What is Political about Political Self-Deception?

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Abstract: In Political Self-Deception, Galeotti considers (and rebuts) two “realist” objections. Galeotti’s realist argues that there is no need for the overly complex concept of self-deception, since self-serving lies and manipulation are descriptively sufficient and normatively preferable; and that in any case, deception in democratic politics is sometimes justifiable. In response, Galeotti offers explanatory, moral, and normative reasons why self-deception is a helpful concept in international politics: it helps us better understand the political reality of deception, and guides us in how to avoid or mitigate it. In this comment, I wish to revisit the realist objections, and to provide a more nuanced and more robust version of them. In doing so, I will raise questions about the relationship between self-deception and the failure of political judgement, about the moral evaluation of deception in democratic politics, and about the normative implications of Galeotti’s analysis for political responsibility and for prophylactic measures.

Keywords: Foreign Policy; Political Judgement; Realism; Self-Deception

Introduction: Galeotti’s Realist and Realists for Real

Political Self Deception is a fascinating study with at least two important contributions. It is, in the first half of the book, a lucid introduction to the complex and specialized philosophical debates on the concept and paradoxes of self-deception, which advances its own distinctive conception; and in the second half, a meticulous application of this conception to international politics, vividly demonstrating how self-deception can occur, and how – potentially – we can stop it from occurring. As a political theorist without a dog in the philosophical fight, I will leave to others to comment on whether Galeotti’s conception of self-deception resolves the impasse between the intentionalisit and motivationalists. In this short commentary, I wish raise a different question: what is political about political self-deception? Is it simply the general conception of self-deception applied to political conduct, or is there something distinct about how self-deception occurs, and how it should be evaluated, in its political manifestation?

In exploring this question, I want to bring into play the figure of The Realist, a character which makes several critical appearances in the book. The Realist serves as a useful foil to Galeotti’s account in these appearances, and the reader is no doubt supposed to identify this cynical figure as

1 Comments: liorezz@gmail.com. Many thanks to Alasia Nuti and Gabriele Badano for the invitation to participate in this symposium, and to Richard Bellamy and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments.
the amoral, *Realpolitik* Machiavellian for what he is. Yet the realist tradition, as defended in recent contributions to political philosophy, presents a more sophisticated challenge. While engaging with this tradition may not have been one of Galeotti’s primary aims, I will contend that doing so illuminates several interesting questions about, and potential problems for, the place of political self-deception as an explanatory, moral, and normative concept. In this short commentary, I aim to tease out these tensions between self-deception and political judgement, the moral evaluation of deception in democratic politics, and the normative implications of Galeotti’s analysis.

I. Explanatory Usefulness: Self-Deception and Political Judgement

To set the scene, a brief introduction to contemporary political realism is in order. In recent years, several theorists and philosophers have developed a nuanced and sophisticated approach to political normativity, which offers a more robust version of the realist opponent than the one portrayed in *Political Self-Deception*. Risking over-simplification, this approach is a rejection of the idea that the normative standards of personal morality are applicable across contexts and practices, and more specifically, that political life is regulated by abstract, pre-political moral commitments. For realists, the political is characterized by conflict and disagreement, unequal power, and the inevitable presence of coercion and violence. The precise relationship between moral normativity and political normativity is contested even among self-described realists, but the gist of the position is that politics is a distinct practice, and that normative evaluations and prescriptions should arise from the particular features of this practice. For a political actor to be guided solely by the edicts of personal morality is not just a mistake, but a failure.

Working from within this position, we can turn to Galeotti’s description of the first realist objection. In this objection, the Realist is skeptical of the value of employing the concept of self-deception to politics at all, arguing that “if we look at the false statements and bogus information coming out from official sources in politics, we can easily find explanations for them in terms of self-serving lies, and self-interested desires to manipulate public opinion, dispensing with all the puzzles and complications typically surrounding SD.” (p. 89).

Contemporary realists pride themselves with being sensitive to actual human psychology, against their moralist opponents’ idealisation of moral agency. It will indeed be curious, then, if they denied the existence of self-deception in politics. When reflecting on the canon of historical thinkers commonly associated with realism, not many do. Arch-realist Machiavelli, for example, warns in the *Discourses on Livy* that ambition distorts the judgement of political leaders, causing them to be myopic about the long-term effects of their actions, or invoke easily debunkable “imagined dangers” as an excuse for extraordinary actions. Similarly, in chapter 23 of *The Prince*,

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3 All parenthetical page numbers are to Anna Elisabetta Galeotti, *Political Self-Deception* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), unless stated otherwise.

