Self-deception and Selectivity: Reply to Jurjako

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Marko Jurjako's article "Self-deception and the selectivity problem" (Jurjako 2013) offers a very interesting discussion of intentionalist approaches to self-deception and in particular the selectivity objection to anti-intentionalism raised in Bermúdez 1997 and 2000. This note responds to Jurjako's claim that intentionalist models of self-deception face their own version of the selectivity problem, offering an account of how intentions are formed that can explain the selectivity of self-deception, even in the "common or garden" cases that Jurjako emphasizes.

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I originally proposed the selectivity problem in Bermúdez 1997, 1999, and 2000 as an argument for intentionalist, as opposed to anti-intentionalist or deflationary, approaches to self-deception. Intentionalists claim that intrapersonal self-deception effectively mirrors interpersonal deception. In both cases the (self-) deceiver intentionally brings it about that the (self-)deceived person acquires a belief, or other propositional attitude. Just as the interpersonal deceiver intends to bring it about that his victim acquires a particular belief, so to does the intrapersonal self-deceiver intend to bring it about that he himself acquire a particular belief.

In opposition to intentionalism, anti-intentionalists such as Al Mele argue that self-deceiving belief acquisition can be explained solely in terms of motivational bias and similar mechanisms, without assuming any intention to acquire a belief (Mele 1997, 2001, 2012). In his 1997 account, for example, Mele proposes the following four jointly sufficient conditions for S to acquire a belief through self-deception.

1) The belief that p acquires is false
2) S treats data seemingly relevant to the truth of p in a motivationally biased way.

3)   This biased treatment non-deviantly causes S to come to believe that *p*

4)   The evidence that S possesses provides greater warrant for ~*p* than for *p*.

The selectivity problem is directed in particular at components (2) and (3) of this account. My objection is that the anti-intentionalist does not have the resources to explain why motivational bias should be brought to bear in some cases and not in others:

> Self-deception is paradigmatically selective. Any explanation of a given instance of self-deception will need to explain why motivational bias occurred in *that* particular situation. But the desire that *p* should be the case is insufficient to motivate cognitive bias in favor of the belief that *p*. There are all sorts of situations in which, however strongly we desire it to be the case that *p*, we are not in any way biased in favor of the belief that *p*. How are we to distinguish those from situations in which our desires result in motivational bias? I will call this the selectivity problem (Bermúdez 2000: 317)

Only intentionalist models of self-deception can solve the selectivity problem, I claim. In order for a self-deceiver to come to believe that *p* there must be not simply a desire that *p* be the case, coupled with various biased mechanisms of belief formation, but also an intention to believe that *p*.

Jurjako raises the very interesting objection that intentionalist models face their own version of the selectivity problem. He starts with the plausible assumption that intentions are formed for reasons, typically beliefs and desires.

> So, in order to explain why in this particular instance self-deception occurred, we need to invoke a desire and a belief. But now we can ask why in this particular situation a desire that *p* be the case caused an intention to believe that *p* is the case? As Bermúdez noted, we have all kinds of desires that, nevertheless strong, do not cause us to believe that *p* is the case; similarly we can say that we have different strong desires to believe that *p* be the case (or that we believe that *p* is the case), that nevertheless do not cause an intention to believe that *p*. So in this way we can raise the selectivity problem against the intentionalist account. Namely, we can raise the question why in this *particular* situation the desire that *p* be the case (or to believe that *p*) caused an intention to believe that *p* is the case since, according to Bermúdez, in all kinds of situations, no matter how strongly we desire that *p* be the case it does not cause us to believe that *p* is the case. (Jurjako 2013: 155)

Jurjako proposes two options that an intentionalist can take to resolve this new version of the selectivity problem. The first option is to assume that self-deceptive intentions emerge "by sheer chance" from the reasons that precede the intention.[1] The second option is to suppose

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[1] Actually, Jurjako refers to "intentions to self-deceive", but intentionalists about self-deception are certainly not committed to holding that a self-deceptive intention is always an intention to deceive oneself. I can (self-deceptively) intend to bring it about that I believe that *p* without intending to deceive myself. For further analysis of how to understand self-deceptive intentions see Bermúdez 2000.

that self-deceptive intentions result from a conscious decision. According to Jurjako, intentionalists are caught on the horns of a dilemma here. The first option is highly implausible and in any case does not provide a satisfying answer to the selectivity problem. The second option, on the other hand, does resolve the selectivity problem, but over-intellectualizes what is going on in self-deception in a way that makes it inapplicable to common or garden varieties of self-deception.

I completely agree with Jurjako that the first option is a non-starter and will say no more about it. I also agree with him that intentions are not determined by standing beliefs and desires. Intentionalist models of self-deception could not possibly work unless forming an intention is in some sense an autonomous mental act. In that respect intentionalist models are committed to something like the commonsense view of the progress from thought to action sketched out by David Wiggins at the beginning of his paper "Weakness of will, commensurability, and the objects of desire" (Wiggins 1978). According to this commonsense view, "we need autonomous and mutually irreducible notions of believing, desiring, deciding *that*, deciding *to*, intending" (Wiggins 1978/9: 244). A similar view of the autonomy of intention is defended in Holton 2009.

