

The Psychology of Self-Deception as Illustrated in Literary Characters

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Few people nowadays know what man is. Many sense this ignorance and die the more easily because of it . . . I do not consider myself less ignorant than most people . . . I have been and still am a seeker, but I have ceased to question stars and books; I have begun to listen to the teachings my blood whispers to me. My story is not a pleasant one; it is neither sweet nor harmonious as invented stories are; it has the taste of nonsense and chaos, of madness and dreams like the lives of all men who stop deceiving themselves. (Hesse 105)

Introduction

We have all experienced insight resulting from the recognition that some prior belief or perception was incorrect. In this instance, pleasure and happiness may result from the intrinsic delight that often accompanies authentic learning. Conversely, anxiety and fear may result from a disturbing realization: If what I once believed to be true now appears false, other beliefs may prove to be false as well. The intensity of response to each insight is relative to the salience of the knowledge domain: namely, how central the notion is to an individual's sense of self. Therefore, if the new insight involves self-understanding, accepting the new information would obviously entail altering self-perception. In this case, the "saliency test"—a test to see whether information is relevant to self and hence worthy of attention—is met, regardless of how inconsequential the information might appear to an outside observer. Thus, the potential exists for any kind of new self-referential information to be emotionally laden, which means that the potential for invoking anxiety or fear is exacerbated.

We are continually flooded with information that could challenge self-image. In an effort to avoid damaging it, we often deceive ourselves. The purpose of this inquiry is to define self-deception, its potential, its functions, and the range of strategies that are employed in avoiding or distorting information that conflicts with self-perception. In doing so, we attempt a phenomenology of self-deception. Given the inherent paradox of the subject matter—the possibility that anything we bring to bear based on our own experiences might itself be a deception—we turn to literary characters for insight,

namely Jean-Baptiste in Camus's *The Fall*, Captain Vere in Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor*, Howard Campbell in Vonnegut's *Mother Night*, and the Mariner in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

I. Definitional and Conceptual Issues

According to Freud, knowledge begins with perception and ends with responses. As information flows, it can be diverted, transformed, or erased. A modification begins at the first perceptible moment, when information passes through a "first memory system," or what contemporary cognitive psychologists refer to as the "sensory memory":

Freud's prescience is exemplified in his positing a perceptual capacity that has no memory of its own, takes fleeting note of the sensory world, but stores no lasting impressions. He saw that the functions of *receiving* sensory signals and *registering* them are separate, a fact later borne out by the neurophysiology of the sensory cortex. It was not until 1960 that his description of perception found a scientific basis with the experimental discovery of what we today call "sensory storage," a fleeting, immediate impression of our sensory world. (Goleman 58)

From this first memory system, information can either dissipate or continue to flow to one of a number of other memory systems. As it does, only a small percentage enters conscious awareness, the rest resides below its threshold. According to Freud, the key tenet to self-deception is that though we are not aware of the existence of this information, it exerts a considerable influence over our behavior. Once memories are somehow designated as "threatening," the information is either transformed (via mechanisms of defense) or barred from conscious awareness by cognitive censors. The censors filter out information likely to provoke pain or anxiety, while allowing non-threatening information to flow. The immediate relevance of Freud's model to the phenomenon of self-deception is readily apparent. Each lacuna (perceptual gap or cognitive omission) prevents an accurate or complete perception of reality. But, because we are seldom aware of the lacuna, we believe our cognitions accurate.

Jean-Paul Sartre also addressed self-deception, or, as he termed it, "*mauvaise foi*" ("bad faith"). In his discussion of "bad faith," he defines consciousness as "a being, the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being" (Sartre 147); like William James, he perceives that consciousness would be more accurately conveyed as a verb than as a noun. The apprehension of its own "nothingness," which creates a sense of "lacking" or "need," directs itself towards some type of understanding, similar to William James' link between attention and meaning. A thing may be present to a person a thousand times, but if it goes completely unnoticed by the individual, it cannot be said to enter his experience. A person's "empirical thought depends on the things he has experienced, but what these shall be is to a large

extent determined by his habits of attention” (James 286). Thus James concludes that all of our consciousness—our sense of meaning, our very sense of self—must be constructed from material to which we have attended. The meaning we derive as we experience life, the consciousness that is a stream of this ongoing experience, and the self that we construct as a personal representation of consciousness are all dependent upon our habits of attention. Take the slave, for example, who unmindful of his severe constraints, suddenly realizes his current position and now attends to advantages enjoyed by his master. The freedom his master enjoys becomes very appealing. His awareness, however, of severe punishment or even death for pursuing this freedom causes him to bury this realization in a morass of reasons why the life of the slave is enviable. In Sartre’s view, he now exists with “bad faith.”

