# Everything Is Going to Be Okay, Right?
# Kindness, Compassion, and the Moral Permissibility of Self-Deception

by

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A thesis

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfillment of the

thesis requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Philosophy

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2012

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# Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

# Abstract

Most people seem to have the intuition that self-deception is always and obviously wrong. In this thesis, I make the case that under certain circumstances, self-deception can actually do a great deal of good and ought to be morally permissible – especially in cases where it would be life-threatening, dehumanizing, or cruel to insist on complete authenticity. I argue that self-deception can be rational and that it can also sometimes be morally permissible to allow the self-deception of others to go unchallenged, especially in cases where the opportunity to exercise compassion, empathy, and kindness towards each other takes precedence over a concern for truth. I then confront self-deception's staunchest opponents, the Existentialists, who maintain that self-deception is never morally permissible because it conflicts with their supreme value, authenticity. I focus specifically on the work of Nietzsche and Sartre and identify the various problems that arise from their objections to self-deception. I conclude this thesis with some suggestions as to why so many people might have come to believe that authenticity is the supreme value, when a closer investigation suggests that it probably is not.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to extend my sincere thanks to those who took the time to help me with this project, encouraging, supporting, and challenging me throughout, keeping me on-track and interested in the subject of self-deception and authenticity – a subject which means a great deal to me. In particular, I would like to thank my advisor, Patricia Marino, who never gave up on me when others would have counted me out long ago. I also owe a debt to my readers, Tim Kenyon and Mathieu Doucet, for their excellent criticism and direction in the final stages of this work, helping me clarify and shape my ideas into something meaningful. Last but not least, I would like to thank two special friends – Richard Holmes for deepening my love and understanding of Existentialism over coffee and wonderful conversations about death and all things bleak, and Micheal McEwan, who always asked the tough questions and never let me get away with the easy answers. To each of you, I am truly grateful.

# Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all those who strive to face up to the truths of their lives, for the price of such courage is high.

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# Introduction

> "Take the life-lie away from the average man and straight away you take away his happiness". –Henrik Ibsen

Most people seem to have the intuition that self-deception is always and obviously wrong, even if they can't always put their finger on why. We react to it on a gut level and feel that something must be amiss—surely it can't be okay to deceive, even if we are just deceiving ourselves. My intuition, however, is somewhat different, and this thesis is dedicated to making the case that under certain circumstances, self-deception can do a great deal of good, contributing to our physical and mental well-being and ought to be morally permissible, especially in cases where it would be life-threatening, dehumanizing, or cruel to insist on complete authenticity. I also argue two further distinct yet related points. The first is that the opportunity to exercise compassion, empathy, and kindness towards each other by sometimes allowing another person's self-deception to go unchallenged can sometimes also be a moral good and outweigh the important of a concern for truth. The second is that it can sometimes be immoral to try to disabuse a person of the false beliefs they hold, as self-deception can give human beings the hope and meaning that they need in their lives to survive and thrive, and attacking, or trying to remove another person's self-deception can be disastrous.

In Chapter One, I begin by making the case that self-deception is indeed a real phenomenon, as the concept has raised so many apparent paradoxes that many

scholars have rejected that it is even possible. I define what we mean when we use the term 'self-deception' and also look at the role that consciousness plays in most discussions of the morality of self-deception. I then discuss the problem of paradoxes, applying an argument developed by Herbert Fingarette to try to resolve the epistemological dichotomies that the concept of self-deception seems to raise.

In Chapter Two, I argue that self-deception can be rational if we take a means-ends view of rationality and emphasize its usefulness in serving legitimate, non-harmful desires, wants, needs, and values other than those involved in a concern for truth. I then make the case that under certain circumstances it can be morally permissible to deceive oneself, especially when the deception is contributing to one's physical and mental well-being. I also argue that it can occasionally be morally permissible to allow the self-deception of others to go unchallenged, especially in cases where the opportunity to exercise compassion, empathy, and kindness towards each other takes precedence over a concern for truth. I then take the argument one step further and claim that attacking or trying to remove another person's self-deception can at times itself be a moral wrong.

