Course Description

Most of us can recall having self-deceived at some point – or at least, we can think of instances when we have observed others doing so. In fact, it seems that self-deception is widespread. People deceive themselves about why they failed exams, why they skipped going to the gym, and about how many glasses of wine they will have later. They lie to themselves about how smart their children are, how prejudiced their judgement of others is, and about when they will sit down and start that paper. But how can someone pull off a lie to herself? Why doesn’t the self-deceiver just see through the lie for what it really is? After all, she is the one ‘telling’ it. Moreover, since the self-deceiver is both the deceiver and the deceived, it looks like we have to explain how she can sustain contradictory beliefs. That is, it seems she believes both the welcome belief (the pleasing belief she claims to hold) and the unwelcome belief (the uncomfortable belief she self-deceives to avoid). Unlike deception of another person, then, it is hard to understand how self-deception is even possible.

This course explores a range of attempts to address the above puzzles and to better understand self-deception. We will ask: What is self-deception and how is it possible? Can self-deception make us happy? Am I doing something morally wrong when I self-deceive and, if so, why is it wrong?

Texts: There is no required textbook or coursepack for this course. All required readings will be made available through myCourses, either as PDFs or links to library and internet resources.

Pre-requisites: There are no formal pre-requisites for this course but many readings are challenging. Expect to spend some time on readings and to read things more than once. If you would like to discuss the requirements of the course in more detail, please come to speak to me in office hours.

Assignments and Grades: One short paper (15%), one term paper (30%), one short presentation (10%), and a take-home final exam (30%). The remaining 15% will be determined by your participation (including comments on a peer’s draft) and attendance.

1. Paper 1 (15%) A short paper (4 pages) on an assigned topic, due on February 9th.

2. Comments on a draft of a peer’s paper (5%) You will be asked to bring an anonymised (student number only) 2-3 page draft of your term paper to class on March 7th. You will receive a peer’s draft and must provide comments on this to be handed in on March 14th. Further guidance will be given in class. Please note: drafts will not be accepted after March 7th and must be handed in to me before being exchanged with a peer.
3. **Paper 2 (30%)** A term paper (6 pages) on an assigned topic, due on **March 21**th.

4. **Short presentation (10%)** A short presentation (5-6 minutes) on your chosen topic with two discussion questions for the group. Presentations must be linked to the class topic and reading. Presenters are responsible for leading a short discussion on their topic and questions after their presentation. Topics must be confirmed with me by the class before the presentation at the latest. Further detail will be given in class.

5. **Take-home exam (30%)** This will range over material from the whole course and will include both short answer questions and an essay (focusing on the latter part of the course material). This is a take-home exam and you will receive it approximately 2 weeks before the due date (to be announced during the semester).

6. **Attendance and participation (10%)** Attending and actively participating is mandatory. Students should come to class having already done the reading and should have questions and comments on the reading prepared. Attendance will be taken with two-minute papers at the end of class. Students may miss one class without this affecting attendance (in addition to absences for which medical notes are provided).

**Extension policy:** No extensions will be granted without a medical note. Late work will be penalised at the rate of one letter grade per day past the due date. For instance, a paper that is evaluated as a B+, if one day late, will receive a B, and if three days late, will receive a C+.

**Email policy:** Please come to office hours if your question requires a long response. Allow 48 hours for a response over email. Please make sure that the response to your question cannot be found on the syllabus.

**Policy on laptops and mobile phones:** Laptops are permitted for academic purposes only. Mobile phones must be switched off completely during class.

**Academic integrity:** McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information).

**Language policy:** In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

**Access:** If you have accessibility needs, please feel free to contact me to arrange a time to discuss these. It would be helpful if you could also contact the Office for Students with Disabilities (www.mcgill.ca/osd) at 514-398-6009 to make them aware of any requirements you may have.

**Please note:** In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

According to Senate regulations, instructors are not permitted to make special arrangements for final exams. Please consult the Calendar, section 4.7.2.1, General University Information & Regulations at www.mcgill.ca
Schedule of readings (subject to change - please refer to syllabus distributed on first day of class)

Classes are on Tuesdays and Thursdays, starting on Thursday January 5th. This list is subject to change; notice of any changes will be given in class and posted on myCourses. Possible presentation days are marked with an asterisk (*).

Students are expected to have done the readings before coming to class.

January

Week 1 5th  Introduction  
- handout

Week 2 10th  Intentionalism (1): Compartmentalism  
- Davidson, “Deception and Division”
12th  Intentionalism (2)*

Week 3 17th  Intentionalism (3)*  
- Bermúdez, “Self-deception, intentions and contradictory beliefs”
29th  Deflating the Unwelcome Belief*  
- Optional: Talbott, “Intentional Self-Deception in a Single Coherent Self”

Week 4 24th  Deflating the Welcome Belief*  
- Gendler, “Self-Deception as Pretense”
26th  Non-doxasticism*  
- Archer, “Nondoxasticism about Self-Deception”

Week 5 31st  Deflationism (1)*  
- Mele, “Real self-deception”

February

Week 6 7th  The Tension of Self-Deception*  
9th  Self-Deception as Avoidance*  
- Bach, “An Analysis of Self-Deception”

[Paper 1 due]
Week 7
14th Guest speaker: Jason D'Cruz, University at Albany, SUNY (TBA)
16th Summary of Intentionalism and Deflationism*

Week 8
21st Self-Consciousness (1)*
   - Zahavi and Kriegel, “For-me-ness: What it is and what it is not”

23rd Self-Consciousness (2)*
   - handout

Reading Week

March

Week 9
7th Self-Consciousness (3)
   - handout

9th Self-Consciousness (4)
   - handout

Week 10
14th Sartrean Self-Deception (1)*
   - Sartre, “Bad Faith” from Being and Nothingness

16th Sartrean Self-Deception (2)*
   - Sartre, “Bad Faith” from Being and Nothingness

Week 11
21st Sartrean Self-Deception (3)*
   - McCulloch, Chapter 4 from Using Sartre

23rd Sartrean Self-Deception (4)
   - handout

Week 12
28th Can Self-Deception Make You Happy?*
   - Van Leeuwen, “Self-Deception Won’t Make You Happy”

30th Using Self-Deception to Sustain Beliefs*
   - Optional: “The Ethics of Belief”, Stanford Encyclopaedia

April

Week 13
4th The Ethics of Self-Deception*
   - Butler, “Upon Self-Deciet”
   - Optional: Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief”
The Ethics of Self-Deception*
- Baron, “What Is Wrong with Self-Deception?”
- Optional: Kirsch, “What’s So Great about Reality?”

Week 14 11th Review for final exam – exam released in class

Exam due date TBA