Sartre concedes that “bad faith” can best be understood as “a lie to oneself, on condition that we distinguish the lie to oneself from lying in general” (Sartre 148), which requires another person. Herein lies a key distinction in his formulation: The liar, in order to complete his task, must maintain complete lucidity about some truth that he possesses. One cannot lie without possessing some *personal* truth, and lying is different than simply being in error. Taking it further, Sartre directly criticizes Freud’s model, especially the concept of the censor:

Thus, psychoanalysis substitutes for the notion of bad faith, the idea of a lie without a liar; it allows me to understand how it is possible for me to be lied to without lying to myself since it places me in the same relation to myself that the Other is in respect to me. (Sartre 154)

In other words, Sartre argues that the censor must know a truth in order to provide the resistance that Freud describes. “There must be an original intention and a project of ‘bad faith’; this project implies a comprehension of ‘bad faith’ as such and a pre-reflective apprehension [of] consciousness as affecting itself with ‘bad faith’” (Sartre 150-151). To deceive ourselves “successfully,” we must pre-reflectively be aware that we are acting in “bad faith.” Placing the source of “bad faith” in a “location” of the mind that cannot be easily accessed (like the Freudian unconscious) renders the project of authenticity virtually impossible. Sartre believed that adhering to a “unity of consciousness” allows the project of “bad faith” to be a *conscious* project and places the locus of control for “bad faith” with the individual.

Herbert Fingarette attempts to avoid the paradox of the Freud–Sartre debate: How can one know something, and, at the same time, not know it?:

Rather than the paradox of knowing ignorance, I have treated as central the capacity of a person to identify himself to himself as a particular person engaged in the world in specific ways, the capacity of a person to reject such identification, and the supposition that an individual can continue to be engaged in the world in a certain

way even though he does not acknowledge it as his personal engagement and therefore displays none of the evidence of such acknowledgment. (Fingarette 91)

We all engage ourselves with the world in some way, but one does not necessarily articulate this engagement; that is, one may fail to reflect on it. According to Fingarette, an individual may either avow this engagement as his own, or disavow it altogether. To disavow selected sequences of engagement is similar to denying responsibility. Although the original project of “bad faith” (disavowing elements of one’s experience) is itself a decision made in “bad faith,” it does not begin as intentional deception. Instead, the decision to avow or disavow is influenced by the threat or reward such an apprehension poses toward self. If choosing to avow a particular engagement with reality threatens the current self-schema, then attention may be directed to another aspect of one’s engagement with the world. In a manner consistent with Festinger’s description of cognitive dissonance, anxiety is avoided by not “noticing” the very thing that threatens one’s identity. The crucial step toward “bad faith” is *rooted in a failure of attention*: we disavow by “not noticing,” and then failing to notice that we have not noticed. By adhering to this model, Fingarette avoids the infinite regression into which a Freudian view may lapse. If one defensive maneuver covers another, it is impossible to distinguish the last defense from prior ones. Part of our psyche shields another part from awareness.

But, according to Fingarette, one is not destined to a life of denial and deception. To the contrary, he believes that one may choose the careful, painstaking path of avowing one’s engagements with the world (Fischer 148). But avowing our engagements with the world must entail making our motivations apparent. The individual engaged in self-deception refuses. With each omission, the project of deception becomes more rooted in the nature of self.

How well do the theories of Freud, Sartre, and Fingarette capture the essence of self-deception? Is it ever possible to *know* when one is deceiving oneself or can we only become aware of the deception after it occurs? To answer these questions and more, we examine four literary characters actively involved in self-deception.

II. Jean-Baptiste

Jean-Baptiste, the main character in Camus’ *The Fall*, serves as a fine example of an individual practicing self-deception. The work describes Jean-Baptiste’s confession to a man in a bar, and throughout, he emphasizes his extraordinary ability to forget: “To be sure, I knew my failings and regretted them. Yet I continued to forget them with a rather meritorious obstinacy” (Camus 76). This admission seems peculiar; most do not boast forgetfulness. But, as our self-deception theorists remind us, forgetting something—especially something relevant to self—can be a useful tool for

maintaining consistency and avoiding anxiety or pain. In this case, the fact that Jean-Baptiste regretted his failings illustrates that he was aware of them. In addition, the pleasure derived from his superior ability to forget indicates that these failings must have initially created considerable anxiety. The following passage suggests a purpose to his motivated forgetting:

In the interest of fairness, it should be said that sometimes my forgetfulness was praiseworthy. You have noticed that there are people whose religion consists in forgiving all offenses, and who do in fact forgive them but never forget them? I wasn't good enough to forgive offenses, but eventually I always forgot them. And the man who thought I hated him couldn't get over seeing me tip my hat to him with a smile. According to his nature, he would then admire my nobility of character or scorn my ill breeding without realizing that my reason was simpler: I had forgotten his very name. The same infirmity that often made me indifferent or ungrateful in such cases made me magnanimous. (Camus 49-50)

Notice that at the same time Baptiste is confessing his forgetfulness, he paradoxically identifies the individuals he has supposedly forgotten. Therefore, he has not really forgotten, nor has he exchanged forgetting for forgiveness. Consider another instance of his lapse in memory:

I contemplated, for instance, jostling the blind on the street; and from the secret, unexpected joy this gave me, I recognized how much a part of my soul loathed them; I planned to puncture the tires of invalids' vehicles, to go and shout "lousy proletarian" under the scaffoldings on which laborers were working, to slap infants in the subway. I dreamed of all that and did none of it, *or if I did something of the sort, I have forgotten it.* (Camus 91-92; italics ours)

Baptiste's desire to engage in destructive and antisocial behavior is set against his ability to forget these impulses.

Motivated forgetting contributes to his positive self-image.

Jean-Baptiste avoided telling the man in the bar that he did nothing to prevent a woman from committing suicide (only later does the reader make this unsettling discovery). The following passage suggests that though he avoided dealing with the woman at the time, it affected him:

Whether ordinary or not, it served for some time to raise me above the daily routine and I literally soared for a period of years, for which to tell the truth, I still long in my heart of hearts. I soared until the evening when . . . But no, that's another matter and it must be forgotten . . . I ran on like that, always heaped with favors, never satiated, without knowing where to stop, until the day—until the evening rather when the music stopped and the lights went out. (Camus 29-30)

Again we confront a paradox: it is Jean-Baptiste alone who broaches suicide, while he simultaneously suppresses the thoughts from consciousness in order to forget.

Psychological research on memory suggests that the suppression of a painful thought can lead to an obsession with the suppressed memory (Wegner et al.). In fact, the difficulty in suppressing even a simple, non-painful thought can be easily illustrated in Wegner's challenge, which we urge the reader to undertake: "Right now, try not to think of a white bear. Keep trying. Do not think of a white bear. Remember, don't think of a white bear." The dilemma is evident, suggesting the complexity of mental processing required in simply forgetting a white bear. When we attempt to forget an experience that is rooted in reality and painful to behold, the complexity may be attenuated.

Camus, a keen observer of human experience, recognized that multiple themes define the overall project of self-deception. While motivated forgetting provides one possibility, another is laughter, which appears throughout Baptiste's confession. At one point, Jean-Baptiste states, "I again began to laugh. But it was another kind of laugh; rather like the one I had heard on the Pont des Arts. I was laughing at my speeches and my pleadings in court" (Camus 65). Baptiste realizes the absurdity of his actions as a lawyer when he questions his own arguments. Laughter serves to close the gap between the disparity of what he believes and how he presents himself; Jean-Baptiste laughs to avoid the pain of incongruity.

Jean-Baptiste is playing the part of a lawyer, and as Sartre contends, we assume any convenient role in order to avoid making decisions. When the role gains ascendancy over self, we can simply respond reflexively to its demands by thinking and feeling nothing. His lack of awareness is evident throughout his confession:

Why, shortly after the evening I told you about, I discovered something. When I would leave a blind man on the sidewalk to which I had convoyed him, I used to tip my hat to him. Obviously the hat tipping wasn't intended for him, since he couldn't see it. To whom was it addressed? To the public. After playing my part, I would take the bow. Not bad, eh? (Camus 47)

To be sure, I occasionally pretended to take life seriously. But very soon the frivolity of seriousness struck me and I merely went on playing my role as well as I could. (Camus 87)

Playing a role, or as Fromm would put it, "escaping from freedom," allowed Jean-Baptiste to avoid responsibility. By purposefully forgetting aspects of himself, and laughing at the "frivolity" of his endeavors, he continues playing a role. The dictates of the role, in turn, provide a false sense of consistency.

Ultimately, being judged is Baptiste's greatest fear, and the avoidance of judgment his greatest motivation:

But I was aware only of the dissonance and disorder that filled me; I felt vulnerable and open to public accusation. In my eyes my fellows ceased to be the respectful public to which I was accustomed. The circle of which I was the center broke and they lined up in a row as on the judges' bench. In short, the moment I grasped that there was something to judge in me, I realized that there was in them an irresistible vocation for judgment. Yes, they were there as before, but they were laughing. (Camus 78)

Baptiste's awareness of this internal conflict leads him to the realization that if he can judge himself, then so can everyone else. By refusing to acknowledge faults in himself and constructing a view of self without them, he can easily defend against the judgments of others.