Machiavelli warns the reader of sycophantic advisers: since humans by nature are prone to indulge in flattery, the wise prince would seek the council of truthful advisers, enabling him to make the prudent decision. This is not unique to Machiavelli: a recurring theme of the realist tradition is to criticize their opponents for refusing to view, or letting themselves be distracted from, the world and its inhabitants as they really are (hence the name).  

So how can we make sense of Galeotti’s suggestion that realists think self-deception doesn’t matter? I think the answer may be that for realists, it only matters if it negatively impacts political judgement. Simply put, political judgement is what enables agents to answer the question “what is to be done?” taking into account the circumstances and particularities of the situation they are facing. Whatever negative or positive effects self-deception might have on the leader’s conscience, authenticity, or psychological coping mechanisms, are irrelevant. In other words, self-deception in itself does not matter. Note that Machiavelli’s above is interested in a particular kind of self-deception which compromises the leader’s judgement and thus makes him a bad ruler. President Trump may well be delusional about his own “great and unmatched wisdom” – despite all compelling evidence to the contrary – but that in itself is only worrying if it leads him and his administration to ignore the risks and opportunities of political reality and make poor decisions.

More radically, I think the Realist, along with the rest of us, has reasons to be skeptical about Galeotti’s assertion that what she describes as “self-deception” necessarily entails poor political judgement. If that were the case, then the “Machiavellian politician moved only by strategically astute scheme” would always seek to avoid it, at risk of ending up as a confused and irrational agent (p. 84). But political actors are not simply neutral assessors of evidence and probability in the political landscape; they actively shape it by their decisions and actions. As Raymond Geuss writes, the arena of political action is a place “where the standards for evaluating what is ‘success’, what is a good idea, what is a desirable outcome, are themselves changing and always in principle up for negotiation”.  

This distinction in function and agency is brilliantly captured by Robert Jervis’s account of the inherent tension (and mutual dislike) between decision makers and intelligence officers. As the political world is at once ambiguous and uncertain, and one where decisions have to be made in a compelling manner, leaders are not necessarily irrational when pursuing a course of action against the evidence-based advice of the intelligence agencies. The self-fulfilling prophecy of over-confidence in future success makes some self-deceived judgement politically correct. Jervis recounts the example of Churchill in 1940 as paradigmatic: against the majority of his cabinet tending towards peace with Germany following the fall of France, and without any supporting evidence, he maintained “that Britain could win because the German economy was badly overstretched and could be broken by a combination of bombing and guerrilla warfare”. This was not the case, but political fortune did not favor the advice of intelligence officers at that time.

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As the Realist suggests, then, we have some reasons to doubt the value of self-deception in political theory, at least when considered in itself. With this in mind, I turn now to questions of moral evaluation and normative prescriptions.

II. Moral Evaluation: Deception in Democracy and War

I mentioned above that realists wish to make a distinction between the evaluation of personal conduct and political conduct. Galeotti follows a similar line of thought: unlike personal self-deception, which main function may be directed at oneself, political self-deception is always connected to the deception of others: “In the political domain, leaders’ SD is transformed into other-deception: like lies, it produces the effect of making the people believe something that is false and that is in the interest of leaders to have it believed” (p. 89). Galeotti rightly points out that this feature of political self-deception matters for the moral evaluation of this phenomenon, undercutting its potential benefits for the self. Moreover, she provides us with a useful typology of the relation between self-deception and other-deception, distinguishing between cases of (I) other-deception as a by-product of self-deception, (II) self-deception as a means for other-deception (it is easier to lie when you are self-deceived you are speaking the truth), and (III) self-deception as a justificatory mechanism for explicit other-deception. The moral evaluation of political self-deception, therefore, hinges on the moral evaluation of other-deception. However, this distinction between the personal and the political can be interpreted more radically than it is in Galeotti’s analysis.

This question is brought to the fore in the discussion of the US invasion of Iraq, and in particular the gap between the (supposed) reasons motivating the attack and the way it was marketed to the American public. The Realist is called to reflect on the normative evaluation of dishonesty and deception in politics, and offers a more or less consequentialist answer. As Galeotti presents this position, “politics in general, and foreign policy specifically, concerns the pursuit of the national interest and is to be judged on the basis of its effectiveness in achieving its goals; and, in doing so, it is inevitable that some dirty hand problems arise and are met so as to grant the political good at the expense of moral qualms” (p. 198). Successful military campaigns require both secrecy regarding the knowledge and motives of the government, and (in democracies at least) a broad national consensus, to be elicited by any means necessary.

