**On Self-deceit**

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**Abstract:** There lies a paradox in self-deceit, where one acts as the deceiver, knowing the facts, but at the same time, as the deceived, not knowing it. Psychoanalysis avoids the paradox through the unconscious mechanisms; Existentialists, however, by declining the unconscious, avoid the paradox because, in order to cover the truth, one surely knows it. The article, by testifying that the deceiver’s self and the deceived’s self are one and the same, uncovers self-deceit in Rousseau’s sincere confession because he separates the agent-self and the confessor-self, while both are the same self. The article further explores self-deceit as a pretense based on Austin’s philosophy. The pretense cannot be seen, but can be detected through understanding its context. The article concludes that psychology should understand the paradox of self-deceiver as a way of self-integrity within a hermeneutic insight.

**Keywords:** Self-deceit; Deceiver’s paradox; Bad faith; Sincerity; Pretense; The self

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**1. Introduction**

Is self-deceit possible? Speaking of self-deceit, people all remember Aesop’s Fox who desired grapes. The grapes are too high for the fox to reach. Then the fox reinterprets its failure by claiming—these grapes are too sour, and it does not want to eat them [1]. Here comes a question: when the fox denies its desire for grapes, that is, how can the reader tell whether the fox is deceiving itself or simply pretending.

Self-deceit implies a paradox. How can we simultaneously act as both the deceiver, aware of the truth, and the deceived, unaware of it? It means that there exist dual selves—an active self that deceives and a passive self that is deceived [2]. Psychologists assume that self-deceit works on Freudian mechanisms of the unconscious, where the self that deceives, along with the concealed truth, remains in the unconscious, and the deceived self stays unaware in the conscious.

Assuming a person is a visitor in psychoanalysis. The analyst declares that the person has not accepted his interpretation. The person told him frankly, “I have really accepted your analysis.” He scrutinizes the person, just like he has penetrated their defenses, “No, you are deceiving yourself. You haven’t accepted my analysis. That’s clear. It’s just that you are not aware of it.” What he says makes the person feel uncertain. So the person reflects on themself cautiously and really believes that the person does accept his damn analysis. But this only further confirms his assertion, “There! Precisely! It proves that you are totally immersed in self-deceit. That is why you are completely unaware of the truth that you have rejected my analysis!”

Explaining self-deceit based on the hypothesis of the unconscious, according to the fictional dialogue above, will lead to a paradox, as demonstrated by Liu Chang, where claiming the absence of self-deceit turns into evidence of its presence, and admitting self-deceit may contradictorily show its absence [3]. It brings people to the core nature of self-deceit, which, as Sartre describes it, is a perpetual threat against sincerity, yet one that self-deceit mimics sincerity to itself [4].

**2. Self-deceit as bad faith**

Sartre explains self-deceit as bad faith—the inauthentic modality of being-in-the-world. He rejects Freud’s unconscious, arguing that bad faith (self-deceit) operates in a state of fully transparent awareness [5]. Since the deceiver and the deceived are one and the same person, it means that the self, as the deceiver, should know the truth concealed from itself when being deceived. More precisely, one must know the truth clearly in order to conceal it more carefully. However, Sartre has not proved the premise—the deceiver and the deceived are one and the same person. They need to prove how the deceiver and the deceived can know that they are the same “I” in self-deceit.

Suppose a driver accidentally kills a child. He feels very sad every time he reflects on the incident [6]. It requires, in his self-reflection, dual selves—one that reflects and the other being reflected, and which one is feeling sad? It is the reflector, not the reflectee, feeling sad, which proves Sartre’s premise. More clearly, I can know the reflector and the reflectee are the same “I”, because I, as the reflector, can feel sad when reflecting on some sad things.

The driver is buried by grief and is deeply depressed. Friends take turns to console him, “It wasn’t fully your fault. It rained heavily that day. The kid came out of nowhere. It might be fate, and think about your children and parents, they need you...” If the driver was easily persuaded by such comforting words, attributing the accident to external conditions or something like fate, and abandoning his own grief, he would fall into bad faith in Sartre’s sense. “Hell is other people” means that through kind persuasion, others take away one’s own pain beyond words [7]. The more one cures, the more bad faith there is.

Byung-Chul Han argues that Sartre’s bad faith implies heroism, maybe leading to an oppression of positive psychotherapy. Under the guise of “be yourself”, it creates deeper anxiety or guiltiness [8]. It forces people to deeply delve into the dark side of the mind, attempting to eliminate the darkness—secrets, negative thoughts, crazy feelings, and so on. As Hannah Arendt observes, the darkness is the very nature of the mind, a needed part to shape human experience [9].

**3. Sincerity as the opposite of self-deceit**

The investigation of the self originates in the thoughts of Augustine and Rousseau. The self, for ancient Greeks, referred to agents who act in the world. Understanding “know thyself” is to know the world; the Greeks desire for the knowledge of their place in the world. The topics in the Platonic dialogues go around the soul, the universe, humanity, and the polis, not around themselves like private lives. In contrast, Augustine’s *Confessions* is about himself, where he introspects about all his wrong thoughts and the way he corrects them. In this way, the self becomes an inner realm separate from the external world. Through introspection, the self, purified by Augustine, would not fall into the dilemma of truth and falsehood, for it has been reconciled with God’s order/love.