In Chapter Three, I directly confront self-deception's staunchest opponents, the Existentialists, who maintain that self-deception is never morally permissible under any circumstances. I begin the chapter with a general

outline of the Existentialist position on authenticity and identify several problems that the position seems to raise, looking specifically at the work of two of the most influential writers on the subject, Jean Paul Sartre and to a lesser extent, Friedrich Nietzsche. The five difficulties I identify are: 1) the problem of absolute truth 2) the problem of absolute freedom 3) the problem of self-creation 4) the problem of dehumanizing expectations 5) the problem of decision-making being valued over consequences. I then consider Sartre's argument in support of his belief that all evasions of self-knowledge are conscious and explain why this point is so critical to his contentions that a) self-deceivers are morally responsible for their deceptions and b) that human beings are capable of living lives of complete authenticity. I conclude the chapter with some suggestions as to why so many people might have come to believe that authenticity is the supreme value, when a closer investigation suggests that it probably is not.

# Chapter One

## Introduction

Before I can begin my main project of exploring the moral dimensions of self-deception, I must first make the case that self-deception is even possible. The issue raises a number of paradoxes so troubling that many scholars do not believe that the phenomenon is real. They are stymied by such questions as ‘how can one believe what one simultaneously knows to be false?’ and often conclude that what they are really looking at are mere cases of dishonesty or wishful thinking. In section one, I define what we mean when we use the term ‘self-deception’, as it is an expression that can take many varied forms and is often used in different ways in everyday language.

Section two looks at the important role that consciousness plays in the literature of self-deception and lays the foundation for my discussion in Chapter Three of why Sartre rejects the moral permissibility of self-deception in any form. As we shall see, Fingarette’s understanding of self-deception relies heavily on the assumption that we are generally not conscious or aware of most of the things that we do, think, and feel, an idea rejected by most Existentialists (most notably Sartre) who believe that we always have access to consciousness and are therefore culpable for any and all forms of self-deception.

Section three discusses paradoxes and focuses on an argument presented by Herbert Fingarette that I believe resolves the epistemological dichotomies raised by the concept of self-deception and best explains how a self-deceiver can hold two contradictory thoughts at the same time without generating any paradoxes. This theory relies heavily on elements of Psychological (Mind) Partitioning and the existence of semi-autonomous sub-systems, a view also shared by Donald Davidson and David Pears.

## 1. What Is Self-Deception?

In *Self-Deception and Self-Understanding*, Mike W. Martin defines self-deception as the purposeful or intentional evasion of self-acknowledgement. Deceiving oneself is the evasion of full self-acknowledgement of some truths or of what one would view as truth if one were to confront an issue squarely. The truths or apparent truths may concern oneself, others, one's immediate situation, or the world at large, while the evasion may have any number of motives, although in general, what is evaded will be perceived as unpleasant or onerous in some way (Martin 1989).

Self-deception can take many forms and is used in different ways in everyday language. Sometimes it can refer to purposeful and intentional conduct (like the actions we take in forming and sustaining projects of evasion), while at other times, it will refer to the mental states that result from the project of evading self-acknowledgement, such as false beliefs, unwarranted beliefs (whether true or false) absence of true beliefs, inappropriate emotions, unfitting attitudes, dispositions to self-pretence or ignoring, and emotional detachment (Rorty 1972). The term can also refer specifically to misconceptions about oneself and may be used either with negative connotations or in contexts where no derogatory appraisal is implied. And even when self-deceivers do manage to persuade themselves to hold false or unjustified beliefs, there are many variations in the manner in which the belief is held and the context in which it is generated.

