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On Political Culpability: The Unconscious?

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In the post-truth age where Trump’s presidency looms large because of its irresponsible conduct, domestically and abroad, it’s refreshing to have another helping in the epistemic buffet of well-meaning philosophical texts. What can academics do? How can they help, if at all?

Anna Elisabetta Galeotti, in her *Political Self-Deception* (2018), is convinced that her (analytic) philosophical approach to political self-deception (SD) is crucial for three reasons. First, because of the importance of conceptual clarity about the topic, second, because of how one can attribute responsibility to those engaged in SD, and third, in order to identify circumstances that are conducive to SD. (6-7)

For her, “SD is the distortion of reality against the available evidence and according to one’s wishes.” (1) The distortion, according to Galeotti, is motivated by wishful thinking, the kind that licenses someone to ignore facts or distort them in a fashion suitable to one’s (political) needs and interests. The question of “one’s wishes,” may they be conscious or not, remains open.

What Is Deception?

Galeotti surveys the different views of deception that “range from the realist position, holding that deception, secrecy, and manipulation are intrinsic to politics, to the ‘dirty hands’ position, justifying certain political lies under well-defined circumstances, to the deontological stance denouncing political deception as a serious pathology of democratic systems.” (2)

But she follows none of these views; instead, her contribution to the philosophical and psychological debates over deception, lies, self-deception, and mistakes is to argue that “political deception might partly be induced unintentionally by SD” and that it is also sometimes “the by-product of government officials’ (honest) mistakes.” (2) The consequences, though, of SD can be monumental since “the deception of the public goes hand in hand with faulty decision,” (3) and those eventually affect the country.

Her three examples are President Kennedy and Cuba (Ch. 4), President Johnson and Vietnam (Ch. 5), and President Bush and Iraq (Ch. 6). In all cases, the devastating consequences of “political deception” (and for Galeotti it is based on SD) were obviously due to “faulty” decision making processes. Why else would presidents end up in untenable political binds? Who would deliberately make mistakes whose political and human price is high?

Why Self-Deception?

So, why SD? What is it about self-deception, especially the unintended kind presented here, that differentiates it from garden variety deceptions and mistakes? Galeotti’s preference for SD is explained in this way: SD “enables the analyst to account for (a) why the decision was bad, given that it was grounded on self-deceptive, hence false beliefs; (b) why the beliefs

were not just false but self-serving, as in the result of the motivated processing of data; and (c) why the people were deceived, as the by-product of the leaders' SD." (4)

But how would one know that a "bad" decision is "grounded on self-decepti[on] rather than on false information given by intelligence agents, for example, who were misled by local informants who in turn were misinformed by others, deliberately or innocently? With this question in mind, "false belief" can be based on false information, false interpretation of true information, wishful thinking, unconscious self-destructive streak, or SD.

In short, one's SD can be either externally or internally induced, and in each case, there are multiple explanations that could be deployed. Why stick with SD? What is the attraction it holds for analytical purposes?

Different answers are given to these questions at different times. In one case, Galeotti suggests the following:

"Only self-deceptive beliefs are, however, false by definition, being counterevidential [sic], prompted by an emotional reaction to data that contradicts one's desires. If this is the specific nature of SD . . . then self-deceptive beliefs are distinctly dangerous, for no false belief can ground a wise decision." (5)

In this answer, Galeotti claims that an "emotional reaction" to "one's desires" is what characterizes SD and makes it "dangerous." It is unclear why this is more dangerous a ground for false beliefs than a deliberate deceptive scheme that is self-serving; likewise, how does one truly know one's true desires? Perhaps the logician is at a loss to counter emotive reaction with cold deduction, or perhaps there is a presumption here that logical and empirical arguments are by definition open to critiques but emotions are immune to such strategies, and therefore analytic philosophy is superior to other methods of analysis.

