**Self-Deception as a Moral Failure**

Florence was a New York City socialite renowned for two things: her love of music and her complete lack of musicality. This lack of musicality was apparent to everyone, with the unfortunate exception of Florence. Indeed, Florence fancied herself to be an accomplished prima donna, and throughout the 1920’s, 30’s and 40’s, she was known to ‘treat’ select audiences of friends and admirers to her tuneless warbling in private recitals. Her career, if you could call it that, culminated in a public concert at Carnegie Hall, where her musical styling caused uproarious laughter and general pandemonium. Florence’s lack of self-awareness was not the result of simple moral ignorance. She was, in fact, an accomplished pianist who had a keen musical ear when it came to judging *other peoples’* performance. Rather, the historical record paints Florence as a self-deceiver who maintained her self-deception by surrounding herself with a chorus of flatterers, and by dismissing the awful reviews that occasionally appeared in papers following her recitals as nothing more than ‘professional jealousy’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This paper seeks to answer the following questions: what’s so bad about Florence Foster Jenkins’ self-deception? And in what sense, if any, can this badness be considered *moral badness*, rather than mere *epistemic badness*? In answering these questions, I’ll explain why we owe it to ourselves not to be self-deceived.

Traditionally, the badness of self-deception has been located in its connection to bad moral consequences. Bishop Joseph Butler, for instance, condemned self-deception as “a corruption of the whole moral character in its principle”[[2]](#footnote-2), while Adam Smith decried it as the “fatal weakness of all mankind” and “the source of half the disorders of human life”.[[3]](#footnote-3) These epithets are certainly apt descriptions of *some* self-deceivers—Nazi officials who insisted that they had no idea what was happening in the concentration camps, for instance—but they seem overblown and moralistic when applied to an ill-fated songstress whose self-deception never resulted in any great moral harms.

Still, I doubt I am alone in thinking that there is *something* undesirable about Florence’s self-deception, in spite of the fact that it caused no great moral harms. I imagine that most of us would strong prefer not to be Florences when it comes to our own life projects. Indeed, discoveries of our own self-deception often provoke moralized reactions like shame and self-reproach.

Instead of looking at self-deception’s inconsistent relationship to bad moral consequences to figure out what’s so morally bad about being self-deceived, I propose that we look instead at the content of our self-deceived beliefs. Self-deception does not strike at random, but instead infiltrates the very epistemic domains that we are most antecedently committed to getting right. Self-deception, I argue, bears a particularly tragic relationship to what we value—and it is this relationship, that is the key to understanding what’s so bad about being self-deceived.

I argue for this relationship as follows. In *Section I*, I establish **Claim 1**, which says that self-deception is evidence of, and motivated by what we value. In doing so, I adopt a pluralistic account of valuing, where valuing involves doxastic attitudes, emotional reactions, actions, and commitments. The various components that make up valuing can come apart; for instance, the values that we doxastically and affectively endorse may not be the values that we come to embody in our actions and commitments. Self-deception, I argue, often gets its foothold in the gap between ‘endorsed’ and ‘embodied values’.

In *Section II*, I argue for **Claim 2**, which says that self-deception is something that we, as valuers, are under rational pressure to want to avoid. The argument for this second claim proceeds as follows:

**Premise 1**: Self-deception leads us to disrespect and distort the values that motivate it in a way

that prevents us from properly valuing those values.

**Premise 2:** Valuing something entails a rational commitment to properly valuing it.

**Conclusion**: Therefore, valuing something entails a rational commitment to not being self-

deceived about it.

The conclusion of this argument gets us to a broad rational commitment. Self-deception is incompatible with valuing, and as such is a rational failure for valuers such as ourselves. But I want to go further than this. Specifically, I want to establish **Claim 3**, which holds that self-deception is a distinctly *moralized failure* that we owe it to ourselves to seek to avoid.

To make this final claim, I argue in *Section III* that we, as valuers, have a *prima facie* obligation to take seriously our values by (among other things) striving to abide by our commitment to proper valuing. We have this commitment even in the case of non-moral values, insofar as they are values that we as valuers have endorsed. Insofar as self-deception undermines that commitment, it is something that we as valuers owe it to ourselves to try to avoid.

This explains why we have a moral reason to avoid self-deception even in ‘non-moral’ cases like Florence’s. Self-deceivers ostensibly a contradiction: their self-deception is evidence that they both affirm: (1) that X is worth valuing, and thus properly valuing and (2) that X isn’t worth properly valuing. But they haven’t willed any old contradiction—they’ve willed a contradiction that relates to the very sort of topic that they, as valuers, have antecedently committed to taking seriously. In failing to honor this commitment, they’ve fallen short of what they owe to themselves as valuers. For this reason, self-deception is a moral—and not just epistemic—failure.

1. Darryl W. Bullock, *Florence! Foster!! Jenkins!!!: The Life of the World’s Worst Opera Singer* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bishop Joseph Butler. Sermon X “Upon Self-Deceit” p. 120 (1860, republished 1993 Virginia: Lincoln-Rembrandt Publishing). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759, republished 1790), part III, Ch. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)