

Dursley Duplicity

The Morality and Psychology of Self-Deception

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Harry Potter and Philosophy

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Honesty and persistence in the pursuit of knowledge has long been a central moral ideal of Western philosophy. The study of philosophy itself was born in ancient Greece as the love (*philo*) of wisdom (*sophia*). Socrates fittingly spoke of the need to “know thyself” and to understand the nature of virtue in pursuing a moral life. Aristotle famously began his *Metaphysics* with the claim that “All men by nature desire to know.” Modern philosophers have explored the many ways in which people sabotage this natural thirst for knowledge through rationalization and self-deception. Sartre argued that we conceal our fundamental responsibility and freedom from ourselves through “bad faith.” Ayn Rand explained human evil as the natural consequence of the mental fog and chaos created by evasion of the facts and refusal to think. Similarly, psychology has generally viewed accurate understanding of the self and the world as a hallmark of mental health.

In recent years, however, philosophers and psychologists have increasingly challenged this longstanding vision of the role of knowledge in human life. Some have merely claimed that self-deception is necessary or unavoidable, while others have further argued that it can be a moral strategy for preserving a positive outlook given the inevitable setbacks of daily life. Oddly enough, the magical world of *Harry Potter* points to fundamental weaknesses in these arguments in favor of self-deception. In particular, the trials and tribulations of the Dursleys—Harry Potter’s abusive, neglectful, and normalcy-obsessed aunt and uncle—highlight basic dangers of self-deception often overlooked by its defenders.

The Arguments for Self-Deception

In Western culture, the basic reason that self-deception is widely seen as a serious and debilitating character flaw is simple: A person cannot judge, choose, or act rightly if willfully blind to relevant facts. By denying what he knows or suspects to be true, the self-deceiver distorts his thinking processes and thereby renders himself oblivious to ever-growing threats, unable to acknowledge problems and failures, and prone to put others in harm’s way. Hence facing reality—whether pleasant or not—is seen as essential to good moral character, a healthy mind, and a happy life.

Some philosophers have challenged this common sense view in recent years by arguing that self-deception is a necessary part of human existence—and that we’re better off as a result. In *The Varnished Truth*, for example, David Nyberg claims that our “strong need” to remain unaware of unpleasant facts drives us to “avoid, distort, conceal, reverse, deny, and fancy up the truth” whenever possible.¹ Such self-deception allows us to maintain “coherence and stability” in our personal identity and protects us from the painful gap between “what we are and what we wish we were.”² Along similar lines, Robert Solomon argues that our “flaws and failings” make honest self-assessment “intolerable” and that genuine self-understanding can be “devastating to

¹ David Nyberg, *The Varnished Truth: Truth Telling and Deceiving in Ordinary Life* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1993), pp. 81, 83-4.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 94, 88.

[our] self-image and sense of self.”³ The common refrain of these arguments is that self-deception is often necessary and moral because our basic human need to think well of ourselves cannot be satisfied honestly.

Despite the temptation, we cannot casually dismiss these claims as the personal confessions of the authors, for they seem to be supported by the psychological literature on “positive illusions.”⁴ Positive illusions are supposed to be mild but enduring forms of self-deception that bias the judgments of psychologically healthy people towards themselves in various ways. So, for example, when asked about themselves, most people focus on their strengths and omit or downplay their weaknesses. This positive slant is particularly strong in comparisons with others, as people tend to regard themselves not just as good, but also better than others—so much so that 90% of drivers consider themselves above average! In addition to forming such generous self-evaluations, people also seem to overestimate the extent of their personal control over life events and adopt overly optimistic views of their future. Many psychologists claim that the “creative self-deception” of such positive illusions is not psychologically damaging, but instead so integral to mental health that its loss or absence is associated with mild depression. As a result of this research, many psychologists have abandoned accurate self-assessment as a criterion of mental health and rejected honesty with oneself as a virtue.

Given the gulf between the traditional, common sense view of self-deception and these new academic arguments, we can now ask: What can the Dursleys teach us about the process of deceiving oneself?