Galeotti is critical of this democracy-undermining argument, and offers two reasons to resist it. First, citing Stephen Holmes, she argues that “the misguided disciples of Machiavelli forget that circumventing democratic procedures may also deprive cabinets and governments from the crucial reality test implied by check and balances, adversarial democracy, devil’s advocates, and so on, which also have the crucial function of hypothesis testing.” (p. 198). This objection sits somewhere between type I and III above, as self-deception here is a result of other-deception. Call this the epistemic objection. Second, Galeotti writes that “[c]ircumventing [the democratic] procedure… is not a trivial detour from boring bureaucratic rituals (as the realist would claim), but is the illegitimate imposition of coercive measures by governments on citizens, who are thus deprived of their agency capability” (p. 200). More generally, “If democratic legitimacy ultimately says that no predicament should be coercively imposed by a lawful government without the informed and free consent of the coerced citizens, then war is the first and foremost locus where democratic legitimacy is to be tested” (p. 201). Call this the democratic legitimacy objection.
Both of these objections, presented in this form, seem overly strong. With regards to the epistemic objection, I have already expressed above some scepticism above about the place of certainty in political judgement: the kind of mechanisms offered by Galeotti are important, but do not exclude the place of judgement. More prosaically, the role of devil’s advocate or partisan contestation can be achieved institutionally regardless of democratic control. A prominent example from military practice is the Israeli ‘Tenth Man Doctrine’. In 1973, captured by what was later named ‘the concept of Arab intentions’, Israeli intelligence failed to see the evidence of a preeminent joint Egyptian and Syrian attack. One of the conclusions of this failure was to establish, within the directorate of military intelligence (AMAN), a designated unit called the Revision Department, with the sole purpose of providing alternative assessments of existing evidence.

Similarly, from a realist perspective, the democratic legitimacy objection sets an implausible standard for legitimising political power. To reiterate the main point of contemporary realism, political normativity is not applied ethics: what makes lying wrong in personal ethics is different from what makes it wrong (if at all) in politics. In the specific context of political power, coercion is a central element. If political decision-making is legitimate only when it enjoys the “free and informed consent” of citizens, then no political decision has ever been legitimate. The complications to this idea are too many to recount. At minimum, consider the Humean challenge of how can one freely consent to coercion; the fact of political pluralism, undermining the idea that “citizens” as a whole can consent; and the empirical realities of political psychology, casting a shadow of doubt on the ideal of the informed citizen. It is important to note that these complications should not lead us to lose sight of the value of democratic institutions; indeed, it is the impossible ideal of legitimacy as free and informed consent that undermines trust in really-existing democracy.

Perhaps this reading is overly literal, and explicit free and informed consent is required only in cases of momentous decisions – the kind of decisions Galeotti maintains are susceptible to political self-deception (p. 80 and passim). She argues that the decision to go to war, with the implied death, destruction and suffering it brings with it, renders the question of democratic legitimacy even more urgent. There are two potential explanations for this claim. First, the threshold of acceptable justification rises in proportion to the risks and costs involved in a particular decision: as war entails excessive risk and costs to the citizenry as a whole, and to those in the armed forces specifically, it certainly qualifies as one of these momentous decisions. The second, more moralized explanation, involves the political responsibility of citizens for what is done in their name: “[d]emocratic citizenship implies a sharing in the responsibility of governmental decisions, which looks especially significant in the case of war, where the government’s policy is then carried out by individual citizens who will be the actual violators of basic morality” (p. 200).

The two explanations above both assume that citizens bear the brunt of war, expressed in either material or moral cost. But the same democratic pressures that establish the requirement for justification are also what undermine it. Most basically, the necessity of the element of surprise at least partially counters the requirement for public justification, as at least in some cases a public deliberation on war would put more lives at risk. Furthermore, as western armies become populated with professional volunteers, fighting conducted by private military contractors, and killing by predator drones and laser-guided missiles, governments are increasingly able to make
war cost-effective and risk-free for their citizens, and thus less in need of justification. Distanced from the horrors of war, and protected from its consequences, citizens have no incentive to be informed of it; on the contrary, knowledge and explicit authorization would bring with it the burden of moral responsibility, whereas ignorance affords plausible deniability.

