustained or recurrent basis.³ I claim for this account not only that it takes the paradox out of self-deception but also that it does justice to the dynamics of the phenomenon. For

the occasion for deceiving oneself arises only insofar as the touchy subject is thought of, and so if the person believed that p (while desiring that not- p) but it never occurred to him that p , he would have no occasion to deceive himself. (354)

¹ Kent Bach, “An Analysis of Self-Deception,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 41 (March 1981): 351-70. All page references are to this paper, except those that are obviously to Hellman’s.

² Nathan Hellman, “Bach on Self-Deception,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 44 (September 1983): 113-20.

³ The reason for this qualification is that self-deception can be successful even if there is fleeting, occasional awareness that p .

I identify three ways of accomplishing this: *evasion*, *jamming*, and *rationalization*. Whereas evasion keeps the nasty thought from occurring, the other two disarm the thought when it does occur, jamming by covering it up and rationalization by explaining it away. Self-deception is a state sustained by these processes; it is not to be identified with any of those processes, each of which can occur outside the service of self-deception.

The two objections

Hellman seems to appreciate at least some of the virtues I claim for my approach, but he registers two general objections. First, focussing on the sorts of propositions about oneself that are most suited for self-deception, Hellman finds it “puzzling that one could think that not- p on a sustained, recurrent basis” (117) if he possesses considerable evidence for p . Hellman’s puzzle suffers from a misplaced “not.” My view, which he quotes verbatim, requires not that the self-deceiver think that not- p on a sustained, recurrent basis but that he not think that p on a sustained or recurrent basis. No wonder, then, that Hellman wrongly takes me to regard self-deception as “essentially a matter of what occurs to one” (115), when in fact I view it as a matter of what does *not* occur to one.

Further, in regard to cases of what Hellman calls “well-entrenched belief” (116) and “strong knowledge” (120), to which I am “apparently oblivious,” we should be very careful how we specify what the self-deception is about. Take the case of a person who wishes that he were intelligent but knows full well that he is not. His self-deception might be not that he is intelligent but that he cares about being intelligent. Some of Hellman’s examples that are supposed to make trouble for my analysis seem to be of this sort, where the proposition the self-deception is about is misidentified.

Hellman’s second main objection concerns my evident refusal to pursue certain questions raised by my notion of motivation about the nature of psychological causation. I rely on this notion both to exclude irrelevant causes of a person’s avoiding a thought and to argue that self-deception is not intentional even though motivated (if it were intentional, it would be paradoxical). Hellman alleges that according to me, “Psychological processes are supposed to be philosophically unproblematical” (117). I try to legitimize my notion of motivation by mentioning various phenomena besides self-deception in which it seems to operate. I give examples like attention-getting, malingering, and compulsive action, where a person acts from unavowed motivations, but I do not try to unravel the mysteries of the psychological causation operative here. This does not mean I find it philosophically unproblematical. Consider modern causal theories of such notions as perception, action, and refer-

ence. These theories appeal to the concept of causation, but their proponents do not thereby imply that the notion of causation is not philosophically problematical. An analysis can make philosophical progress even if it appeals to a philosophically problematical notion.

The two purported counterexamples

Hellman's first counterexample is the case of "negative self-deception," in which "the self-deceiver manages to convince himself, against the evidence . . . , of something that he does *not* desire to be the case" (118; my italics). This is illustrated by one Jack, who is self-deceived that he is not intelligent but desires to be intelligent.⁴ However, the fact that Jack has this desire does not mean that he does not also desire not to be intelligent. Hellman is either committing another logical error or is mistakenly assuming that one cannot have conflicting desires. These are not only possible but quite common. Hellman does not fill in the details of his example, but surely there must be something that motivates Jack's self-deception. Perhaps he is afraid of failure and wants to have a ready excuse should he fail. Maybe he is embarrassed in the company of his anti-intellectual buddies. Perhaps he feels guilty about not respecting his wife's ideas. Any of these emotions might lead him to desire not to be intelligent and to deceive himself accordingly, even though, for other reasons, he desires to be intelligent. And, as I note in regard to the motivating desire mentioned in my analysis, "it should be kept in mind that an emotion might underlie that desire and therefore be the fundamental motivating factor" (362).

Hellman's second counterexample is directed against viewing self-deception as always concerned with a particular proposition. He does not deny that self-deception is always propositional but is suggesting that it might not be "'about' a particular proposition, but rather a system or cluster of propositions" (119). My account does not exclude cases of this sort. Indeed, I note that "rationalization about a particular proposition can lead to rationalization about other[s]" (360), and I could well have made the same point about self-deception itself. At any rate, Hellman considers the case of Martha, who desires not to be ugly, and supposes that her self-deception

might consist in her disposition to [accept] propositions like this: "Oh, that dress does not do too much for Doris," "I need not worry about my appearance," etc. In order to deceive herself, it is sufficient that Martha act as if she were attractive; she may well know that she is not

⁴ Hellman again misrepresents my position as implying that Jack "has self-deceived himself into . . . repeatedly thinking that he is not intelligent" (118). Rather, Jack has deceived himself into not repeatedly (or sustainedly) thinking that he is intelligent.

attractive, and need not even lapse into temporary dispositions [to think] that she is attractive. (119)

This example poses no problem for my view. As I point out, jamming can involve “acting as if not-*p* were the case” (361). And Hellman again misrepresents my view when he suggests that it implies that to be self-deceived that she is not ugly, Martha must have some disposition to think that she is attractive. Again, my view implies only that she not think (on a sustained or recurrent basis) that she is ugly.

All in all, Hellman’s objections and counterexamples miss their mark. At best, they show that there are some cases of self-deception that have features not mentioned in my analysis. These cases may be of special philosophical or psychological interest, but Hellman has given no reason why their distinctive features deserve special mention in an analysis designed to capture the essential features of self-deception generally. What Hellman ridicules as “the narrowness of Bach’s approach” is really its intended generality. Of course self-deception about a given proposition is likely to be part of a larger psychological fabric, often including self-deception about a whole range of propositions. It may be aided and abetted by (and in turn aid and abet) feelings of guilt, obsessive fears, compulsive inhibitions, a sense of inferiority, or what have you. An analysis of self-deception cannot be sensitive to the psychological subtleties and complexities of every individual case, but there is no reason to expect it to be.