Self-Deception, Strategic Self-Distrust, and Oppression

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# Introduction

Self-deception can be a distinctly tragic epistemic state. On the one hand, it can speak directly to what we care most about. If you’re self-deceived about how good of a parent you are, or about how well your career is going, or about how enjoyable your friends find your company, then your self-deception is testament to the fact that you care about being a good parent, having a successful career, and being well-liked by your friends. But at the same time that self-deception can reflect what we value, it can also undermine the values that it reflects. Self-deception can keep us from realizing that we’re falling short, and thus prevent us from making the changes that we need to genuinely have the good traits we already believe ourselves to have.

I have argued elsewhere that we can owe it to ourselves to avoid self-deception.[[1]](#endnote-2) But this is no easy task: the very nature of self-deception makes it hard to identify and hard to overcome. In this paper, I will explore one potential strategy for overcoming self-deception, which I call ‘strategic self-distrust’. When we strategically self-distrust, we take up an attitude of suspicion towards ourselves with regards to the conclusions we have drawn within a particular epistemic domain.

I think that strategic self-distrust can often help us combat our tendency towards self-deception, but that it is also a risky epistemic gambit, especially for people living under conditions of oppression. Thus, I will argue in this paper that people who are oppressed will often find themselves in a particular double bind when it comes to potential self-deception: while they may owe it to themselves as persons to engage in strategic self-distrust in order to avoid self-deception, they may also have strong moral and epistemic reasons as oppressed persons to hold fast to their current self-conception, even if that self-conception may be self-deceived. One of the harms of oppression, then, is that it frustrates peoples’ ability to take up critical attitudes that can help us overcome self-deception.

My paper unfolds as follows. In Section 1, I offer an ‘ideal theory’ explanation why people in general have an obligation to try to avoid self-deception and why strategic self-distrust can be a potential strategy for fulfilling this obligation. In Section 2, I will provide a ‘non-ideal theory’ story about why strategic self-distrust is a particularly risky epistemic gambit for people experiencing oppression. Given this, oppressed people may sometimes have both moral and epistemic reasons to refuse to reevaluate positive self-conceptions. These competing moral considerations represent a double bind. If one is oppressed, then strategic self-distrust will simultaneously be an attitude that they at times have moral reason to take up with regards to themselves, and also an attitude that self-respect demands they avoid.

Before I get started, let me give you a sketch of a case that I will return to throughout the paper. Imagine that a woman named Sandra is struggling to make progress on her dissertation. The topic that she has chosen is very large and poorly defined, and her committee has cautioned her against it repeatedly. To make the situation even more dire, Sandra is in an academic field that is extremely competitive, and she will be graduating into a market that is oversaturated with new PhDs. So far, Sandra’s research has not resulted in any of the CV lines that often help people get jobs; she doesn’t have publications, and she has continually struggled to get her work accepted at conferences. Despite this, Sandra remains optimistic (most would say, *too optimistic*) about her prospects of finishing her dissertation before her funding runs out and landing an academic job. Her committee has repeatedly tried to move her towards a more circumscribed project, and they have communicated to her their worries about her research trajectory. Nevertheless, Sandra has repeatedly dismissed their suggestions and concerns, and has remained committed to her initial dissertation project. She has reason to be wary of their criticisms: Sandra is a Black woman in a predominantly white and male field, and she suspects that her committee members might be biased in a way that is leading them to underestimate her talents and career prospects. Nevertheless, Sandra also has reason to take seriously her committees’ criticisms: all three of her committee members have a track record of placing students in desirable academic jobs, two work squarely in her research area, and many students (including students of color) have reported having positive experiences working with them.

It is important to this case that there is a genuine question about whether Sandra is self-deceived. Her committee worries that she is; Sandra is confident that she isn’t. Sandra has some evidence to debunk her committee’s evaluation, but the evidence isn’t conclusive—after all, the committee could be biased against her *and* it could still be the case that her project is unviable and her career prospects are slim. This sort of ambiguity is not uncommon in cases of self-deception: often, the question of whether someone is self-deceived is a question that cannot be definitively answered either first- or third-personally.