The Self-Deceptions of the Dursleys

Vernon and Petunia Dursley are Harry Potter’s only living adult relatives—and his caretakers (to stretch the meaning of the term) since the death of his parents. Every encounter with the Dursleys in the novels emphasizes their obsession with appearing—both to themselves and others—wholly “normal,” i.e. completely untainted by magic. The obvious problem for the Dursleys on this score is that Petunia is connected to the magical world through her sister Lily Potter. This unwanted bond arouses an overpowering fear and hatred of magic in both the Dursleys and motivates their self-deceptions about any and all magic-related facts.

When we are introduced to the Dursleys in the first chapter of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, we quickly learn of their penchant for and skill in the art of self-deception. Upon learning of young Harry’s defeat of Voldemort, the magical world celebrates with little regard for detection by Muggles—but Vernon is bound and determined not to notice anything odd whatsoever. Upon leaving the house, he sees a cat (actually Professor McGonagall) reading a map, but dismisses it as “a trick of the light” (SS 3). When he notices the many “strangely dressed people... in cloaks” milling about, he first rages about this “stupid new fashion” of young people, but upon seeing an older man in a cloak, his cover story changes: the people must be part of a “silly stunt... collecting [money] for something” (SS 3). Later in the day, this second story fails when Vernon cannot spot “a single collecting tin” among the strangers, so he simply “eye[s] them angrily,” unable to identify why they make him “uneasy” (SS 4). Vernon finally resorts to the unprecedented act of “hoping he was imagining things” when a man

³ Robert Solomon, “What a Tangled Web: Deception and Self-Deception in Philosophy” in *Lying and Deception in Everyday Life*, eds. Michael Lewis and Carolyn Saarni (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), p. 42.

⁴ See Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown, “Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health,” *Psychological Bulletin* 103, 2 (1988).; Shelley Taylor, *Positive Illusions* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

wearing a violet cloak bumps into him, mentions “You-Know-Who” and calls him a “Muggle” (SS 5).

This basic pattern of denial and rationalization of obvious facts continues when Vernon overhears mentions of “the Potters” and “their son, Harry” from some of the strange people (SS 4). He suppresses his initial flood of fear by convincing himself that “Potter” is a common name and that “Harry” might not be the name of his nephew anyway (SS 4). That evening, when he inquires with Petunia about the name of the Potters’ son, she looks “shocked and angry” because “they normally pretended she didn’t have a sister” (SS 7). Only when she tells him that the boy’s name is “Harry” does an inescapable feeling of dread overcome him (SS 7). Yet Vernon still manages to comfort himself to sleep that night with the thought that the doings of the Potters couldn’t possibly affect his family (SS 8).

As Vernon and Petunia’s behavior on this fateful day indicates, self-deception is integral to their response to magic, helping them close their minds to both its existence and their connection to it. As we shall see, this pattern continues even after their magical nephew arrives on their doorstep.

The Lessons of Dursley Deceit

Although the physical, moral, and psychological defects of the Dursleys are obviously exaggerated for comic effect in *Harry Potter*, the troubles created by their self-deceptions accurately reflect fundamental facts about the process of lying to oneself. The negative example of the Dursleys thus highlights three critical lessons about self-deception often overlooked by its defenders:

1. Self-deception cannot insulate a person from disturbing reminders of the truth.
2. Self-deception often will spread beyond the original denial to related issues.
3. Self-deception easily becomes a habitual method of avoiding painful truths.

Let us examine each of these lessons in turn.

1. Self-deception cannot insulate a person from disturbing reminders of the truth.

The arguments for self-deception all implicitly presume that self-deception is a highly effective process, one that renders a person blissfully ignorant of painful truths for the foreseeable future. David Nyberg, for example, describes self-deception as a “gradual process” in which a belief is fully replaced by its contrary.⁵ However, if self-deception is not so effective, if the self-deceiver is faced with nagging doubts, unexplained facts, or confounding reminders, then the short-term emotional relief provided by self-deception may come at the price of more troubles and pains in the long run.