In addition to the varieties of self-deception which merely center on false beliefs, the following instances are also included: wilful ignorance (which can be simply the absence of true beliefs rather than the presence of false ones); systematic ignoring of something known, believed, or suspected (where ignoring may include both distraction of thoughts from a topic and disregarding evidence while reasoning); emotional detachment and attitudinal distortion; and self pretence (acting as if one believes, and typically trying to believe without succeeding, or trying to play a role or have emotions and attitudes that are not genuine) (Martin 1986).

Self-deception presents us with several seemingly unsolvable problems. For example, how can one convince oneself to believe what one simultaneously knows to be false? We are required to knowingly use our knowledge of the truth in the very attempt to make ourselves ignorant of it or to believe the opposite falsehood. This knowledge about the attempt to make ourselves ignorant would seem to subvert our efforts from the outset. In section three, we will look at a plausible explanation of how these paradoxes might be solved.

## 2. Self-Deception and Consciousness

It seems to me that the single most important question we need to ask ourselves when trying to determine if self-deception could be a real phenomenon (and therefore sometimes morally excusable) is whether or not it is possible to have an unconscious belief coexist with a seemingly contradictory conscious one. If the answer is yes, then the paradoxes that self-deception seems to raise become easier to address and far less problematic. Questions of moral culpability also become easier to handle, as an awareness of one's actions is usually a requirement for censure. If the answer is no – unconscious beliefs cannot coexist with contradictory conscious ones – then the paradoxes associated with self-deception are virtually unsolvable. This also means that the self-deceiver on some (accessible) level must be aware of his deception and is therefore morally culpable for his actions. Since this thesis concerns itself with the issue of the moral permissibility of self-deception, this distinction becomes extremely important.

In the next section, I discuss a theory developed by Herbert Fingarette which I believe is the most plausible explanation of what is really going on when we self-deceive. This theory relies heavily on the notion that self-deception occurs at the unconscious level, where the conscious individual has no access to what is going on within these other regions of his psyche. Seen in this way, the self-deceiver can be excused for his behaviour in that if he has no awareness of what he is doing, he can have no power to stop it. To be clear,

saying that he might not be morally responsible is not the same thing as saying he might not otherwise be responsible for any harm that his actions may cause to himself or to others; however, it does provide a defence of a sort against the attacks made by the Existentialists, discussed at length in Chapter Three, who condemn all forms of self-deception as morally wrong.

## 3. Fingarette's Theory and Solving Paradoxes

Of all the theories that claim to justify how self-deception is possible, the one that seems the most plausible to me was put forth by Herbert Fingarette in his seminal work, *Self-Deception*, in which he was able to resolve the two most troubling paradoxes surrounding the issue: 'intentional ignoring' and how a self-deceiver can both 'know and not-know' at the same time. His main idea is that a self-deceiver—indeed, each of us—is a community of 'subselves', organized clusters of desires, attitudes, emotions, beliefs, and purposes, each of which can be expressed in semi-independence from other clusters as semi-autonomous sub-systems. Psychological (Mind) Partitioning allows the self-deceiver to hold two contradictory beliefs at the same time without resulting in any paradoxes, because the conflicting beliefs can exist in different parts of the mind that are capable of 'ignoring' each other. And this is precisely what happens in self-deception: a wider community of 'selves' shuns (or 'ignores') a 'subself' that is unacceptable to it (Fingarette 1969).

Even if Psychological (Mind) Partitioning is possible and the human mind is made up of semi-autonomous sub-systems, we still need to explain how it is possible that certain thoughts can simply be 'ignored', or kept from becoming explicitly conscious. Interpersonal deceivers act on the basis of what they know in order to conceal certain facts from their victims. What is puzzling here is how the self-deceiver can use his knowledge or suspicions of some truth as a basis for intentionally ignoring that very same thing. It would seem

that the very act of forming the intention to ignore something – and the consciousness of the knowledge of what is to be concealed – would block the very effort to conceal it. Further, the self-knowledge of the intention to conceal the truth would seem to thwart the project as well.