# Section 1: The Obligation to Resist Self-Deception

Let’s start with the ‘ideal theory’ answer to the question of what we ought to do to overcome our potential self-deceptions. By ‘ideal theory’, I mean to be offering an answer that abstracts away from contingent social circumstances and that articulates a broad moral obligation.

We can best tease out this ‘ideal theory’ answer by focusing specifically on Sandra and by putting the question in terms of reasons: what sort of reason does Sandra, as a potentially self-deceived person, have to overcome her possible self-deception?

Sandra, as I’ve suggested above, values succeeding in academia. Her self-deception is evidence of that: if she truly didn’t care about academic success, she probably wouldn’t mind the fact that her committee was concerned about her project and her chances of success. Perhaps she would even take their criticisms as permission to leave her program and do something else. Now, it is certainly clear that she has prudential reasons to be concerned about being self-deceived—self-deception, after all, often (though not always) makes us prudentially worse-off. But I want to say that she also has moral reasons to avoid being self-deceived.

Why think that Sandra has a moral reason to avoid self-deception? Here, I’m going to tell a story about what it means to value, and what it means to be a valuer. According to this story, human beings are fundamentally *valuers*. We are not simply automata propelled through life by whatever desire happens to be strongest. Instead, we make judgments about what values to endorse and to embody throughout our lives, and we set ends in the service of those judgments.[[2]](#endnote-3)

That valuing is, or at least can be, a reflective process involving judgment and discretion helps to explain why respecting one’s values can so often feel like a moral matter. This feeling isn’t mistaken. Respecting ourselves as agents often is a matter of respecting the values that we have chosen to endorse and embody. To motivate this thought, just imagine someone who perpetually gives into social pressure to sacrifice her values. Perhaps this person really loves living in a city, but moves to the suburbs because her overbearing parents think it’s safer. Perhaps she wants to become a doctor, but chooses to go into accounting because her partner doesn’t like the idea of her working long hours at a hospital. Or perhaps she’s always wanted purple hair, but she keeps her hair an ashy blond because she’s worried about what her traditional relatives might think. Individually, no failure of valuing is a huge sacrifice of self-respect. Collectively, however, these failures form a picture of someone who cannot take herself seriously as a valuer. By constantly sacrificing her own values in order to placate or impress others, this person expresses something about how she sees those values (as less important than the values of others), and also about how she sees herself as a valuer (as less competent or authoritative than other valuers).

The values that we build our life around, then, are not simply pragmatically relevant to how well that life goes. Instead, they’re morally relevant: when we take them seriously, we also take ourselves seriously. What exactly does it mean to take one’s values seriously? This is going to be hard to answer in the abstract: what counts as ‘properly valuing’ a specific object of value value will generally be highly contextual. Properly valuing one’s career looks different than properly valuing the beauty of the natural world. Proper valuing will also be relative to the particular ends that we’ve set with regard to our value. Even if two people both value art, one might value it by volunteering at an arts and crafts hour at a local nursing home, and the other might value it by doing a fine arts degree.

Nevertheless, I think that for anything that we can value, and for any way that we can value it, there will be better and worse ways of valuing it. And I think that, in general, being self-deceived about our values, or being self-deceived about ourselves relative to our values, will be one of the worse ways. This is because, as I will explain below, self-deception does not strike at random, but rather infiltrates the very epistemic domains that implicate our values. Insofar as we have moral reason to take seriously what we value, we have moral reason to be especially concerned with the epistemic failing that is self-deception.

Why think that self-deception frustrates our ability to value? For starters, self-deception often makes us bad practical reasoners. The self-deceived person will struggle to make appropriate judgments about what ends to set and about how to pursue those ends once she has set them. If Sandra is indeed self-deceived about the viability of her research project, for instance, then her self-deception will prevent her from making the changes to the project that need to be made in order for it to actually be fruitful. This prudential consideration becomes a moral reason when we appreciate the connection between valuing ourselves and valuing our values.

There is also a deeper, constitutive tension between self-deception and proper valuing. Specifically, I think that properly valuing something involves a commitment to seeing it clearly. That is, if we value something, we should want to *know it* and know how we’re stacking up relative to it. This commitment need not be endless; I can value my friend without wanting to know everything about their dating life, for instance. Nevertheless, a complete indifference to whether or not one actually knows what one purports to value suggests a lack of valuing. I might say that I value our friendship, but if I loathe spending time with you and have not even a passing interest in the details of your life, then you would have reason to doubt my declaration.