Rousseau also shows numerous faults he commits in his *Confessions*. He writes in the preface—“Let the trumpet of the Day of Judgment sound when it will, I will present myself before the Sovereign Judge with this book in my hand. … I have told the good and the bad with equal frankness. I have neither omitted anything bad, nor interpolated anything good. … I have unveiled my inmost self even as Thou hast seen it, O Eternal Being. Gather round me the countless host of my fellow-men; let them hear my confessions, lament for my unworthiness, and blush for my imperfections.” Then let each of them in turn reveal, with the same frankness, the secrets of his heart at the foot of the Throne, and say, if he dare, “I was better than that man?” [10].

Through admitting mistakes before God, Rousseau shows inner sincerity. In this way, he proves that he is the best person in the world. In contrast, Augustine never thinks he is better than anyone else, and he does not, like Rousseau, try to persuade God to look and see if he is the best. If God says—“Stop rambling! Just tell me what you did”, I guess Rousseau’s response would be—“I admit all my sins, so I am the best one. I never concealed the truth from my inner self, so you can see my sincerity.” Here comes an interpretative gap between God’s self and Rousseau’s self—one as an agent and the other as a feeler. Rousseau, as an agent, is so dishonest, yet as a feeler, is so sincere.

The sincerity of the inner self by Rousseau complicates the understanding of self-deceit. Based on the established language usage, words like lying, theft, and robbery are referred to as untruthful behaviors in a negative way, and accordingly, those who carry out such actions mentioned above are not considered honest persons. Although the word— sincere—is usually referred to a positive relationship between people, Rousseau enlarges its connotations by referring to the inner feelings during self-introspection. From Rousseau’s perspective, self-introspection can automatically encounter the true self, which is not true because we possess a mind. The more complex the mind, the harder it is to determine between what is deception, what is pretense, and what is the true self [11]. There is no such thing as pure feelings, isolated from behaviors and relations, and it is impossible to possess a purely sincere inner self, which is bad faith in the terms of existentialists.

**4. Self-deceit as pretense**

It is difficult to tell the boundary between self-deceit and pretense. Austin, an amazing Philosopher, comes to help us out of the situation with his essay on pretense. Sometimes, self-deceivers do not need to conceal the truth; instead, they may disguise it through pretense—by acting as if it were something else [12].

Consider a thief goes to a jewelry store, and here comes a policeman. The thief pretends to clean the glass rather than running or hiding. People can see a man who is cleaning, but cannot see his pretense, for understanding pretense demands a hermeneutic insight. Sherlock Holmes, for instance, can identify pretense since he is able to detect most of the contextual connections in the act of pretending. He always sees things from their most meaningful standpoints.

Then, how can people identify their own pretense? Here comes a Japanese novel named *Snowy Night* [13]. An old couple has lost their son, and put themselves in self-deceit for a long time to alleviate the pain of grief. They, in the way of self-deceit, struggle to accept their son’s death, keeping weave elaborate lies for each other, and pretending that their son is still alive. In this way, they can piece their fragmented lives together. This story urges people to reinterpret “what is self-deceit” from the perspective of self-deceivers, and people recognize that self-deceit can serve as an approach to self-construction in exceptional situations [14].

Peopleare all self-deceivers when seeking self-realization—When Aesop’s fox declaims, “the grapes are sour”, it has not ignored the fact, but preserved self-integrity against the existential lack; When kids pretend the chairs are horses to each other during playing together, they are not self-deceivers, but self-constructers; When actors/actresses are immersed in the roles they are playing, forgetting who they really are, they do not deceive themselves, but achieving the true self; When a girl who has had plastic surgery watches herself in the mirror, imagining her beauty is natural, she is constructing a strong self to settle existential anxiety. In fact, people do not need to remember all life stories, like the embarrassing moments, to build their self-identity.

**5. Conclusion for future investigation**

When people use the sentence structure of “I know it is true, but I still act as if it is not true”, people are not concealing facts from themselves. People are trying to lead a meaningful life, although people live in a world shaped by facts. How can people still find implications in lives when the truth is brutal? This is the paradox belonging to the self-deceivers themselves, and psychology should understand it [15]. To what extent people understand this paradox is to that extent people understand self-deceit, and people also need to tell what truly concerns them when investigating self-deceit.

It is never a simple task, but a lifelong creative effort for people to maintain a balance between truth and implications [16]. To fully understand self-deceit, people may not require psychology to offer a final definition or a ready-made psychometric scale. People need to know more about “who I am” and “what should I do” [17]. It is not hard to know that the world is nothingness. The hard part lies in clarifying what people truly love—Is there anyone or anything in the world that people cannot let go of? If not, then it does not matter; but if so, then promise to do something for what people love. In this way, maybe there is no such thing as self-deceit.

**Disclosure statement**

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