In spite of Baptiste's self-deceptive behaviors, evidence that contradicts one's self-concept that is "out of character" still manages to break through to awareness. To combat it, Baptiste practices diffusion:

But to be happy it is essential not to be concerned with others. Consequently, there is no escape. Happy and judged, or absolved and wretched. (Camus 80)

That is what no man (except those who are not really alive—in other words, wise men) can endure. Spitefulness is the only possible ostentation. People hasten to judge in order not to be judged themselves. (Camus 80)

Now my words have a purpose. They have the purpose, obviously, of silencing the laughter, of avoiding judgment personally, though there is apparently no escape. Is not the great thing that stands in the way of our escaping it the fact that we are the first to condemn ourselves? Therefore it is essential to begin by extending the condemnation to all, without distinction, in order to thin it out at the start. (Camus 131)

The sting of incongruent information can be softened: It is not that "I" am that way; it is rather that "everyone" is that way. In one sense, Jean-Baptiste's strategy to avoid judgment is similar to the idea of diffusion of responsibility (Darley & Latane; Latane & Nida). Rather than hold himself responsible, he attributes the characteristics to everyman. In another sense, this mirrors Freud's notion of projection, save for a minor modification: I see the characteristic as "within me" at the same time that I project it onto "you." In Freud's scheme, we make such projections while denying projected content as relevant to self.

The more I accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you. Even better, I provoke you into judging yourself, and this relieves me of that much of the burden. (Camus 140)

Jean-Baptiste's strategy follows a certain logic: If I find something undesirable within myself, then, whether they are aware of it or not, other people must have this same attribute. If everyone else possesses this negative characteristic, then there is

nothing *particularly* wrong with me. The undesirable attribute is not distinctive to self, and therefore, does not need to be incorporated into my self-concept; the “saliency test” is no longer met.

III. Captain Vere

In Melville’s novella, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, the simple story of a conflict between shipmates plays a subservient role to the discussion of self-deception. At the center of this discussion is the Captain, Edward Vere. The plot concerns Billy Budd, a moral young sailor, who accidentally kills his superior, John Claggart, the evil master-at arms. When this event occurs, Vere must make a crucial decision: Should he uphold naval law and condemn Billy to death, or do what is morally right, opt for another punishment, and let him live? He knows that Claggart falsely accused Billy of mutiny. He also knows that Billy has a speech impediment, and therefore has to resort to using his fist to defend against the accusation. No sooner than Billy accidentally lands the fatal blow, Vere has already sealed the sailor’s fate. He states of Claggart: “Struck dead by an angel of God, yet the angel must hang” (Melville 101). The reader immediately notices a conflict arising in Vere. He considers Billy an angel, but believes that he must sentence him to death. The reader asks: How can one condemn an angel to death? The answer lies in a study of Vere’s self-deception.

There is a constant struggle between Vere’s morality, and the naval laws he must uphold as captain. In deceiving himself, Vere, like our other literary characters, is able to justify his actions and resolve the struggle. The work itself is rather deceptive, so we must look beyond what is stated, when an index is given, to what is implied about this struggle. In Chapter 11, the dialogue between the narrator and “his senior” is one such time. The narrator states:

Knowledge of the world assuredly implies the knowledge of human nature, and in most of its varieties.

His “senior” replies:

Yes, but a superficial knowledge of it, serving ordinary purposes. But for anything deeper, I am not certain whether to know the world and to know human nature be not two distinct branches of knowledge, which while they may coexist, yet either may exist with little or nothing of the other. (Melville 75)

This exchange suggests that one may be knowledgeable of the world, or reality, yet create a division between an understanding of human nature, or the identity of true self, and consciousness. For one who accepts reality and perceives himself accurately, there is no division: “human nature,” or the identity of true self, would be included in “knowledge of the world.” In Vere’s case, they are “branched” by his self-deception.

