

# SUMMER SESSION SYLLABUS:

## WHAT MAKES US HUMAN — SELF-DECEPTION

### BENOSSI LIS

#### COURSE INFORMATION

Philosophy Department, Stanford University.

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Office hours: weekly or by appointment.

#### OVERVIEW

Self-deception is a fascinating and universal human phenomenon—one that, as this class will argue, helps define the human experience. The ability to deceive ourselves depends on complex psychological, epistemic, and action-guiding mechanisms. Research on self-deception brings together insights from epistemology, psychology, cognitive science, and moral philosophy. Examples range from everyday procrastination and denial to more serious cases, such as ignoring signs of addiction or a failing relationship. Works of literature and film also play an important role in helping us recognize and reflect on self-deceptive behavior.

#### DESCRIPTION

This course explores what self-deception is, why it matters, and how it shapes our lives. We will draw on recent research in epistemology, psychology, cognitive science, and moral philosophy to understand one of the most puzzling features of human thought: our ability to believe what we *know* or should believe isn't true.

We all self-deceive at times. We promise ourselves that *tomorrow* we'll finally start exercising or finish our homework; we insist that a painful rejection is really the other person's loss; we ignore signs that someone close to us is growing distant. Such cases raise deep questions about how we understand ourselves and our own minds.

The course will be organized around four guiding questions:

1. *What is self-deception?* We begin by distinguishing self-deception from related but different phenomena such as wishful thinking, delusion, and confabulation. We'll examine the psychological and cognitive mechanisms involved—including distraction, avoidance, procrastination, and compartmentalization.
2. *Why do we self-deceive?* Drawing on evolutionary psychology, we'll explore possible functions of self-deception: how it might help us protect our confidence, carry out difficult tasks, or even deceive others more effectively.
3. *How do we self-deceive?* If self-deception is like lying to ourselves, how can that work? Don't we need to know the truth to hide it from ourselves? We'll analyze how philosophers have addressed this puzzle by rethinking our awareness of the truth and our intentions to deceive ourselves.
4. *Is self-deception always wrong?* Philosophers often treat self-deception as an epistemic or moral failure—that is, as believing against the evidence or as lying to oneself. We'll conclude by asking whether self-deception is always harmful, or whether it can sometimes be helpful or even necessary for human life.

#### LEARNING GOALS

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Identify and summarize key theories and debates about self-deception;

2. Understand how different disciplines (philosophy, psychology, cognitive science) study the same phenomenon;
3. Read and discuss philosophical and psychological texts;
4. Develop and present their own ideas clearly, both in writing and discussion;
5. Reflect on the role of self-deception in their own thinking and in human life more broadly.

### COURSEWORK AND GRADING

Learning will be assessed through the following components:

- weekly responses (30% of the final grade). Each week, submit a short (up to 200 words) discussion post on the week’s reading material. You could summarize one of the readings, ask a question, identify an ambiguity or challenge the reading.
- participation (40% of the final grade). Participate regularly and actively (10% of final grade). We will have three in-class debates (each 10% of final grade). During the in-class debates, you will be asked to collaborate with your classmates. You are encouraged to come prepared for the in-class debate: you can prepare a short speech, some notes, and you are encouraged to prepare with your classmates.
- final project (30%). By week 7, submit a short (up to 500 words) proposal for a final project. The proposal counts for 5% of your final grade. I will provide feedback and suggestions. The final project (worth 25% of the final grade) may be:
  - a summary and critical discussion of at least two accounts of self-deception (2000 words). You may focus on psychological, epistemic or moral analyses of self-deception.
  - an essay (2000 words) advancing your account of self-deception or some aspect of it.
  - an analysis of an example of self-deception in literature or movies. Discuss why it is a case of self-deception, how it fits under at least two accounts of self-deception discussed in class.
  - an artistic project inspired by our discussion of self-deception. It should be accompanied by a 1000 words description of your art project and how it responds, advances or integrates at least one account of self-deception we discussed.

To summarize, the grading scheme is as follows:

Weekly Reading Responses: ○ weekly discussion post (3.75% each)	30%
Participation: ○ participation (10%) ○ in-class debates (10% each)	40%
Final Project: ○ Proposal (5%) ○ Final Project (25%)	30 %

### PROVISIONAL SCHEDULE

Subject to revision, depending on your feedback!

Week & Topic	Reading	Weekly Assignments	Other Assignments

Week 1: Question 1: what is self-deception?	Question 1: What is self-deception? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>collection of core examples from the literature</li> </ul>	Weekly Responses	
	Self-deception between wishful thinking and delusion: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Self-Deception, Delusion and the Boundaries of Folk Psychology” Bortolotti &amp; Mamei (2012)</li> </ul>		
Week 2: Question 2: Why do we self-deceive?	Question 2: Why do we self-deceive? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“The what and why of self-deception” Chance &amp; Norton (2015)</li> </ul>	Weekly Responses	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“The evolution and psychology of self-deception” von Hippel &amp; Trivers (2011)</li> </ul> RECAP ACTIVITY: WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO EXPLAIN?		
Week 3: Question 3: How do we self-deceive?	The inner lie model: contradictory beliefs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Lying to oneself” Demos (1960, excerpts)</li> </ul>	Weekly Responses	
	The inner lie model: intention to deceive and rationalization <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Paradoxes of Irrationality” Davidson (2004, excerpts)</li> </ul>		
Week 4: Question 3: How do we self-deceive?	Revised inner lie: rationalization and self-deception <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Self-deception, Rationalization and Reasons for Action” Audi (1988, excerpts)</li> </ul>	Weekly Responses	In-Class Debate
	FIRST IN-CLASS DEBATE: IS SELF-DECEIVING JUST LIKE LYING?		
Week 5: Question 3: How do we self-deceive?	The motivated belief model: self-deception vis-à-vis wishful thinking and delusions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Self-deception and Delusions” Mele (2006)</li> </ul>	Weekly Responses	
	Motivated belief model: twisted self-deception <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“When are we self-deceived?” Mele (2012)</li> </ul>		
Week 6: Question 3: How do we self-deceive?	Self-deception & Attention: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Self-Deception Needs No Explaining” Fingarette (1998)</li> </ul>	Weekly Responses	In-Class Debate
	SECOND IN-CLASS DEBATE: WILL THE REAL SELF-DECEIVED PLEASE STAND UP?		

<p>Week 7: Question 4: Is self-deception always wrong?</p>	<p>The epistemic problem with self-deception: believing according to the evidence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The ethics of belief” Clifford (1877)</li> </ul> <hr/> <p>The moral problem with self-deception</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-Deception, Autonomy and Moral Constitution” Darwall (2009)</li> </ul>	<p>Weekly Responses</p>	
<p>Week 8: Question 4: Is self-deception always wrong?</p>	<p>Hold on, if self-deception can be useful, is it always wrong?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “User-Friendly Self-Deception” Rorty (2009)</li> </ul> <hr/> <p>Third In-class Debate: Self-Deception and Human Experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Love’s Knowledge” Nussbaum (1988) on self-deception and self-knowledge in Proust</li> </ul>	<p>Weekly Responses</p>	<p>Proposal for Final Project Due;</p> <p>In-Class Debate</p>
<p>Finals Week</p>			<p>Final Project Due</p>