At the same time that self-deception can frustrate our ability to properly value, so too is it an epistemic failing that often speaks directly to what our values are. This is no accident. Rather, the very process of valuing something often makes us prone to being self-deceived towards it. There are several reasons for this. First, when we value something, we often set goals for ourselves with regards to it, and feel emotionally invested in achieving those goals. But sometimes life (and our own psychological and physiological limits) gets in the way. We might really value the idea of becoming a runner, but struggle to actually enjoy our five mile runs. Self-deception can bridge the gap between the values that we want to instantiate and the extent to which we’ve actually instantiated them.

Other features of valuing also help to explain why we are often so prone to becoming self-deceived about the things we care about most. Consider the sorts of attitudes that make up valuing. Valuing something, for instance, often involves being emotionally vulnerable to it: this makes negative truths about it (or about our relation to it) especially painful to countenance. Similarly, valuing something usually involves some degree of optimism bias towards it—we see the good in our values, and we ignore (or reinterpret) the bad. That we often have an unduly rosy picture with regard to our values can bias our evidence gathering in relation to them. We might be prone, for instance, to dismissing the testimony of people who don’t share our values.

As the above discussion demonstrates, self-deception is not simply one epistemic shortcoming among many. Instead, it is an epistemic shortcoming that impinges directly upon our ability to value, and thus on ourselves as valuers. This gives us a distinctly *moral* reason to strive to overcome our self-deception. Further, since self-deception often rids us of a vantage point from which to recognize it, this reason will extend to cases in which there is genuine uncertainty about whether we’re self-deceived. In the case motivating this chapter, it just isn’t certain whether Sandra is self-deceived; her committee thinks she is, but she would insist that she’s not. On the ideal picture, we need not settle the question of whether someone is self-deceived in order to think that they have a reason to try to counteract their potential self-deception. The mere potentiality, coupled with the importance of the implicated epistemic domain, is enough.

How should we respond to potential self-deceptions? I want to suggest that, within epistemic domains that are vulnerable to self-deception (i.e. epistemic domains that implicate oru values), it is often rational for us to take up an attitude of strategic self-distrust.

When we strategically self-distrust, we take up an attitude of suspicion towards the judgments that we are inclined to make within a well-defined epistemic domain. Strategic self-distrust thus does not by itself imply disbelief, in much the same way that being suspicious that a student plagiarized need not imply that one has formed a belief about whether or not they have indeed plagiarized.[[3]](#endnote-4) Rather, strategic self-distrust implies a skepticism towards one’s initial conclusions, coupled with a commitment to seriously generating and entertaining alternative viewpoints and explanations, including those that run contrary to our preferred interpretation. This skepticism is well-founded: if we know that we’re reasoning within a valuing domain, we know that we’re reasoning within a domain in which we may be prone to self-deception.

Here’s how Sandra might take up an attitude of strategic self-distrust. Suppose Sandra recognizes that she greatly values the prospect of being an academic: she’s dedicated years of her life to her field, and she feels anxious and depressed at the thought of leaving. And suppose she knows that she should take seriously the fact that she values this prospect; it’s not one life ambition among many, it’s *her* life’s ambition. Finally, suppose Sandra also recognizes that insofar as ‘being an academic’ is one of her values, she may be prone to self-deceptions relating to it. This follows from the sort of thing valuing *is*: valuing something just makes us vulnerable to being self-deceived about it.[[4]](#endnote-5)

Once Sandra recognizes this live possibility, she has a choice to make. She can continue to assume that she’s not self-deceived, or she can entertain the possibility that she may be self-deceived and act accordingly. Given that valuing generally involves a commitment to proper valuing, I think that the latter choice is often the one that valuing demands we make.

Suppose Sandra does indeed make this choice. What happens next? This is where strategic self-distrust comes in. Specifically, Sandra can adopt this attitude towards the beliefs that she’s formed in connection to the implicated value. This attitude would lead her to distrust her judgments about, say, the value of her dissertation project and the extent to which she’s made good use of professional opportunities.