As the previous example illustrates, the reader must recognize the “double meanings” (Melville 49) inherent in almost every aspect of the work. The “right” meaning is sometimes hidden. “Plain readings” do not go well with Melville—the reader must delve deeper. As Watson states, “Though the book be read many times, the student may still remain baffled by Melville’s arrangement of images. The story is so solidly filled out as to suggest dimensions in all directions. As soon as the mind fastens upon one subject, others flash into being” (Watson 44). The following passage may “baffle,” but if we delve further, we can uncover Vere’s deception of self. The narrator states:

Forty years after a battle it is easy for a non-combatant to reason about how it ought to have been fought. It is another thing personally and under fire to direct the fighting while involved . . . Much so with respect to other emergencies involving considerations both practical and moral, and when it is imperative promptly to act . . . Little ween the snug card-players in the cabin of the responsibilities of the sleepless man on the bridge. (Melville 114)

The “battle” metaphorically represents what happened to Billy. Vere’s self-deception is the “noncombatant” who is “reasoning” about those events: “It” was not there; therefore “it’s reasoning” is not based in reality. It speculates about the “oughts.” Its very purpose is to distort reality. His consciousness is “personally under fire” and “involved” in the actual events. Notice how Melville hints at this correlation by describing it as similar to “other emergencies involving considerations both practical and moral.” To drive this home, he utilizes another clever metaphor in the last sentence: Vere’s self-deception is the “snug card players,” which “little weens . . . the *responsibilities* of the sleepless man on the bridge” (Melville 114, italics mine) or, in other words, his consciousness.

Vere knows what is morally right, yet tries to deceive not only himself, but other as well. In Sartre’s terminology, he lives with “bad faith.” He demands “the maintenance of secrecy” (Melville 103) in what turns out to be the fatal meeting between himself, Claggart, and Billy. He knows that this decision is questionable, and, in the end, an open meeting might have prevented the homicide. Additionally, Vere forbids emotions from swaying the jurors’ verdict in the trial. He says that the heart “must here be ruled out” (Melville 111), and they must “strive against *scruples* that may tend to enervate decision,” due to “paramount obligations” (obligations to a man who is practicing self-deception). He also knows that there is good reason for the jurors’ “troubled hesitancy” (Melville 110) in sentencing Billy to death, but he tells the jurors to follow his example, and “to challenge” their “scruples.” He pleads that they “recur to the facts: In war-time at sea a man-of-war’s-man strikes his superior in grade, and the blow kills” (Melville 111). Billy *did* kill Claggart, but it was unintentional and precipitated by a serious, false accusation. Therefore, Vere does not really adhere to

the facts in the case, and by doing so, he displays a definite “disdain for innocence” (Melville 78).

Another example of Vere’s self-deception is the following broad description: “His settled convictions were as a dyke against those invading waters of novel opinion, social, political and otherwise” (Melville 123-4). “Settled convictions” is close-mindedness, the enemy of accurately perceiving reality, and “otherwise” is all-inclusive: The “invading waters” of accurate self-perception would definitely fall under this description.

The following passage describes Vere’s attitude towards his companions concerning their conversations, and it gives the reader additional insight into his self-deception: Since not only did the Captain’s discourse never fall into the jocosely familiar, but in illustrating of any point touching the stirring personages and events of the time he would be as apt to cite some historic character or incident of antiquity as that he would cite from the moderns. He seemed unmindful of the circumstance that to his bluff company such remote allusions, however pertinent they might really be, were altogether alien to men whose reading was mainly confined to the journals. But considerateness in such matters is not easy to natures constituted like Captain Vere’s. Their honesty prescribes to them directness, sometimes far-reaching like that of a migratory fowl that in its flight never heeds when it crosses a frontier. (Melville 63)

This description clearly illustrates that Vere is not concerned with reality. Instead, his attention is directed at “historic characters” and “incidents of antiquity.” Therefore, he is “unmindful” of the fact that his conversations do not make sense. He bars this information from awareness with cognitive censors in order to reduce the likelihood of experiencing the pain or anxiety inherent in facing reality. Vere fails to be attentive (a fatal step toward “bad faith”); he “never heeds the frontier.” He disavows, and in doing so, fails to accept responsibility. His denial ultimately destroys both himself and Billy.

Scholars familiar with the work of Melville know that he is a master at the art of ambiguity, a deceptive, yet effective literary device. He uses ambiguity as sly indexes to how we should read the narrative. The narrative should bring us to certain realizations concerning self-deception, not personal opinions concerning specific events. The following passage describes the closeted interview between Vere and Billy. The scene takes place before Billy’s trial and contains interesting ambiguities that further illustrate Vere’s self-deception:

That the condemned one suffered less than he who mainly had effected the condemnation was apparently indicated by the former’s exclamation in the scene soon perforce to be touched upon . . . Between the entrance into the cabin of him who never

left it alive, and him who when he did leave it left it as one condemned to die.
(Melville 115-116)

The reader must ask himself: Is the narrator referring to Vere or to Billy? Who is the “condemned one and who effected it?” Who is the “former?” Who “never left it alive?” This leads to some very weighty conclusions when you consider that the descriptions apply as much to Vere as they do to Billy. Vere’s self-deception would definitely cause him to suffer. Self-deception, in general, can be described as the condemnation of the truth and the killing of reality.