According to Fingarette, acting intentionally requires acting knowingly but it does not require that this knowledge be constantly attended to; we engage in many intentional activities without deliberately attending to them. The intentions involved are typically not deliberately thought about with focused consciousness, nor constantly attended to with any degree of consciousness. Indeed, intentional ignoring entails having and using suspicions, beliefs, or knowledge about what is ignored but it does not entail bestowing any kind of ongoing attention to it. We have the capacity to distract our attention from things we sense, to selectively focus it elsewhere, and to disregard troublesome facts. Fingarette believes that one of the biggest mistakes people make is assuming that we are generally conscious and aware of most of the things we do, think, and feel. (As we shall see in Chapter Three, this is also Freud's position, vehemently denied by Sartre).

He tells us that instead of taking explicit consciousness for granted, we need to start taking its absence for granted and treating explicit consciousness as something that only happens when we exercise a 'specific skill for a special reason' (Fingarette 1969, 36). This implies that something other than full

awareness is our default position, and that explicit consciousness only springs into action when there is good reason for it to do so. As a result, most of our 'engagements in the world' are not experienced with any kind of full consciousness. By 'engagements in the world', Fingarette means an individual's conduct, aims, hopes, fears, perceptions, and memories, using the phrase in order to characterize in the most general terms, what someone does or what he undergoes as a human being: "it is how an individual finds and/or takes the world, including himself. It is also a matter of the activities he engages in, the projects he takes on, and the way the world presents itself to him to be seen, heard, felt, enjoyed, feared, or otherwise 'experienced' by him" (Fingarette 1969, 39). Anything that a person does not take account of, for whatever reason, is not part of his engagement in the world, although such a thing could have an effect on the course of his engagements, in one way or another.

Among the various ways in which 'conscious' is used, Fingarette tells us that the one he selects is a close cousin to 'explicitly aware', or 'attending explicitly to'. As he explains, "When I ride a bicycle, drive a car, form and utter sentences in English, dress myself, play the violin, sit down in a chair, walk, handle my body, I usually exercise these skills well, at times with art; yet most of the time I do not spell-out, not even to myself, what I am doing" (Fingarette 1969, 41). The immediately crucial point that Fingarette wants to make is that most of the time we are not explicitly conscious of our

engagements in the world and that in order for us to be explicitly conscious of any one of these, we need to actively 'spell-out' what we are doing or experiencing, an act that Fingarette refers to as a special skill. For an individual to become explicitly conscious of something, he must either spell it out in general terms ("I am racing in a sailing contest"), or spell out some relevant feature of the engagement ("I am losing, my competitor's boat is about to pass me") (Fingarette 1969, 40). He must also have good reason to do so.

Once we acknowledge that we must have a special reason for spelling-out, we begin to realize that the skill of spelling-out must be larger in scope than the mere capacity to perform it; exercising the skill requires sizing up the situation in order to assess whether or not there is adequate reason for spelling-out a particular engagement. When confronted with a situation where there are reasons for both spelling-out and not spelling-out, presumably the individual will weigh these considerations against each other, and his decision to spell-out or not spell-out – or exactly how he will do so if he chooses to spell-out – will depend on his assessment of the situation as well as on his ingenuity in adapting to the conflicting considerations.

Fingarette draws attention to the fact that using our 'spelling-out' skill is itself a way of being engaged in the world. It is something we do. As a result, spelling out is an activity which is not itself spelled-out, except when there is special reason to do so. Most of the time we will not have good reason to do

so, but occasionally there will be good cause. Fingarette gives the example of spelling-out one's finger placement while practicing the violin, and also spelling out *that* one is spelling-out one's finger placement. The occasion might be one in which the individual is so distractingly conscious of his finger placement as to lead him to become explicitly conscious *that* he is distractingly conscious of it.