The changing nature of war also brings with it a potential tension between the epistemic and the democratic legitimacy objections. The epistemic objection relies on the duty to act according to accurate interpretations of reality; the democratic legitimacy objection, on the duty to act only according to what the public sanctions. But simply put, we have no reason to think that the reasons which are the best justification for engaging in war are also going to be acceptable public reasons for engaging in war. If war is only justified by some enlightened version of the national interest – the preservation of political and territorial sovereignty and the protection of fellow nationals – we may be excused in assuming a convergence, as national armies are institutionally structured for these aims. But if wars can be justified by cosmopolitan reasons – the protection of human rights, for example – we inevitably face what Cheyney Ryan calls the “cosmopolitan soldier dilemma”. Insisting that normative reasons and motivating reasons in this case must converge leads to tragic results, where the failure of normative reasons to motivate leads to inaction. Even the Second World War (the paradigmatic “just war”) was not publicly endorsed in the United States on the basis of its best normative justification, namely coming to the aid of Europe. Instead, President Roosevelt’s administration engaged in covert operations, clearly hostile to Germany and Japan, which plausibly prompted the attack on American territory. It was only then, with the attack on Pearl Harbor, that Americans were persuaded to publicly endorse the war.

So far I have been assuming that the gap between public reasons and actual justifying reasons is the result of straight deception and noble lies, where leaders sell the public on a message they themselves do not really believe. The suggestion that even this can, in some circumstances, be justified, is indeed controversial. But if we go back to self-deception, our evaluation becomes murkier. Take again Galeotti’s discussion of the decision to invade Iraq. Importantly, she seeks to refute what she calls the “conspiracy theory” account, according to which political leadership knowingly lied about Saddam Hussein’s WMDs, and maintain instead that they were self-deceived. Bush, Cheyney and others came to sincerely hold the false belief that the enemy they were facing was state-like (a straight case of SD, because it was preferable to the alternative), and that the threat of WMD was real and eminent (a twisted case of SD, this being the worst case scenario). They had other, perhaps stronger reasons to see the invasion as a good decision (e.g. Neocon ideology, the belief that Saddam was sponsoring terror), but thought that the WMD narrative was the best way to convince the public. Following this depiction, it is difficult to resist the unsettling conclusion that their decision was factually mistaken, but not morally wrong.

III. Normative Prescriptions: Assigning Responsibility and Prophylactic Measures

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10 I thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me refining this example.
Beyond the explanatory value of the concept and its moral evaluation, Galeotti’s main argument for the value of self-deception is normative. She raises two main normative questions, applicable to the general concept and to its application to international politics specifically. First, can the self-deceived be held responsible for their own self-deception, and, second, can we prevent instances of self-deception? Galeotti answers in the affirmative to both, and while I broadly agree with her conclusions, I am skeptical about the way she arrives at them.

In her conceptual account of self-deception, Galeotti stirs a middle path between intentionalist accounts (whose view of self-deception as intentional is paradoxical) and motivationalist accounts (who, in their causal depiction of self-deception, leave out the question of agency). Her innovative answer to the question of moral responsibility is that, while the agent is not intentionally self-deceiving, she did bring about the conditions that facilitated her own self-deception. If she could have done differently, the attribution of moral responsibility to her is fitting. To give a trivial example, if I am negligent in replacing the batteries of my watch (causing it to be slower), then I can be seen as having successfully deceived myself about the accurate time, and can be held responsible for that. You have every right, in other words, to be angry at me for being late.

But this does not translate well to the political cases in which Galeotti is interested. As she correctly points out, “the circumstances of political decision making, when momentous foreign policy choices are at issue, are blurred and confused both epistemically and motivationally”, with miscalculation, uncertainty, dishonesty and straight lying often entangled together. This is further complicated by political decision-making being a collective endeavor, where a collective agent (say, the government) may be self-deceived even when none of its constituent parts is self-deceived, and so it is difficult to trace the responsible.\(^\text{11}\) Disentangling self-deception from its conceptual cousins can only be done retrospectively, and even then this is questionable: failed leaders have every incentive to present their decision making as justified given the circumstances, and any distorting features as elements beyond their control.

For these reasons, correctly identifying who was responsible for the consequences of bad decision making, in the causal and moral sense, will often prove impossible. Galeotti’s meticulous reconstruction of the Cuban Missile Crisis, The Gulf of Tunkin Affair, and the Invasion of Iraq is a pursuit of the correct account of the facts, which is essential for identifying the responsible. The question of assigning responsibility, however, is importantly distinct from the question of identification. “Unlike identifications”, David Miller argues, “assignments of responsibility can be justified or unjustified, but they cannot be correct or incorrect”.\(^\text{12}\) There are multiple contexts where we are justified is assigning responsibility for a certain harm to a party that was neither the cause of this harm, nor is blameworthy for it. My contention here is that political decision-making is one of these contexts.