When Billy is hung, the narrator describes Vere’s reaction: “Vere, either thro’ stoic self-control or a sort of momentary paralysis induced by emotional shock, stood erectly rigid as a musket in the ship-armorers’ rack” (Melville 87). This “momentary” paralysis is his consciousness creeping in, but he blocks it from awareness with cognitive sensors in order to reduce anxiety and stands rigidly defiant. Like most of us, Vere is not a one-dimensional deviant who enthusiastically embraces evil, but as he continues down a path of deception, he is more than able to sacrifice a human life. Melville attempts to convey to the reader that it doesn’t have to be this way. The novella concludes with Vere murmuring, “Billy Budd, Billy Budd” (Melville 129) on his deathbed. He is remorseful for his actions, and has perhaps gained insight—but much too late and at such a cost.

IV. Howard Campbell

In *Mother Night*, Vonnegut’s characterization of Howard Campbell, a renowned American born playwright living in Germany during the Nazis’ ascent to power, illustrates a classic account of self-deception. The work revolves around the repercussions of Campbell’s decision to pose as a Nazi propagandist. The plan is that Nazi war secrets will be encoded in his radio broadcasts, thereby aiding allied forces. On the surface, Campbell will appear to be a Nazi, but he is actually an allied supporter. Note that Vonnegut begins the work with a moral to the tale: “We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be” (Vonnegut V). Campbell relays secret messages to Allied Forces, but because they are embedded in Nazi propaganda and delivered so persuasively, he inspires the Germans. In the end, we must ask: “Who is Campbell really helping?” The answer to that question portends the question of identity: Which identity is the “real” Howard Campbell? The following dialogue between Campbell and another character expounds on this question:

“Three people in all the world knew me for what I was—” I said.

“And all the rest—” I shrugged. “They knew you for what you were too,” he said abruptly.

“That wasn’t me,” I said, startled by his sharpness.

“Whoever it was—” said Wirtanen, “he was one of the most vicious sons of bitches who ever lived.” (Vonnegut 138)

The character, Wirtanen, poses the haunting question: If not Campbell, who was this renowned Nazi propagandist? Campbell did not know the answer, and did not realize the effects of his “playing a role.” Vonnegut delves into this further in a conversation between Campbell and his proud Nazi father-in-law:

“And do you know why I don’t care now if you were a spy or not?” he said. “You could tell me now that you were a spy, and we would go on talking calmly, just as we’re talking now. I would let you wander off to wherever spies go when a war is over. You know why?” he said.

“No,” I said.

“Because you could never have served the enemy as well as you served us,” he said. “I realized that almost all the ideas that I hold now, that make me unashamed of anything I may have felt or done as a Nazi, came not from Hitler, not from Goebbels, not from Himmler—but from you.” He took my hand. “You alone kept me from concluding that Germany had gone insane.” (Vonnegut 80-81)

Further developing the self-deception theme, Vonnegut relates a dialogue between Campbell and Adolf Eichmann that takes place in an Israeli prison following the war:

“May I ask a personal question?” I said . . .

“Certainly . . .”

“Do you feel that you are guilty of murdering six million Jews?” I said.

“Absolutely not,” said the architect of Auschwitz . . .

“Listen—” he said, “about those six million—”

“Yes?” I said.

“I could spare you a few for your book,” he said. “I don’t think I really need them all . . .” It’s possible that Eichmann wanted me to recognize that I had killed a lot of people, too, by the exercise of my fat mouth. But I doubt that he was that subtle a man, man of many parts as he was. I think if we got right down to it, that, out of the six million murders generally regarded as his, he wouldn’t lend me so much as one. If he were to start farming out all those murders, after all, Eichmann as Eichmann’s idea of Eichmann would disappear.” (Vonnegut 123-125)

By having Campbell describe Eichmann, Vonnegut offers us a keen glimpse into self-deception: The comments concerning Eichmann can easily be applied to Campbell. If he acknowledged his actions, his false self-concept would collapse. But he doesn’t, and the web of self-deception remains intact. In the end, the reader is left at precisely the same point as Campbell himself: with a question, but no answer, as to which is the “real” identity.

V. The Mariner

In considering Coleridge's dark nineteenth century ballad, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," we organize our treatment of the title character's self-deception around two central questions. First, exactly what is the Mariner's "fault?" And second, how does that fault relate to both his and the reader's perception of reality? In answering these questions, the ballad's classic interpretations of "sin and redemption" or "crime and punishment" are helpful, but not exhaustive. A deeper analysis of the Mariner's self-deception hinges on four themes: the Mariner's insistence on continually relating his story (even after his redemption), the reader's desire to hear it, the significance of vision, and most important, the concept of relatedness (between the Mariner and fellow beings).