In a contrasting example, and the one of most direct interest to our investigation of self-deception, Fingarette describes a situation where there is overriding reason *not* to spell-out some engagement, where we "skilfully take account of this and systematically avoid spelling-out the engagement, and where, in turn, we refrain from spelling out this exercise of our skill in spelling-out" (Fingarette 1969, 42). In such a case, we avoid becoming explicitly conscious of our engagement while at the same time avoid becoming explicitly conscious that we are avoiding it. Fingarette believes that the person in self-deception is one who persistently avoids spelling-out some feature of his engagement in the world, even when it would normally be appropriate to do so.

Sometimes we see this as an 'inability' to spell-out, that the self-deceiver is in some way 'unable' to admit to himself the truth, even though he knows in his heart that it is so. We believe that there is a kind of genuineness to his 'ignoring', that it is not simply hypocrisy, or lying, or duping of others. At the

same time, we also feel that in some sense, he *could* admit the truth to himself if he only *would*. This inability to spell-out is not a lack of skill or strength, but rather it is the adherence to a tacitly adopted policy. The phrase 'he cannot admit it, cannot let himself become conscious of it' means in this case that he '*will* not'. The 'will not', however, refers to a general policy commitment, and not to an ad hoc decision not to spell it out (Fingarette 1969, 43).

Fingarette likens this to saying, "It's not that I *won't* come with you, it's that I *can't* because I promised Smith I'd go with him." However, the 'cannot' of self-deception is quite different in one respect from the 'cannot' of the man who promised: while the one who promised cannot say yes, he *can* reveal that he is committed *not* to say yes; the self-deceiver, on the other hand, is committed to saying nothing on either score. As a result, he a) says nothing, i.e. does not spell-out the truth b) gives us the impression that 'in some sense' he could if he would c) also gives us the impression that he has somehow rendered himself incapable of doing it (Fingarette 1969, 46).

Self-deception, then, is possible because human beings are rarely explicitly conscious of their engagements in the world. As a result, the self-deceiver is able to hold two contradictory beliefs at the same time without resulting in a paradox because he is able to simply 'ignore' the belief that he does not want to become explicitly conscious of. Psychological (Mind) Partitioning allows these conflicting thoughts to reside in different parts of the mind where they can exist in semi-independence from each other as semi-autonomous sub-

systems. In order for an individual to become explicitly aware of one of his engagements in the world, he must exercise the skill of spelling-out that engagement, which will only happen if he has good reason to do so. Needless to say, the self-deceiver is not likely to ever have good reason to become explicitly conscious of a belief that contradicts what he wants to believe, and as a result, he is able to maintain his dual roles of deceiver and deceived.

A word should also be said about self-deception and moral paradoxes. Regarded as deceivers, self-deceivers seem guilty for their deception and any harmful effects, while as the deceived, they appear to be innocent victims. Viewed as liars, they appear to be insecure and dishonest, but viewed as victims of a lie, they appear sincere and honestly mistaken. As deceivers, they appear responsible and blameworthy for cowardly hypocrisy, but as the deceived, they seem deserving of compassion and help in gaining full awareness of the deception perpetrated on them. Fingarette believes that these moral paradoxes arise because of two erroneous assumptions: interpersonal deception is an appropriate general model for understanding the moral status of self-deception; and a simple moral appraisal of deceivers and their victims can be given (namely, that the deceiver is always guilty, responsible, insincere, blameworthy, whereas the person deceived is always an innocent victim, exculpated, not insincere, and deserving of compassion). According to him, both assumptions are false. Much interpersonal deception is morally permissible, with some of it even morally admirable or even obligatory.

Furthermore, victims of deceivers are neither always lacking in responsibility and guilt, nor always deserving of compassion and sympathy. Interpersonal deception cannot provide a simple, general moral model for self-deception because the moral status of interpersonal deception varies too much from case to case (Fingarette 1969).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that self-deception is indeed a real phenomenon, and explained how the paradoxes that seem to surround it can be resolved. I started by defining what we mean when we use the term 'self-deception', and then looked at the role consciousness plays in our understanding of self-deception and the moral culpability (or lack thereof) of self-deceivers. I then explained how Herbert Fingarette's theory about the interaction (and non interaction), of semi-autonomous sub-systems within the human mind can help resolve the paradoxes that self-deception seems to raise.