Defending Your Own Beliefs

If the first argument for seeing SD as an emotional "reaction" that conflicts with "one's desires" is a form of self-defense, the second argument is more focused on the threat of the evidence one wishes to ignore or subvert. In Galeotti's words: SD is:

"the unintended outcome of intentional steps of the agent. . . according to my invisible hand model, SD is the emotionally loaded response of a subject confronting threatening evidence relative to some crucial wish that P. . . Unable to counteract the threat, the subject . . . become prey to cognitive biases. . . unintentionally com[ing] to believe that P which is false." (79; 234ff)

To be clear, the "invisible hand" model invoked here is related to the infamous one associated with Adam Smith and his unregulated markets where order is maintained, fairness upheld, and freedom of choice guaranteed. Just like Smith, Galeotti appeals to individual agents, in her case the political leaders, as if SD *happens* to them, as if their conduct leads to "unintended outcome."

But the whole point of SD is to ward off the threat of unwelcomed evidence so that some intention is always afoot. Since agents undertake “intentional steps,” is it unreasonable for them to anticipate the consequences of their conduct? Are they still unconscious of their “cognitive biases” and their management of their reactions?

Galeotti confronts this question head on when she says: “This work is confined to analyzing the working of SD in crucial instances of governmental decision making and to drawing the normative implications related both to responsibility ascription and to devising prophylactic measures.” (14) So, the moral dimension, the question of responsibility does come into play here, unlike the neoliberal argument that pretends to follow Smith’s model of invisible hand but ends with no one being responsible for any exogenous liabilities to the environment, for example.

Moreover, Galeotti’s most intriguing claim is that her approach is intertwined with a strategic hope for “prophylactic measures” to ensure dangerous consequences are not repeated. She believes this could be achieved by paying close attention to “(a) the typical circumstances in which SD may take place; (b) the ability of external observers to identify other people’s SD, a strategy of precommitment [sic] can be devised. Precommitment is a precautionary strategy, aimed at creating constraints to prevent people from falling prey to SD.” (5)

But this strategy, as promising as it sounds, has a weakness: if people could be prevented from “falling prey to SD,” then SD is preventable or at least it seems to be less of an emotional threat than earlier suggested. In other words, either humans cannot help themselves from falling prey to SD or they can; if they cannot, then highlighting SD’s danger is important; if they can, then the ubiquity of SD is no threat at all as simply pointing out their SD would make them realize how to overcome it.

A Limited Hypothesis

Perhaps one clue to Galeotti’s own self-doubt (or perhaps it is a form of self-deception as well) is in the following statement: “my interpretation is a purely speculative hypothesis, as I will never be in the position to prove that SD was the case.” (82) If this is the case, why bother with SD at all? For Galeotti, the advantage of using SD as *the* “analytic tool” with which to view political conduct and policy decisions is twofold: allowing “proper attribution of responsibility to self-deceivers” and “the possibility of preventive measures against SD” (234)

In her concluding chapter, she offers a caveat, even a self-critique that undermines the very use of SD as an analytic tool (no self-doubt or self-deception here, after all): “Usually, the circumstances of political decision making, when momentous foreign policy choices are at issue, are blurred and confused both epistemically and motivationally.

Sorting out simple miscalculations from genuine uncertainty, and dishonesty and duplicity from SD is often a difficult task, for, as I have shown when analyzing the cases, all these elements are present and entangled.” (240) So, SD is one of many relevant variables, but

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being both emotional and in one's subconscious, it remains opaque at best, and unidentifiable at worst.

In case you are confused about SD and one's ability to isolate it as an explanatory model with which to approach post-hoc bad political choices with grave consequences, this statement might help clarify the usefulness of SD: "if SD is to play its role as a fundamental explanation, as I contend, it cannot be conceived of as deceiving oneself, but it must be understood as an unintended outcome of mental steps elsewhere directed." (240)

So, logically speaking, SD (self-deception) is not "deceiving oneself." So, what is it? What are "mental steps elsewhere directed"? Of course, it is quite true, as Galeotti says that "if lessons are to be learned from past failures, the question of SD must in any case be raised. . . Political SD is a collective product" which is even more difficult to analyze (given its "opacity") and so how would responsibility be attributed? (244-5)

Perhaps what is missing from this careful analysis is a cold calculation of who is responsible for what and under what circumstances, regardless of SD or any other kind of subconscious desires. Would a psychoanalyst help usher such an analysis?

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References

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