With the Dursleys, their self-deceptions about Harry’s magical powers are easily and often shattered—and thus are almost continuously in need of renewal. Even before Harry learns that he is a wizard, his unintentional acts of magic—such as his eternally unkempt hair (SS 24), his shrinking of Dudley’s ugly old sweater (CS 2), and his removal of the glass on the snake cage at the zoo (SS 28)—are clear evidence not only of his magical powers, but also of the ineffectiveness of the Dursleys’ attempts to “stamp [the magic] out of him” (SS 53). Once Harry begins his studies at Hogwarts, the Dursleys try to banish magic from their sight by locking away Harry’s owl (CS 1), confiscating his school supplies (CS 3; PA 3), and referring to magic euphemistically as “the ‘m’ word,” “you-know-what,” Harry’s “abnormality,” and “funny stuff” (CS 2; OP 26; PA 19). These superficial strategies cannot hope to shield the Dursleys from

⁵ Nyberg, p. 100.

reminders of magic like Hagrid charming Dudley a pig's tail (SS 59), Dobby's destruction of Petunia's pudding during a dinner party (CS 19-20), Harry's accidental engorgement of Aunt Marge (PA 29), the Weasleys' demolition of the living room (GF 44), and the attack upon Dudley by the dementors (OP 15-8). Because such magical events contradict Vernon and Petunia's deceptions, they consistently generate explosions of fear and rage. Only the last is traumatic enough to finally melt away Petunia's longstanding "furious pretense" about magic (OP 31-2). The Dursleys are thus unable to make their self-deceptions about magic stick, but not for lack of trying.

The basic problem for the Dursleys—and for all self-deceivers—is that denying the facts does not thereby alter them. As his admission to Hogwarts proves, Harry's magical powers are impervious to the Dursleys' denials and rationalizations—and even to their punishments. Nor do the Dursleys' pretenses prevent others from recognizing and acting upon the facts, as illustrated by Hagrid's persistence in delivering the acceptance letter from Hogwarts (SS 34-45) and Dumbledore's Howler warning Petunia against ejecting Harry from the house (PA 40-1). The Dursleys' attempts to deny their familial connection to magic are doomed to frequent failure, as reminders of the facts are inevitable with a young wizard living in the house.

Moreover, even when acting in a thoroughly "normal" fashion, Harry is still a living symbol of all the Dursleys hate and fear. To minimize these symbolic reminders, Vernon and Petunia often resort to the absurdity of pretending that Harry doesn't exist at all. So their living room is filled with pictures of Dudley, but contains "no sign" of Harry (SS 18); when company comes for dinner, Harry is supposed to "be in [his] room, making no noise, and pretending [he's] not there" (CS 6-7); and when Ron Weasley calls and shouts into the telephone for Harry, Vernon roars "THERE IS NO HARRY POTTER HERE!" (PA 4). However, even if Harry had never come to live with them, the Dursleys' self-deceptions about magic would not serve as an impenetrable shield against the facts. Everyday events would naturally evoke Petunia's childhood memories of Lily, Hogwarts, and all the rest, and Vernon would occasionally experience the same paralyzing fear of being "outed" as he did on the day after Voldemort's apparent death (SS 1-8).

Notably, the fact that self-deception cannot not change or fully conceal the unpleasant facts means that the process is likely to compound the problems faced by the self-deceiver. As we find with the Dursleys, failed self-deceptions are likely to leave a person in a far worse psychological state—more confused, fearful, angry, vulnerable, depressed, and so on—than if the hard facts had been accepted at the outset. Moreover, a person's troubles are likely to grow and fester in the blind neglect of self-deception, such that they will be more difficult (if not impossible) to resolve in the future. In short, the world is often quite hostile to the illusions of the self-deceiver—and consequently, they can be difficult to sustain in the long term.

2. Self-deception often will spread beyond the original denial to related issues.

Arguments in favor of self-deception presume that the process can be sufficiently contained and controlled to a single desired area of thought. Yet self-deception, as a process aiming at "voluntary blindness, numbness, dull-mindedness, and ignorance," cannot be carefully monitored and regulated by consciousness, because to do so would bring the unpleasant facts too much and too often into the spotlight of full, explicit awareness.⁶ Surprisingly, the defenders of self-deception often recognize this fundamental difficulty. In *Vital Lies, Simple Truths*, Daniel Goleman writes that self-deception can lead us to "fall prey to blind spots, remaining ignorant of

⁶ Ibid., p. 81.

zones of information we might be better off knowing, even if that knowledge brings us some pain.”⁷ He recommends that we find “a skillful mean” between truth and falsehood, but does not even hint at how we might do so.⁸ In fact, such advice is impossible, for applying it would require awareness of both the self-deception and what it conceals. The negative example of the Dursleys colorfully illustrates the problem of blindly spreading self-deceptions in practice.