What might this distrust look like? For one, it will involve a willingness to treat with suspicion any reasonable evidence that confirms (or seems to confirm) one’s preferred interpretation.[[5]](#endnote-6) Suppose Sandra takes the fact that nobody in her PhD program has attempted a project as ambitious as hers in recent years as evidence that she’s chosen a promising dissertation topic. If she adopts an attitude of strategic self-distrust, she’ll push back on this interpretation. Sure, Sandra might see the project as ambitious, but how might other people see it? Perhaps it’s just *large*, or perhaps it only appears ambitious because she hasn’t done the necessary background research to see that it’s actually covering well-trodden ground. Sandra might also question the connection that she’s drawn between ambition and success. She could, for instance, look at dissertations in her field that have been successful in the past—were they ambitious in the way her dissertation is ambitious? Or were they more circumscribed? She could also think critically about the steps it will take her to finish this ambitious project. Does she know what these steps are? Does she have the time and resources to take them? What potential pitfalls might she encounter? Finally, Sandra could interrogate her reasons for dismissing her committee’s feedback. She suspects that their feedback might be influenced by biases against her. Are there alternative explanations that hold any weight? And even if there aren’t, does this rule out the possibility that her committee is both biased and right?

Strategic self-distrust, then, does not require Sandra to adopt an overly critical or cynical attitude towards herself. It does not, for instance, require her to distrust her capacities as an epistemic reasoner. After all, the potential problem that she has identified isn’t with her capacity to form epistemic judgments *in general*, but rather with her capacity within a certain self-deception-prone epistemic domain. Instead, strategic self-deception requires her to critically engage with her assumptions and resist the urge to conclude that her initial interpretation of her project is the only reasonable one available to her. In this way, Sandra will treat herself in much the way that a cognitive behavioral therapist treats a patient prone to catastrophizing or to black-and-white thinking. The therapist may help the patient investigate the assumptions that they’ve made and the alternative explanations they’ve ignored, thus helping them overcome their tendency to assume that their initial worst-case-scenario interpretation is the only plausible interpretation available.

Note also that Sandra need not perpetually distrust herself in order to take herself and her values seriously. Such an obligation would be self-defeating: Sandra would never be able to make progress on *any* dissertation topic if she were perpetually suspicious of her judgments about it. Nevertheless, the process of valuing invariably presents us with clear opportunities for strategic self-distrust. The more we engage with one of our values, the more opportunity we have to question whether it is as valuable as we think it is, and to interrogate how we’re faring with regards to it. The person who takes their values seriously, in turn, is someone who doesn’t shy away from these opportunities for strategic self-distrust. And so, Sandra might choose to strategically distrust herself after receiving some truly devastating feedback on an early chapter draft, or when she sees that her peers are pursuing projects that look very different in scope from her own. But she need not (and perhaps should not) distrust herself when she’s presenting her research to a search committee or when she’s in the middle of a productive twelve-hour writing binge. And once Sandra has selectively distrusted herself, she should be willing to stick with whatever judgment she’s formed from that process—at least until another natural opportunity for strategic self-distrust presents itself.

Strategic self-distrust is not a silver bullet. For instance, it is always possible that Sandra will be self-deceived about the extent to which she has succeeded in adopting this attitude. It’s also possible that Sandra will be self-deceived about what beliefs are relevant to her value, thus leading her to employ strategic self-distrust incompletely within the relevant epistemic domain. Finally, Sandra may be self-deceived about the extent to which she actually values what she values—she might, as a defensive mechanism, be in denial about just how much she really cares about becoming an academic. Likewise, she might be in denial about the reasons that she cares about academic success: does she care about it because she actually wants to be an academic, or just because she hates to fail at things? That strategic self-distrust does not offer a guaranteed cure is unsurprising; when it comes to self-deception, all we have are better and worse heuristics with which to guard against it. But I think that strategic self-distrust is one of the better heuristics, insofar as it both reminds us that we always have available to us multiple vantage points from which to view our values and ourselves as valuers, and reinforces our commitment to getting our values right.