Now that I have established that self-deception is indeed possible, I can move on to my main project of exploring its moral dimensions. In Chapter Two, I argue that certain kinds of self-deception are morally permissible under certain circumstances, especially in cases where it would be life-threatening, dehumanizing, or cruel to insist on complete authenticity. I also argued that it can occasionally be morally permissible to allow the self-deception of others to go unchallenged, especially in cases where the opportunity to exercise

compassion, empathy, and kindness towards each other takes precedence over a concern for truth. Finally, I make the claim that attacking or trying to remove another person's self-deception can at times itself be a moral wrong.

# Chapter Two

## Introduction

In Chapter One, I address the question of whether or not self-deception is even possible, and determine that it is, indeed, a real phenomenon. While much of the philosophical literature concerns itself with the issues discussed in the previous chapter, less attention has been paid to its moral status. In Chapter Two, I argue that self-deception can be both rational and morally permissible under certain circumstances. I begin the chapter by arguing that self-deception can be rational if we take a will-centered view of rationality, emphasizing its usefulness in serving legitimate, non-harmful desires, wants, needs, and values other than those involved in a concern for truth. If we understand that self-deception can be an important survival mechanism, then it becomes easier to see how self-deception could be a rational reaction to certain circumstances.

I then make the case for the moral permissibility of some kinds of self-deception, arguing that survival, as well as physical and mental well-being, are sometimes more important than a concern for truth and should take precedence over it under certain circumstances without penalty to the self-deceiver's moral standing. I show how self-deception can be an effective survival mechanism, capable of providing the hope and meaning necessary to satisfy certain essential psychological human needs that are fundamental to our physical and mental well-being. I also argue that it can occasionally be morally permissible to allow the self-deception of others to go unchallenged,

specifically in cases where the opportunity to exercise compassion, empathy, and kindness towards each other takes precedence over a concern for truth. In Section 3, I take the argument one step further and claim that attacking or trying to remove another person's self-deception can at times itself be a moral wrong.

I end the chapter by outlining what I believe are the two main reasons (in addition to the belief that self-deception is always irrational) why so many people intuitively feel that self-deception is always wrong and could never be morally permissible. These are the belief that self-deception is always harmful to others and/or to oneself, and the belief that authenticity is the supreme virtue. While it is possible that some of the following arguments could be used to justify other kinds of deception as well as self-deception, my focus here is strictly on the latter and should be understood as an explanation of the circumstances under which I believe it is morally permissible for an individual to deceive him or her self—not another.

## 1. Is Self-Deception Rational?

The standard objection to self-deception is that it is irrational. Rationality has been so closely linked with the pursuit of truth and the objective weighing of evidence that it seems almost impossible to conceive that self-deception could be rational. To ascribe self-deception to someone is to attribute to him an erroneous belief which it is unreasonable to have. Self-deception requires the purposeful avoidance, misinterpretation, manipulation, or suppression of evidence to corroborate one's beliefs. How then, could it be rational? If we take an evidence-based view of rationality, then it is not, for such a view holds that all evasion of evidence is irrational by definition.

According to John Passmore, rational persons form beliefs in strict accordance with the best available evidence and then shape their conduct, emotions, and attitudes consistently with those beliefs. Rational persons also adopt the most effective means for meeting their goals, but it is assumed that the calculation of these means should be based on beliefs warranted by available evidence. On this view, self-deception is irrational because it constitutes an evasion of evidence or apparent truths (Passmore 1968). From this perspective, the idea that self-deception could be a *legitimate good* is heretical and implies a competing conception of rationality centered on usefulness in serving legitimate, non-harmful desires, wants, needs, and values other than those involved in a concern for truth.