Vernon and Petunia’s fear and hatred of *all* things magical cannot, by its very nature, be limited to *only* things magical. Such careful discernment would require too much honest investigation into strange events for people unable to withstand even casual references to Hogwarts, brooms, and wizards (GF 32-3). Thus the Dursleys’ self-deceptions about magic must cast a wide net, encompassing “anything even slightly out of the ordinary” and “anything acting in a way it shouldn’t” whether in dreams, imagination, or fiction (GF 31; SS 5, 26). So when Harry mentions a dream about a flying motorcycle on the drive to the zoo, Vernon nearly crashes the car and then “turned right around in his seat and yelled at Harry, his face like a gigantic beet with a moustache: ‘MOTORCYCLES DON’T FLY!’” (SS 25). Similarly, Harry is forbidden from asking questions about his parents because the answers would hint at his magical roots (SS 30). So the Dursleys’ self-deceptions are not limited to just those pesky facts about magic; in order to preserve the core deceit, they must also embrace a dreary conventionality and a wholly uninquisitive attitude towards anything strange in the world.

In general, any attempt to isolate and limit self-deception to only a certain set of unpleasant facts creates a tension between the facts denied by the self-deception and those still accepted as true. No fact of reality can be isolated from all others, so any conflict between knowledge and pretense pressures the self-deceiver to either admit the self-deception or deceive himself further to preserve it. As a result, a single self-deception is likely to ripple outward into related areas of life and thought, slowly corrupting as it does.

The disastrous effects of expanding self-deception are particularly clear in the case of the year-long denial of Voldemort’s return by the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge. Given Harry’s eyewitness account of Voldemort’s rebirth and the gathering of Death Eaters (GF 695-8), the confirming confession of Barty Crouch (GF 683-91), the reappearance of the Dark Mark on Snape’s arm (GF 709-10), and the weight of Dumbledore’s opinion (GF 703-10), Fudge cannot merely assert that Voldemort is dead and gone to either himself or others. So in the course of a single conversation at the end of the Triwizard Tournament, Fudge says that Harry is unreliable due to his ability to speak Parseltongue and the burning of his scar (GF 705-6), that Barty Crouch was a lunatic who merely believed himself to be acting on behalf of Voldemort (GF 704), that Lucius Malfoy donates to too many worthy causes to be a Death Eater (GF 706), and that Dumbledore and his supporters are “determined to start a panic” (GF 707). Fudge’s absurd pretense continues over the next year, enabling Voldemort and his Death Eaters to pursue their deadly plans relatively unimpeded. Only when Fudge sees Voldemort at the Ministry of Magic with his own eyes does his elaborate edifice of self-deceptions disintegrate—and even then only grudgingly (OP 816-9).

Like many real-life self-deceivers, Cornelius Fudge must tell both himself and others a multitude of absurd rationalizations in order to maintain his core pretense. Of course, each new deceit in this chain increases the risk of “detection and exposure by anyone with access to the facts.”⁹ However, unlike the mere deceiver of others, the self-deceiver cannot consciously and

⁷ Daniel Goleman, *Vital Lies, Simple Truths* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), p. 243.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁹ Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1991), p. 270.

meticulously craft his additional self-deceptions—at least not while remaining blind to the truth. Consequently, the self-deceiver is largely powerless to prevent the destructive expansion of his original deception into new and ever more dangerous territory.

3. *Self-deception easily becomes a habitual method of avoiding painful truths.*

In arguing their case, the defenders of self-deception generally focus upon the immediate emotional relief provided by this or that self-deception. Denying painful truths is portrayed as little more than a convenient method of reducing anxiety, preserving hope, and saving face.¹⁰ This narrow focus unfortunately neglects the long-term effects of self-deception upon a person's psychology and moral character. Perhaps the most noteworthy long-term danger is the gradual formation of habits of self-deception based upon even occasional self-deceptions about seemingly insignificant issues. As the chronic self-deceivers of everyday life demonstrate, lying to oneself can become a general strategy for whitewashing painful truths of all shapes and sizes, including those about critical and even life-threatening issues. But how might minor acts of self-deception now contribute to or encourage major acts of self-deception later? Once again, the Dursleys—this time Petunia in particular—can help us answer this question.