# Section 2: The Non-Ideal Answer

In a fully ideal world, perhaps we would all be perfectly transparent to ourselves, and there would be no self-deception for Sandra to overcome. In a slightly less ideal, but still heavily idealized world, Sandra might be self-deceived—but strategic self-distrust will offer a helpful heuristic through which she could productively strive to overcome her self-deception. In our actual world, it may be unreasonable for Sandra to take up an attitude of strategic self-distrust. In this section, I will provide a ‘non-ideal theory’ outline of the reasons Sandra has to avoid strategic self-distrust.

To start sketching this outline, consider first what reasons people generally have for thinking that they’re self-deceived. As I’ve argued previously, valuing something often predisposes us to be self-deceived about it for a variety of reasons. It makes us emotionally vulnerable to harsh truths about our values and leads us to see our values (and ourselves in relation to those values) through rose-colored glasses. Thus, insofar as we are valuers who ought to care about ‘getting things right’ with regard to our values, and insofar as valuing something can lead us to self-deception, we have at least some reason to be concerned that we might be self-deceived about any one of our values. This reason gets stronger depending on what the value is: if it’s a value that’s central to our self-conception or upon which a significant portion of our wellbeing hangs, then we will have a fairly strong reason to be concerned about potential self-deceptions with regards to it.

The reason that I’m describing here is a very general reason—it doesn’t appeal to any facts about a particular type of value or a particular agent. And I’ve already suggested that this reason can be outweighed by competing prudential concerns, e.g., we may sometimes have a prudential reason to *just go for it* and not worry about whether we’re self-deceived. But in addition to being potentially outweighed by competing prudential concern, our reason to suspect self-deception within epistemic domains that implicate our values can also be outweighed by competing epistemic reasons. For instance, if an agent has very good evidence that they’re not self-deceived (perhaps because their self-perception is being well-corroborated by the world, or because they’ve just undergone a process of strategic self-distrust), then that reason could outweigh the reason they have to be concerned about self-deception within epistemic domains that implicate our values.

I want to suggest that oppression supplies its victims with one such epistemic reason. Specifically, the realities of oppression make it the case that, for many situations in which an agent may reasonably judge that she is self-deceived relative to a body of evidence, there is a non-self-deceptive, counter-interpretation of the evidence that appeals to facts about that oppression.

Let’s take a look at this counter-interpretation. There is a wealth of evidence that suggests that women and people of color are commonly perceived as less brilliant than their white male counterparts.[[6]](#endnote-7) Men are also generally perceived as being more creative[[7]](#endnote-8) than their female counterparts, with this perception being found to occur across cultures.[[8]](#endnote-9) These assumptions can have tangible impacts on success in higher education: for instance, faculty may be prone to rate application material higher when they perceive it to have come from a male student rather than a female student.[[9]](#endnote-10)

To complicate matters further, Sandra may recognize that her committee’s conception of what a fruitful research project looks like is likely itself colored by the biases described above. Contingent social norms influence what sorts of projects will strike us as interesting, novel, and worthwhile, and not everyone gets an equal voice in the establishment of academic social norms. Dominant social groups typically have an outsized impact on the creation and maintenance of these norms.[[10]](#endnote-11) Perhaps Sandra’s committee only finds her project unpromising because it fails to ascribe to norms that she herself has not had a role in shaping.

Could these considerations explain (or at least partially explain) Sandra’s committee’s belief that her work lacks novelty and promise? This is a difficult question to answer in any particular circumstance. Abstracting across cases, however, it’s hard to deny that gender- and race-based biases have an impact on academic performance and feelings of belonging in academia.[[11]](#endnote-12) And what matters to the present issue isn’t whether Sandra can be *certain* of the veracity of this alternative explanation, but merely whether she can be confident that it is a plausible explanation. Given the strength of the evidence, I think that she can be. This means that so long as Sandra recognizes herself to be a victim of oppression, she has a reason to resist distrusting herself.

To be sure, this epistemic reason is defeasible. Perhaps there is good evidence that Sandra’s committee is not biased against her. Further, even if her committee *does* have these biases, it could *still* be the case that her dissertation project is misguided. Given this, one might think that this epistemic reason will rarely trump the moral reason sketched in the previous section, and that insofar as Sandra values her academic career, she ought to engage in strategic distrust *even if* she recognizes that there is another plausible explanation for her committee’s opinion of her that appeals to facts about her oppression. After all, the stakes are high: it’s her research career that’s on the line. Insofar as she cares about herself and her life projects, she should do what she can to ensure that those projects are set up to succeed—and this will likely involve being on the guard for self-deception even in cases where one has reason to discount other peoples’ contradictory opinions.

