

Book Review  
**The Philosophy of Deception**  
Clancy Martin  
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The release of WikiLeaks documents triggered a debate between two perspectives on truth and transparency. One side wanted to know what was happening. More importantly, they wanted the truth. This view was opposed by another insisting that secrets were necessary – transparency and truth would be destructive in the wrong hands – and that we did not need to know *everything*. After all, they reasoned, a little deception can be a good thing! And in this, there was a kernel of truth: we often find it comforting to forgo truth in order to find safety in our ignorance or in defense of threats to our worldview. Much of modern politics seems to rely on deception, intentional or not, intended to avoid confronting the supposed truths that sustain our world. The distinction between withholding and putting forward false information is blurred. It is commonplace to assume that we do not want to be deceived, but the WikiLeaks debate demonstrated plainly that the desire to end deception and find truth is hardly as clear – and desired – as it might seem. «We cannot imagine social intercourse without opacity» writes Robert C. Solomon in his chapter «Self, Deception, and Self-Deception in Philosophy,» which serves to introduce many of the areas of contention throughout the book (p. 21). Here *The Philosophy of Deception*, a highly diverse and strong collection of many of the leading thinkers on the philosophy of lying and deceit, intervenes.

As Clancy Martin explains in the introduction, «Lies and self-deceptions seem to exist along a continuum,» from the direct lie that is not self-deceived – We did not do *this* (even though we know we did) – to the other extreme, where one is entirely self-deceived – That is not why we're doing *this* (even though it is) – «and in the middle the many cases where the lies we tell others are inseparably mixed up with the lies we tell ourselves» (p. 3). *Philosophy of Deception* engages this idea thoroughly, and from varied perspectives: Mark A.

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Wrathall's phenomenological investigation into "perceptual deception" contrasts with Kelly Oliver's psychoanalytic examination of the possibility of an inherent self-deception in our existence. Even though the approaches differ, the narrative of the book is clear and gratifyingly cohesive for an edited collection.

The book aims to unite two fields: the study of lying and the study of self-deception. The book's thesis, as Martin argues, is that these two fields «which had been undertaken almost entirely independently, could both benefit from a sustained examination of the many traits they have in common, of the ways they work together, of similarities and differences in their structure, their practice, their ethics» (p. 4). Its overarching purpose, then, is to explore bonds between these two forms of inquiry and ask what syntheses might come out of this reading. The strongest point that the work makes is the importance of the analogy of deception and self-deception. For Martin, «[Mele's] understanding of self-deception can provide us with a more helpful analogy with deception» (p. 11). Why? Precisely because the most fruitful cases to investigate involve beliefs that are not as simple as believing "p and not-p." The analogy demonstrates that self-deception is much less about the attempt to trick oneself, than about a person being affected or motivated in a certain way that falls in line with his/her interests. It becomes a question of the confusing, tricky, vague ways that deception and self-deception manifest themselves because in these difficult situations, in «the way the mind actually works, [that] we are human» (p. 11).

*Philosophy of Deception* is divided into two halves. The first, which deals with "the *how* of deception," focuses on the role of deception in our lives; the second half, which takes a more theoretical direction and presentation, analyzes concepts like lying and self-deception. What makes *The Philosophy of Deception* work is the subtle way in which all of the pieces stand in dialogue with each other. Following Solomon's first chapter on how lying is in many ways a necessary part of social existence, Harry Frankfurt's chapter "On Truth, Lies, and Bullshit," the only previously published material in *Philosophy of Deception*, is enlightening particularly because of how he probes deeper into the way deception changes and alters interpersonal situations. To quote Frankfurt, a lie is damaging precisely because «It reveals that *our own nature* [...] is unreliable, having led us to count on someone we should not have trusted» (p. 40). In effect, then, lies make you feel "a little crazy" by rejecting a personal assumption of the ability to guide oneself through social situations

accurately. Frankfurt's claim that «Lies are designed to damage our grasp on reality, » contrasts with the assertion beginning Kelly Oliver's chapter "Duplicity Makes the Man, Or, Can Animals Lie?" that, «Insofar as unconscious forces drive us beyond our control and even beyond our knowledge, then we are all and always a bunch of liars» (p. 104). If this is the case, as Oliver goes on to investigate, the Lacanian understanding of "lying" can problematize the assumption that lying and deception are predominantly *human* behavior. From that examination of the unconscious, we can jump to a materialist investigation in Paul Ekman's wonderful chapter on "catching" lies through microexpressions. Ekman asks, if learning how to notice and catch lies is possible, why is it that we do not all do it? His conclusion is sobering: «Anyone who says there is an absolutely reliable sign of lying that is always present when someone lies and never present when someone is truthful is either misguided or a charlatan» (p. 133). There are a multitude of approaches here, from William Ian Miller's look at "who we root for" in the classical tales of tricksters – concluding that «It is not always clear» (p. 65) – to David Sherman's call to "remake the social world" through a new understanding of deception in relation to social being. The collection ends with Alfred Mele's "Have I Unmasked Self-Deception or Am I Self-Deceived" which introduces his notion of self-deception as motivationally biased belief acquisition and rebuffs some of his critics. This chapter makes a good end to the book particularly because it immerses the reader in a broad swath of the literature on self-deception while simultaneously leaving the question of deception open to further investigation.

To quote Amelie Rorty's chapter "User-Friendly Self-Deception: A Traveler's Manual," what *The Philosophy of Deception* does well is to «engage ourselves in the Stoic task of understanding the minute details of [self-deception's] operations» (p. 259). The central lesson in the book is a reminder of the risk for any philosopher of believing that any single theory can provide the absolute explanation of the nature of truth and lying. That, this book tells us, is just another form of self-deception. Rather than a feeling of theoretical schizophrenia which is always a risk of an edited volume – of course, our friends Hegel, Kant, and Plato show their faces frequently throughout adding a clear theoretical undercurrent – this collection succeeds in bringing a sustained investigation from multiple angles, cleverly self-referential, questioning, and continually searching. The obvious joke about a book about lying – that the truth about self-deception appears to be an oxymoron – seems

relevant here. Such an investigation into the meaning of deception, self-deception, and truth asks us to consider in our own lives both the power and the risk in investigating the truths – and, of course, the lies – large and small that we think and tell. An answer is not absolutely clear and it is doubtful that it will ever be, but *The Philosophy of Deception* should serve as a rallying point for scholars to continue in the quest to deepen our understanding of the intricate connections between deception and self-deception.