Although the source of Vernon's hatred of magic is a mystery, Petunia's pretenses clearly originate in her teenage years when her sister Lily attended Hogwarts. So when Harry first learns from Hagrid that he is a wizard, Petunia rages at him:

How could you not be [a wizard] my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that—that *school*—and come home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was—a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family... Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as—as—*abnormal*—and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you! (SS 53).

Although superficially a history of Harry, this story clearly betrays teenage Petunia's agonizing feelings of jealousy and inadequacy in comparison to her magical sister. Based upon her adult deceptions about magic, young Petunia probably did not discuss the problem with her parents or friends, contemplate her own unique talents and accomplishments, question whether her self-worth ought to depend upon a favorable comparison to her sister, or face her feelings squarely by investigating their source and meaning. Instead, young Petunia sought to end her discomfort quickly by wholly committing to normality and conventionality as absolute moral duties, as the only right way for a person to be. This commitment transformed the strangeness and wonder of magic into abnormality and freakishness in her mind—and twisted her feelings of jealousy and inferiority into hatred and contempt.

Significantly, Petunia's self-deceptions are not limited to issues of magic. Ever since our very first peek into her life, she has held fast to the belief that “there [is] no finer boy anywhere” than her increasingly fat, stupid, and cruel son, Dudley (SS 1). Eleven-year-old Dudley punches Harry in the nose, throws tantrums, and cannot add $2 + 37$ —all without provoking anger or concern in Petunia (SS 20-1). Even though Dudley's bottom “droop[s] over either side of the kitchen chair,” she fears that he is not getting enough to eat at school (CS 2). She explains away his bad grades in school as misunderstanding by the teachers and denies his bullying on the grounds that he's just “a boisterous little boy” (PA 26-7). Only “a few well-chosen comments from the school nurse” about Dudley's body exceeding the maximum volume of the school uniforms penetrates Petunia's defense that Dudley is just “big-boned” with some “puppy fat” and

¹⁰ Nyberg, pp. 82-4.

induces her to put him on a diet (GF 27). The next year, Dudley spends evenings terrorizing the neighborhood, but Petunia contents herself with the thought that he's having tea with one of his "many little friends" (OP 3). Dudley is only too happy to exploit Petunia's massive blind spots, although clearly her pride and joy is not developing into anything remotely resembling a decent person in the absence of any guidance or discipline.

Unlike Petunia's self-deceptions about magic, those about Dudley do not seem to be motivated by any pressing emotional distress. Yet we might suspect that her emotion-driven deceptions about magic set the stage for her deceptions about Dudley. By the time Dudley was born, Petunia already had accepted the tacit principle that her emotions take precedence over the facts. Faced with Lily's magical talents, Petunia ignored the fact that magic is simply a different way of interacting with the natural world in order to assuage her painful feelings of inferiority and jealousy. Similarly, Dudley's actual physical, mental, and moral qualities are irrelevant in light of Petunia's absolute devotion to him and desire for a picture-perfect family. So in keeping with the precedent set by her teenage deceptions about Lily, whenever Petunia faces a conflict between her head and her heart, it's her head that is expendable.

Additionally, Petunia's teenage denials and rationalizations about magic made self-deception a comfortable and familiar strategy for avoiding unpleasant facts by the time Dudley was born. Her skills of denying obvious facts, explaining away contradictory evidence, constructing cover stories, and suppressing her natural curiosity had been honed to a sharp point. Correspondingly, the virtues, skills, and resources she needs to navigate difficult situations honestly have either faded to nothingness or failed to develop at all. She lacks the fortitude necessary to investigate painful issues fully, the creative skills of problem-solving, a sense of humor to bring light to dark times, the self-confidence to withstand the disapproval of others, close friendships for support and advice, the courage to admit and learn from her mistakes, and so much more. In these ways, Petunia's self-deceptions about magic make honesty about Dudley—and any other potentially unpleasant matter—far more difficult than necessary.

Petunia Dursley's life of dishonesty illustrates many of the subtle and gradual ways in which self-deception becomes a habitual method for coping with troubles of all kinds. By permitting feelings to trump facts, seemingly innocuous self-deceptions set a precedent for further and more destructive lies. By developing skills of self-deception rather than practicing honesty, facing and resolving the hard problems of life becomes all the more difficult and painful. Such is how the power of habit renders even minor self-deceptions dangerous.