If Sandra only had this epistemic reason to resist strategic self-distrust, then I agree that it will often be trumped by the moral reasons in favor of resisting self-deception. But I think that there are moral reasons against strategic self-distrust at play as well. Specifically, people experiencing oppression may often have to be their own champions, as they know from experience that other people won’t step up to play that role. This sort of self-championing may be beneficial globally, even if it turns out to be a bad gambit in specific cases. And so, it may turn out to be the case that Sandra will benefit from refusing to capitulate to her naysayers in more instances than not, even if this proves to be a bad strategy in the case of her dissertation. Further, this sort of self-championing may feel like a matter of self-respect; by standing up for herself and sticking to her guns, Sandra is asserting that she deserves to be taken seriously. Finally, by acquiescing to her committee’s view of her project, Sandra might feel that she is reinforcing the negative stereotypes that they likely have about Black women in their field.

Given these considerations, Sandra might feel that she owes it to herself and her professional aspirations to trust herself, to ignore her committee members, and to go full speed ahead on her research project.

# Conclusion: Oppression, Self-Distrust, and Double Binds

What should Sandra do? Should she distrust her judgments about her potential for success in academia? Or should she dismiss her critics and keep plugging away at her dissertation project? I want to suggest that self-respect supplies Sandra with a reason to take both paths. When it comes to self-deception and strategic self-distrust, oppression places Sandra in a genuine double bind. Strategic self-distrust may help her make progress on her projects, but it also risks undermining her self-respect. Steadfast self-trust, meanwhile, might be a globally epistemically less risky attitude for Sandra to take, but it cuts her off from potentially valuable insights into one of her life goals. Whatever path Sandra takes, she is undermining herself as an agent.[[12]](#endnote-13)

We often talk about oppression as denying its victims the opportunity to develop positively-valenced attitudes toward themselves. Oppression frustrates our ability to develop self-trust,[[13]](#endnote-14) self-esteem,[[14]](#endnote-15) and self-confidence.[[15]](#endnote-16) But oppression also frustrates our ability to respectfully take up critical attitudes towards ourselves insofar as it may make these attitudes morally costly and potentially epistemically unwarranted. This is a serious loss. Negatively valenced attitudes like strategic self-distrust are not always psychological pitfalls to be avoided at all cost, but are often rather valuable heuristics that we can take up towards ourselves in the service of respecting our values and understanding ourselves.

1. MacKenzie, 2022. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Bratman, 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. In this regard, I depart from several prominent accounts of self-distrust, e.g., Jones 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Note that Sandra can recognize that she has a potential for self-deception without actually thinking, or even suspecting, that she is indeed self-deceived. Rather, it is sufficient that she merely acknowledges that, insofar as the process of valuing something provides fertile soil in which self-deception may grow, it is a live possibility that she may be self-deceived about her own values. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Sandra’s self-deception might make it difficult for her to assess what evidence counts as ‘reasonable’. She might deny, for instance, that forms of evidence that disconfirm her preferred interpretation aren’t really evidence. Here, we might use something like an ‘impartial spectator’: a piece of information counts as ‘reasonable evidence’ towards a proposition if someone uninvested in the truth of that proposition would, upon being presented with that information, update their belief state about that proposition in accord with it. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. See, for example, Proudfoot et al., 2015. This is connected to the well-documented ‘Gender Brilliance Stereotype’, in which men are regularly perceived as more brilliant than their female counterparts. See, e.g., Bian et al., 2017; Leslie et al., 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Proudfoot et al., 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Hopp et. al., 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Moss-Racusin et al., 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. For discussions of this phenomenon in philosophy, see Davis 2021, Dotson 2012, and Dotson 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Ibid.; Deiglmayr et. al., 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Hirji, 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. El Kassar, 2021; McLeod et al., 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Cudd, 2006, p. 176-78 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Stark, 2019.

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