To begin, the bird appears and is greeted with unmitigated enthusiasm:

As if it had been a Christian Soul,
We hailed it in God's name (Lines 65-66).

Coleridge paints a portrait of relatedness that is positive and glowing, ending with the literal sheen of the moon: "glimmered the white Moon-shine" (78). It is at precisely at this point that the listener interrupts and asks: "Why look'st thou so?" (81). And it is with no hesitation and no explanation that Coleridge's ancient Mariner responds: "With my crossbow I shot the Albatross" (81-82). The following lines illustrate the Mariner's failure of interpersonal relatedness:

He [the spirit] *loved the bird that loved*
The man who shot him with his bow (404-405, italics mine).

The Mariner's *real* fault lies in the senselessness of the act: Lacking any apparent motive, he slays the bird just the same. This act stems from his will, yet lacks conscious intention. It was committed not as an expression of self, but for reasons unknown. The Mariner's fault is rooted in self-deception, which, in his case, is rooted in perception.

The subtlety with which Coleridge conveys self-deception becomes apparent because even at the moment the Albatross falls away, the Mariner remains unaware:

A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I bless them unaware:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware (284-287).

The Mariner's fault lies in his unawareness. But a shift in perception does occur, and the Mariner perceives the beauty of the water snakes, whereas only moments before he saw "a thousand slimy things" (238). Consequently, this shift causes the Albatross to fall from his neck. But, as the ballad continues, the Mariner confronts the voices within or his "inner self":

But ere my living life returned,
I heard and in my soul discerned
Two voices in the air. (395-397)

The voices point to disassociation—a failure of integration—on the part of the Mariner. Ignoring these "inner voices" allows him to act out without realizing it.

Jung believed that the demon we fear the most lies within the psyche, and Coleridge captures this view in the Mariner's continued fearfulness—even after the Albatross had dropped from his neck:

Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows, a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread. (446-451)

An accurate perception of self can be upsetting. The Mariner has gained insight, but has not achieved an integration of self. According to Freud, the price of repression is repetition. The Mariner, though absolved of shooting the albatross, must nevertheless repeat his narrative to keep from repeating his horrible deed:

Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns:
And till my ghastly tale is told,
This heart within me burns. (582-585)

Nevertheless, as long as there are inner voices, there is a possibility for the Mariner—and for us—to change. It is here that Coleridge answers the critical question: How does the Mariner's "fault" relate to readers of his tale? He answers this for us by placing the tale within the framework of a recountance told by the Mariner to an "innocent" wayward guest, who, upon its conclusion, leaves the Mariner in the same way as should readers: "sadder and wiser." Like the guest, readers are now wiser because, grasping the same insight as the Mariner, we now perceive reality more

accurately. We depart sadder, however, because we recognize that the path from self-deception and toward self-integration is long, painful, and fraught with obstacles: discordant voices within are not so easily harmonized into a cohesive arrangement. More to the point, the sadness of the wedding guest, and the reader,, stems from a stunning recognition: I am that Mariner.”

He went like one that had been stunned,
And is of sense forlorn:
A sadder and a wiser man,
He rose the morrow morn. (622-625)

VI. Conclusion

We began this essay with an assertion that everyone has experienced insight that altered some prior perception. As we began to question false ideas concerning self-insight, the complexity of our task grew exponentially. Having turned to literature as a potential source for illumination, what have we learned? Answering this question requires working towards a theory of self that not only allows for the possibility of mistaken or deceptive beliefs, but also embraces them as fundamental to the construction of a self-concept. Although a completely accurate reading of all dimensions of self is impossible, our literary characters suggest that relative degrees of accuracy are attainable. Therefore, the dilemma of self-deception is best approached not as a phenomenal *thing*, but as a phenomenal *process* (much like consciousness itself). At every moment of existence, we are flooded with information that potentially challenges our current perception of self. We say, “potentially challenges” because, as our literary characters instruct us, we ignore a large amount of information that conflicts with prior perceptions.

