Self-deception as Affective Coping - An Emotional Approach

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People usually believe that they are good drivers, professors typically believe that they are well above average and seriously ill patients often believe that they will recover. As reality is less flattering, it appears that we deceive ourselves. How is this possible?

In the philosophical literature, the main issues concern the paradoxes of the state one is in when self-deceived and of the very process leading to it. Do self-deceived subjects entertain contradictory beliefs [1]? Do they only form the self-deceived belief [2]? Is self-deception intentional [1] or can we explain it without intentions [2]?

Despite these controversies, it is agreed that self-deception is motivated by protection from distress. Yet, surprisingly, few accounts take this idea and its affective dimension seriously. In this paper, we argue, with the help of findings from cognitive neuroscience and psychology, that self-deception is a mechanism of affective coping.

First, we show how affect is implicitly part of all philosophical accounts. Second, we present a model which recruits three appraisals of the distressful evidence: appraisal of the strength of evidence as uncertain [3], low coping potential and negative anticipation of one’s affective state along the same lines as Damasio’s somatic marker hypothesis [4, 5, 6]. At the same time, the desire motivating self-deception impacts the treatment of the flattering evidence via dopamine, as dopamine increases the anticipation of reward [7]. Our main proposal is that self deception involves emotional mechanisms similar to the ones described for decision making by provoke a preference for immediate reward. In conclusion, we use this model to disentangle the philosophical paradoxes with the help of emotions.