This is not a particularly novel argument: the distinction between moral and political responsibility has been espoused repeatedly from Weber to Walzer, from Arendt to Young. Galeotti herself appeals to this distinction in support of her argument that self-deception does not absolve politicians of responsibility (p. 109). What I want to suggest is that the political responsibility of


leaders for disastrous decision making does not depend on why the decision was mistaken. This is especially true in cases of grand foreign policy decisions – where, unlike other actions of the state, the discretionary authority of lower-level bureaucrats is limited and government most closely resembles a hierarchy. Galeotti rightly argues that assigning political responsibility does not depend on leaders’ good intentions (p. 109), and I think we can go further and make the same argument about epistemic conditions. Political leaders are responsible for the failures of their decisions and actions, even if those decisions were ones that any reasonable person in their position would have made, or were the result of being duped by the deception of others. Political responsibility, in this sense, is distinct from, and more strict than, moral blameworthiness or legal liability. The harshness of this conclusion simply reflects the inevitable burdens of political leadership.

It is important to add two caveats to this potentially controversial suggestion. The first is that political responsibility does not, obviously, preclude moral responsibility. If the disastrous decision was driven by self-serving reasons, or that could have been easily avoided, the political leader may very well be subject to moral critique and sanction as well. The second is to notice that this model of political responsibility can also be abused to end further probing into governmental failures: Following the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, President Kennedy publicly accepted the "sole responsibility" and objected to anyone’s "attempting to shift responsibility" away from him. As Dennis Thompson convincingly argues, this “ritual” cut short public inquiry into other officials’ responsibility for the failure, and forestalled a public debate about the morality of the decision.13

Galeotti similarly argues that simply admitting a mistake or finding the party to blame for deception is not sufficient to prevent future instances (p. 113). This leads us to her second normative prescription, where she argues that political self-deception can in fact be prevented or at least mitigated (p. 108-114). In the personal realm, self-deception can be prevented by character development, or by pre-commitment: I can make myself more aware of situations where I am susceptible to self-deception, or I can find a reliable friend to stop me when this is happening. Political self-deception can be prevented in analogous ways: through the political education of politicians and leaders to see themselves as responsible for accuracy, and through institutional pre-commitments such as devil’s advocates, impartial fact-checkers, and the like.

This of course seems very sensible, but I am not sure why Galeotti argues that these prophylactic measures would not be efficient deterrents of the two other causes of bad political judgement – namely, straight lies and cold mistakes. Even if we grant that “lies and mistakes can be detected only by hindsight” (p. 109), that in itself does not entail that they cannot be prevented or deterred. Assuming that an independent body with the ability to check decision-making is in place, it seems that it should be able to counter falsehoods regardless of their origins, especially if its institutional role is primarily to offer adversarial interpretations of the facts.

Indeed, from the realist point of view, institutional constraints (broadly understood) are all that is available to counter self-serving or stupid decisions, whereas the moral education of leaders is either redundant or impotent. Redundant, because if Galeotti is right and I am wrong, leaders have self-interested reasons to avoid self-deception; and impotent, because morality alone would not stop a politician intent on deception. Galeotti rightly acknowledges this point, but sees institutional constraints as secondary, “not meant to substitute the duty of politicians for moral training against

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SD, nor to lessen their political and moral responsibility and the related moral sanctions, but simply to supplement moral reasons whose appeal is not always so strong”. (p. 113) I argue, conversely, that institutional constraints (with the attached sanctions of political accountability) are the best and most feasible educational tools we have in hand: if politicians are not motivated to avoid self-deception by moral reasons, they will do so to avoid being seen as self-deceived.

Concluding Remarks

In this short commentary, I sought to provide a more robust interpretation of the Realist’s objections to Galeotti’s conceptual, moral and normative analysis in *Political Self-Deception*. Importantly, this is meant as a sympathetic critique: As I hopefully showed throughout, I believe that Galeotti’s account is able to accommodate these objections, and in fact is built on broadly “realist” presuppositions, charitably understood.

What I argued, however, it that at present Galeotti does not always follow through on the full implications of these presuppositions. In its role in explaining failures of political judgement, in its moral evaluation, and its relevance to normative prescriptions regarding responsibility and prevention, I think that some additional dosage of realism with regards to political self-deception is called for.
References


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