A Fourth Lesson

The three lessons from the Dursleys about self-deception—that it cannot insulate a person from disturbing reminders of the truth, that it often will spread beyond the original denial to related issues, and that it easily becomes a habitual method of avoiding painful truths—give us ample reason to reject the rosy picture of self-deception put forth by its philosophical defenders. The prospect of short-term relief from emotional distress simply cannot justify risking those long-term harms. Western philosophy has been right to emphasize the critical virtues of honesty and persistence in the pursuit of knowledge.

Although this rejection of the philosophical arguments for self-deception appeals to the negative examples of Vernon and Petunia Dursley, we ought not overlook the positive and inspiring exemplars of honesty found in *Harry Potter*. For example, in the summer before the fifth year, when Ron is chosen as a prefect rather than him, Harry frankly acknowledges to himself—in spite of his anger and disappointment—that Ron deserved the honor as much as he

did (OP 162-7). Once at school, Hermione's full recognition of the danger posed by Professor Umbridge's refusal to teach practical Defense Against the Dark Arts (given that she and her fellow students will soon leave the protection of Hogwarts for a world threatened by Voldemort and his Death Eaters) is shown by her use of Voldemort's terrifying real name for the very first time (OP 324-8). And after the battle with Voldemort in the Ministry of Magic, Dumbledore risks Harry's respect and affection by insisting upon taking the blame for Sirius's death from him, for Dumbledore knew but kept secret Voldemort's likely plan to lure Harry into the Department of Mysteries (OP 825-6). Hard and painful truths do not deter these characters from seeking and acting upon their knowledge—and without this fundamental honesty, all of their other virtues would be of little use.

The lessons learned from the positive and negative examples of honesty in *Harry Potter* show us the flaws of the recent philosophical defenses of self-deception. However, the psychological data on positive illusions, which claims that illusion is integral to a positive view of life and thus to well-being, remains for us to consider. Once again, characters from *Harry Potter* can help us clarify the issues.

Making Sense of Positive Illusions

On the whole, the psychological data indicates that normal people's judgments about themselves, their degree of control over events, and their prospects for the future tend towards the positive—at times overreaching the evidence or conflicting with the facts. The concept of positive illusions attempts to explain these findings by appealing to “pervasive, enduring, and systematic” self-deceptions in which negative information is not actively denied or repressed, but instead interpreted through “best possible light” filters.¹¹ Clearly, some people do rely upon illusions to maintain a positive self-image. Draco Malfoy, for example, artificially inflates his sense of self-worth by judging people on the basis of purity of blood, a characteristic wholly irrelevant to either magical ability or moral character but which he conveniently possesses (CS 222). He knows about Muggle-born Hermione Granger's better grades, but explains them away as the result of favoritism by the teachers (CS 52). Yet like real-life racism, this self-enhancing belief is not the “benign fiction” that positive illusions are claimed to be.¹²

Despite the clear influence of self-deception in some such cases, the evidence for widespread positive illusion is scant. The empirical studies show that positive views are common—but cannot say whether they are self-deceptions, honest errors, or correct judgments. For example, pervasive illusion is supposed to be proven from the fact that “most individuals see themselves as better than the average person” since it is “logically impossible for most people to be better than the average person.”¹³ However, for any positive trait, half of all people are truly above average—and the errors of those who misjudge do not taint the accuracy of those who judge well. Hermione surely knows herself to be one of the best students at Hogwarts regardless of how many other students might wrongly think themselves equal to her. Moreover, even those who misjudge in a consistently positive direction are not necessarily self-deceived, as subtle asymmetries in information can quietly skew judgments in which a person compares himself to others. A mediocre student may not realize that other students tend to talk about their grades when anxious and worried but not when confident and secure—or that when studying in the common room, he would tend to notice those goofing off rather than those also quietly working.

¹¹ Taylor and Brown, “Illusion and Well-Being,” p. 194.; Taylor, *Positive Illusions*, p. 126.

¹² Taylor, *Positive Illusions*, p. 123.

¹³ Taylor and Brown, “Illusion and Well-Being,” p. 195.