Both Holton and Wiggins primarily analyze intentions that result from choice, where choice typically results from a process of deliberative practical reasoning. Again, I agree with Jurjako that it is not helpful to see typical examples of common or garden self-deception as the result of deliberative practical reasoning. But we can escape from the dilemma that he poses for intentionalist approaches to self-deception by recognizing other ways of thinking about how intentions are formed. Deliberative and reflective choice is one end of a spectrum, rather than the only game in town.

As standardly understood, intentions lead straight to action (modulo weakness of will), which is why they bridge the gap between beliefs, desires, and other propositional attitudes, on the one hand, and action on the other. But of course this immediately raises the question of how the gap is bridged between propositional attitudes and intentions. The canonical model, going at least as far back as the Aristotelian practical syllogism, sees intentions as resulting from means-end reasoning about how best to satisfy desires (taking "desire" broadly enough to include what Aristotle would have called the apparent good). But there are some important passages where Aristotle appears to recognize that even as an idealization the deliberative model often fails to apply. Looking at those passages points towards an alternative that helps make better sense of self-deception.

In an illuminating passage in Book VI of the *Nichomachean Ethics* Aristotle discusses the distinctive character of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and what distinguishes it from intelligence (*nous*). He writes:

> That practical wisdom is not knowledge is evident; for it is, as has been said, concerned with the ultimate particular fact, since the thing to be done is of

> this nature. It is opposed, then, to comprehension; for comprehension is of the definitions, for which no reason can be given, while practical wisdom is concerned with the ultimate particular, which is the object not of knowledge but of perception—not the perception of qualities peculiar to one sense but a perception akin to that by which we perceive that the particular figure before us is a triangle.[2]

The key idea here is that practical wisdom involves perception. How one acts is, in the last analysis, a function of how one *sees* things.

One way of understanding what is going on here emerges when we recall the basic form of the Aristotelian practical syllogism, which contains both a major premise and a minor premise. The major premise is typically portrayed in a way that aligns it with belief. In *De Motu Animalium* Aristotle gives the example: All men ought to walk. The minor premise, though, typically comes across differently. The minor premise is how a general belief is seen to be applicable to *this* particular situation. Here is another important passage from *De Anima*. Aristotle is considering the question (rather strange to modern ears) of whether the faculty of knowing moves or is at rest.

> The faculty of knowing is never moved but remains at rest. Since the one premise or judgment is universal and the other deals with the particular (for the first tells us that such and such a kind of man should do such and such a kind of act, and the second that this is an act of the kind meant, and I a person of the type intended), it is the latter opinion that really originates movement, not the universal; or rather it is both, but the one does so while it remains in a state more like rest, while the other partakes in movement.[3]

The minor premise (dealing with the particular) is, to use the earlier phrase, what bridges the gap between beliefs, desires, and action. It is what allows me to see that the situation I am in is one to which *this general belief* or *this desire* is applicable.

Without getting into the question of how to reconcile Aristotle's various comments about action, choice, and deliberation,[4] it seems to me that there is an important insight in these two passages, pointing towards an alternative way of thinking about how intentions emerge. An intention to act in a certain way can come about because of how I interpret or understand the situation in which I find myself. To use a very non-Aristotelian term, intentions can result from *framing* a situation in a certain way. There are many different types of frame. Some are highly intellectualized. But many are not. Framing a situation can be as simple a matter as identifying which other situation it is most similar to, highlighting one feature over another, or finding an affective

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[2] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* Bk. VI 1142a23–1142a28, translated by W. D. Ross, revised by J. O. Urmson (in J. Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Vol. 1)

[3] Aristotle, *De Anima* Bk. III 433b17–433b21, translated by J. A. Smith (in J. Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Vol. 1).

[4] For helpful discussion and further references see Price 2008.

valence. Framing (and re-framing) a situation in a different way can often open up new possibilities for action.[5]

This way of thinking about intention and choice offers a way out of the dilemma Jurjako poses. The intentions that drive common or garden self-deception do not have to be viewed as emerging either randomly or from conscious acts of deliberative choice. Instead we can see them as emerging from how the self-deceiver frames the situation in which they find themselves. Of course, what is being framed in self-deception is not, as it were, the object of the self-deceiving belief. The spouse determinedly convinced of his spouse's fidelity despite all the evidence to the contrary may well be framing his spouse's behavior in all sorts of ways, but that is not what generates the self-deception (more likely, it is explained by the self-deception). What matters for self-deception is how the self-deceiver frames the situation in which he believes that his spouse is faithful. He might, for example, frame this as an act of trust and loyalty. Having a certain belief is part of the person that he wants to be, and it is because he sees things that way that he intentionally comes to form the self-deceptive belief. Here it seems correct to say both that the intention to form a certain belief is what ultimately explains his self-deception, and that the intention does not emerge from an over-intellectualized process of conscious choice.

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[5] For a very suggestive view of reasoning and choice from which I have learnt a lot see Schick 1991 and 1997. Schick talks about understandings rather than frames. The role of framing in reasoning is developed in more detail in Bermúdez (Forthcoming).