

How reasonable it is to deceive yourself?

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Anyone who simply denies the facts is most certainly behaving unreasonably - aren't they? Bochum's philosophers Prof. Dr. Albert Newen and Christoph Michel expound that in some cases it may be useful to deceive yourself. The self-deception can be an important motivating factor and not entirely lacking reason. The reason may be locally restricted, however basic strategies of rational evaluation processes remain intact. The researchers have published their work in the international specialist journal *Consciousness & Cognition*.

Become as good as you think you are

Self-deception is a common everyday phenomenon. Someone who sees the facts, but refuses to admit them, is generally described as unreasonable - wrongly, say Prof. Newen and Christoph Michel. Because self-deception can be an important factor in keeping up motivation. For example: if someone is not very good at maths, but convinces himself he is, this false self image can provide important motivation to prepare intensively for a maths test. The hard facts on the other hand, for example, if his teacher tells him quite plainly that even if he works really hard he won't get more than a D+, would destroy his motivation.

Distortion of reality is damaging

Of course, self-deception can also lead to a massive distortion of reality. If a father e.g. puts his 16-year-old son's declining school marks down to his puberty and persuades himself that they will get better again by themselves, but ignores the fact that his son is skipping days of school,

coming home drunk every weekend and hiding alcohol in his room , the self-deception no longer has a positive effect. In this case, it leads to a distortion of reality, which becomes harmful for the self-deceiver who is interested in the welfare of his son.

Reason is locally restricted

"These two examples show that the answer to the question of whether self-deception is unreasonable is not as clear as it seems at first glance", says Prof. Newen. "Self-deception is not always unreasonable, but is an essential factor for stabilising motivation. Indeed, the strategy of self-deception is even mainly based on rational consideration processes which, however, no longer work in the usual way in relation to certain facts." The researchers therefore do not see the essence of self-deception at all as a breakdown of reason, but merely as its local failure in narrowly enclosed areas, whereby, however, basic strategies of rational evaluation processes remain intact.

Distinction from recent theories

The new theory of self-deception is clearly distinguished from those theories according to which self-deception only consists of my saying something other than I actually think (self-deception is neither just insincere speech nor a comment which is not to be taken seriously). Self-deception is, on the other hand, also not the same as one-sided beliefs caused by biased attention processes ("biased belief formation"): because the latter lead to certain obvious facts no longer being available to a person. They are not registered at all, while a self-deceiver registers the facts, but then "refuses to admit them". For this purpose, they are reinterpreted in the light of the viewpoint he is trying to safeguard, whereby pseudo-rational processes play a primary role.

More information: C. Michel and A. Newen, 2010, Self-deception as a pseudo-rational regulation of belief, *Consciousness and Cognition* 19, 731-744. [doi:10.1016/j.concog.2010.06.019](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2010.06.019)

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