I would like to suggest that when self-deception serves rational desires or needs, it is rational to engage in it so long as there are no overriding negative consequences in doing so and as long as no better options are available. D.W. Hamlyn observed that “there is a sense in which self-deception may sometimes be the right policy, in that it may be the only way of maintaining a viable human life” (Hamlyn 1971). A concern for truth, he suggested, is not of paramount importance in all situations. In fact, a preoccupation with truth and avoiding self-deception can inhibit the spontaneous emotions on which important personal relationships depend, emotions like love and compassion. In a similar vein, Amelie Rorty described a dying doctor who deceives himself about his illness and thereby prevents himself from collapsing into despair. The doctor’s self-deception seems to nurture fresh capacities for love, optimism, and humour, in dealing with his ordeal and responding to the people who care for him. This illustration shows how “individual instances of self-deception can be beneficial and in some sense rational or at least canny” (Rorty 1972). Robert Audi also made an explicit and careful defence of the rationality of some self-deception that serves good ends claiming that self-deception is rational whenever it “advances, better than readily available alternatives, the wants, or actions, at least not in a way that outweighs its contribution to realization of the person’s rational wants; and does not have an excessively high threshold of evidential eradication” (Audi 1985).

The idea that rationality is primarily about getting around in the world (known as a means-ends, or 'instrumental' view of rationality) is a dominant view of rationality in many domains and has achieved broad acceptance. It holds that the point of cognition/belief formation is in the end practical and that we believe things in order to help us navigate the world. Beliefs, then, ought to be assessed and deemed rational or irrational in relation to how well they help us get around in the world, and not on whether or not they are true. If we stop looking at self-deception as an obvious wrong that has no place in the life of a moral person, then we can start to see how it might, at times, function as a rational survival mechanism and a legitimate good.

## 2. Self-Deception and Morality

Now that we have established that self-deception can indeed be rational, we can turn our attention to its moral status. In the following section, I first address the question of whether or not it can ever be morally permissible to deceive oneself, and then I look at the question of whether or not it can ever be morally permissible to allow another person's self-deception to go unchallenged. In the first case, I argue that self-deception should be morally permissible in circumstances where the self-deception is contributing to one's physical and mental well-being. In the second case, I argue that it should be morally permissible to allow another person's self-deception to go unchallenged in cases where the exercise of compassion, empathy, and kindness is a moral good that outweighs the importance of a concern for truth.

### 2.1 Physical and Mental Well-Being

Some of the arguments we saw in Section One in defence of the rationality of self-deception also appear here in defence of its moral permissibility suggesting that some of the factors that make it rational also play a role in making it moral. As we saw earlier, self-deception can sometimes be an important survival mechanism that can contribute to keeping us alive in a very real sense, and in such cases, our physical and mental well being ought to take precedence over a concern for truth. Not only is this a rational course of action, but I believe that it ought to be a morally permissible one too. Far from being a mere refuge for those too cowardly to confront the truth, self-

deception can be a legitimate means of bringing the hope and meaning into our lives that are so necessary for staying emotionally and physically healthy.

The presence of hope and meaning in our lives can help calm the existential fears and anxieties that awareness of our human condition so often generate. For example, the inevitability and permanence of death (our own death and that of others), can lead to feelings of powerlessness, fear, sadness, loneliness and pain and any belief that can offer us hope, even if we are deceiving ourselves, can lead to better mental and physical health. Patients often do better when they believe they will get well again, even if the science is against it. Beliefs that give us hope and meaning are also vital in helping us stave off anxiety and depression, as well as the physical manifestations that so often accompany those problems.