Leon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance (1957), for example, addresses the way individuals avoid potentially discrepant information in order to avoid discomfort. Festinger shares a presupposition with many identity theorists: *consistency* of self and world is a primary motivational attribute. We briefly register new information in sensory memory, giving primacy to information that matches what is already stored in long-term memory, while simultaneously blocking information that contradicts with that which we already know. Jean-Baptiste illustrates most vividly the role memory plays in self-deception: If he “did something of the sort,” he has “forgotten it” (Camus 92). There are, however, problems with Festinger’s theory: it addresses the “discrepancy” test (information is perceived that conflicts) without adequately considering the “validity” test (issue of whether that information is accurate or not). Here is a rather mundane example. Consider an advertisement that states: “You are what you wear.” A consumer named Charles hears this message, tests it against his

own belief system, and then rejects the proposition as false. For Charles, a person is not reducible to what he wears. A couple of hours pass and he simply forgets about the message. Is he guilty of self-deception? No. Later that day, someone walks up to Charles and says: “You are wearing Flash sneakers, which were manufactured in a sweatshop in Indonesia. You are supporting the oppression of innocent people.” Charles acknowledges that the sneakers are of that brand, and that he is wearing them, but he quickly rejects the accusation of being an “oppressor,” because it is discrepant from his self-identity. As for the information regarding the sweatshop, he eventually “forgets” that information, acts as if he never “knew” that information, and reminds himself that millions of people wear Flash sneakers. Is he now guilty of self-deception? Assuming the validity of the information regarding the origin of the sneakers, yes. The first case may be seen as an act of self-affirmation, while the second case clearly suggests self-deception.

Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance and Freud’s model of defense take an important step toward understanding self-deception: They describe a cognitive mechanism by which individuals unconsciously reject information that is dissonance-producing. The problem is that one can reject information that is both dissonance producing and threatening (“you are what you wear”) and not practice self-deception. How, then, are we to distinguish?

Sartre’s “bad faith” and Fingarette’s “disavowal” move us toward a theory framed by “integrative” or “harmonizing” motifs, while both Festinger’s and Freud’s theories suggest a dissociative element implicit in self-deception. In a sense, the two sets of theorists provide a glimpse of opposite sides of the same coin. To act in “bad faith,” to “disavow” some facet of our engagement with reality, creates conditions of incongruence and dissociation within our psyche. The disparate elements are buffered, are separated, by lacunae—blind spots that literally block perception of self, or of reality. Sartre’s concept of “bad faith” can be understood as a full-view mirror for the psyche. To understand the self accurately, we must be aware of our motivations—a process that requires absolute attention to consciousness. While it is possible to split the consciousness, or hide from oneself, we *may choose* not to do so. Sartre describes this as unity of consciousness, Jung as *integration* of self. The full-view mirror, however, is not sufficient: we also need a full-view window to the outside world, because self emerges when reality is accurately perceived. The crucial question, then, and the problem that our literary characters each faced in his own way, is this one: *Is it possible to look both into a full-view mirror and out of a full-length window at the same time?*

The complexity and elusiveness of the integrative task, it would seem, is that it demands a bi-directional gaze: accuracy of both self-perception and world-perception

are required, all from a cognitive system that first seeks “consistency” with what knowledge (of both self and world) already exists. At each moment, we are presented with a range of stimuli that far exceeds the capacity of our selective attention. As our focus shifts, the contents of consciousness also imperceptibly shift in pursuit, transferring awareness to our memory. And, as memory researchers warn, when we attend to material previously stored, we reconstruct it in a manner more fitting to our current attentive gaze. Perceiving reality of self and world is no simple matter. We can understand why Jean-Baptiste begins to remember the night of the woman’s suicide only to relegate it to a matter of lesser importance that must be forgotten; how Vere can become so immersed in his position that he perverts the very justice that he is supposed to uphold; how Howard Campbell can assume a role, pretending to be a Nazi, only to become so immersed in the part that he “forgets” that he is pretending; and why the ancient Mariner must maintain vigilance for “a frightful fiend,” and shoot the bird that loved him.

To speak of complexity and difficulty, however, is not to speak of impossibility. If cognitive psychologists are correct, human beings are capable of “divided attention”; it is possible to gaze into both a full-view mirror and through a full-length window simultaneously. Awareness, attendance to self, and articulation of engagement with the world frees the mind from self-deceptive tendencies. Both attentiveness to deception and maintenance of attention become the prime prerequisites of integration. The puzzling paradox of self-deception is that it bestows short-term benefits to self by helping us maintain consistency in order to avoid anxiety. But this comes at a great price to ourselves in the long-term, as well as to others—in both the short-term and long-term. If our literary characters are instructive, the greater an individual’s proclivity for self-deception, the more pronounced is that person’s capacity to harm others—without even perceiving his or her actions as harmful. In this way, cruelty becomes deceptively camouflaged. By the time our literary characters witness the suicide of another human being, the hanging of an angel, the murder of six million Jews, or the killing of something that only loves, they have inadvertently turned their attention to the fatal acts themselves and ignored their cause. It may be that the telling of their stories, and the consequences implicit therein, constitute essential first steps for the re-direction of our own attentive processes.

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