Reasonable differences in standards for positive qualities—such as whether a good student is one who earns top grades, is well-rounded, or works hard—may also generate the illusion of positive bias within groups. After all, students will not only judge themselves according to their own standards, but also develop their skills and talents in accordance with it. So the fact that more people see themselves as above average than is actually possible for the group as a whole does not prove self-deception in any given case, as other plausible explanations of the data remain unexplored.

Since the other evidence cited as proof of widespread positive illusions suffers from similar inadequacies, the psychological research does not demonstrate that self-deception is either widespread or beneficial.¹⁴ In fact, more recent studies suggest that illusory self-esteem is related to narcissism rather than mental health (as in Draco Malfoy) and that realistic self-assessment is coupled with high self-esteem in some people (as in Harry, Hermione, and Dumbledore).¹⁵

An Honest Life

The philosophical and psychological arguments defending self-deception claim that a healthy, happy, and meaningful life cannot be achieved honestly. As the characters from the *Harry Potter* novels have illustrated for us, these arguments are ultimately unpersuasive. They overlook fundamental harms of self-deception, such as painful reminders of the truth, pressures to protect the core deceit with layers of further lies, and habits of denial and rationalization nurtured by even small deceptions. Our brief review of the psychological data on “positive illusions” showed that positive views of life can be and likely often are fully honest.

In addition, the fundamental honesty of Harry Potter suggests a more positive principle, namely that “the achievement of values is the norm” of human life for those who choose to “think, value, and act rationally.”¹⁶ Termed the “benevolent universe premise” by Ayn Rand, this principle reminds us that the world is fundamentally comprehensible to the human mind and hospitable to human life—but only for those committed to understanding its nature and acting accordingly. In many ways, Harry’s life exemplifies this benevolent universe premise. Whisked away from the neglect and malice of the Dursleys’ home to the wonders of Hogwarts, Harry slowly develops the knowledge, skills, virtues, and maturity necessary for a successful and happy life as a wizard. He builds close and steady friendships with Ron and Hermione, becomes an exemplary Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, and repeatedly thwarts Voldemort’s attempts to return to power. He does not relish the dangers he faces, whether fighting the troll with Ron to protect Hermione (SS 175-6), rescuing Ginny Weasley from the Chamber of Secrets (CS 306-22), discovering the true identity of the traitor who betrayed his parents (PA 338-77), dueling with the newly-embodied Voldemort in the cemetery (GF 659-69), or fighting off the dementors in the alley in Little Whinging (OP 15-9). Yet knowing that his own life and the lives of loved ones are at stake, he does not shrink from these dangers. Each success deepens his self-confidence and thereby helps him face future challenges. This virtuous cycle of success and confidence could not be sustained by the self-deception of false hope, blind wishes, and unearned honors. Without a genuine trust in the logic of his reasoning, the morality of his principles, the wisdom of his choices, and his skills in magic, Harry’s self-confidence would melt away as

¹⁴ See Randall Colvin and Jack Block, “Do Positive Illusions Foster Mental Health? An Examination of the Taylor and Brown Formulation,” *Psychological Bulletin* 116, 1 (1996).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁶ Leonard Peikoff, “The Philosophy of Objectivism” (Connecticut: Second Renaissance, 1976).

quickly as does Draco's at the prospect of entering the Forbidden Forest at night (SS 249-50). Of course, Harry's commitment to the facts does not preclude errors and missteps, but only helps him correct them in light of new information. So although he initially accepts Tom Riddle's story that Hagrid opened the Chamber of Secrets years before, he soon realizes that Aragog's account shows that Hagrid was falsely accused (CS 246-8, 277-82). In essence, Harry's basic honesty and other positive qualities create a "benevolent universe" for him in which success, self-confidence, and optimism are entirely just and natural.

The recent arguments for self-deception imply that people like Harry Potter are impossible in real life and thus that our respect and admiration for this young hero is misguided. We should be thankful they are wrong. In the end, the love of wisdom at the heart of philosophy reminds us that a commitment to the truth, wherever it may lead us, is indispensable to a happy and moral life.¹⁷

¹⁷ This essay is written in memory of Bob Zinser—a friend, fellow fan of Harry Potter, and man passionately committed to the truth.