Certain beliefs can also help us survive by keeping us from being careless with our lives and treating them as worthless and insignificant. Belief that there is a purpose to it all, that there is a reason why we suffer, that there is a reason for everything, that all things happen in accordance with some higher plan – for many people, these ideas and others like them, are necessary fictions. We cannot deny that we are going to die but we *can* deny that death is the end; we cannot deny that the world is full of suffering but we *can* believe that everything happens for a reason; we cannot deny that life is unfair but we *can* believe that the meek shall inherit the earth, or that science will keep us alive forever. Religion and the supernatural are ports that many

people turn to in a storm; for others, it is faith in science. We look to our beliefs for reassurance and for strength and meaning, for guidance, and for direction and safety. Viewed in this way, self-deception might be one of the least harmful ways to satisfy important psychological needs while doing far less damage to our psyches than leaving these vital human needs unmet or allowing them to manifest into severe psychological disorders.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that everyone who holds false beliefs is deceiving themselves; rather, I am saying that in cases where self-deception *is* at play, it is sometimes morally permissible for an individual to hold such beliefs if it is the only way in which he can attain the hope and meaning in his life that I have argued are so essential to our physical and mental well-being.

### 2.2 Compassion, Empathy, and Kindness

I have argued that a person's survival as well as their physical and mental well-being are considerations that should sometimes take precedence over a concern for truth. In this section, I look at whether or not it is morally permissible to allow another person's self-deception to go unchallenged on occasion and determine that it is – especially in cases where the exercise of compassion, empathy, and kindness becomes a moral good that outweighs the importance of a concern for truth. In some cases, attacking or trying to remove a person's self-deception can have disastrous consequences, an idea explored

at length in Eugene O'Neil's *The Iceman Cometh* and Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, two famous plays that will be familiar to some readers.

In "Adaptivity and Self-Knowledge", Amelie Rorty says, "Like programs for eradicating the vices, attempts at doing away with self-deception would damage habits that are highly adaptive. Those incapable of self-deception are probably also incapable of romantic love, certain sorts of loyalty, and dedication to causes that require acting slightly larger than life. While these gifts have their dangers, they have on occasion served us well" (Rorty 1975). There seems to be something inherently wrong and unsettling about wanting to take away from people the stories that give their lives so much meaning. There is something dehumanizing about the expectation that people ought to be morally obligated to face up to every truth of their lives, especially when those truths are about our existential condition, something that we can do nothing about – the inescapable facts of our life. As Sophocles wrote in *Oedipus Rex*, "How dreadful knowledge of the truth can be when there is no help in truth" (Sophocles 1996). Further, we ought to extend this kindness and tolerance to others in the hope that it might also be extended to us one day, should we ever need it to lighten our own burdens.

Human beings believe all sorts of things, from the plausible to the impossible and in the spirit of being good and kind to each other, of living together in harmony, we should exercise compassion and empathy whenever we can – to

live and let live. We need to seriously consider the harm that can come from forcing another person to confront certain truths of his life when he is not psychologically prepared to do so. This is especially true when the facts are at odds with any beliefs he may have generated that are responsible for bringing hope and meaning into his life. Unfortunately, the circumstances of the real world cannot always provide these for us, and sometimes self-deception is the only way we can attain them.

It must be said that it is a short step from justifying the indulgence of some self-deception in others to becoming complacent, indifferent, or patronizing. None of us is flattered to be regarded as unworthy of being presented with the truth (gently) as others see it. Further, there are often reasonable and non-self-deceiving hopes that it would be preferable to support in others. The danger is that we might too often support the self-deception of others in order to avoid the difficulties that providing the truth might bring, even if the truth, offered in the right way, would provide more substantial help than complicity.

## 3. Disabusing Other People of False Beliefs as a Moral Wrong

In the previous section, I argued that it is sometimes morally permissible to allow another person's self-deception to go unchallenged. In this section, I take the argument one step further and claim that it can actually be a moral *wrong* to try to disabuse a person of a false belief. My claim is not rooted in the value of autonomy or the problem of paternalism; rather, it is based on the harm principle and I argue that sometimes attacking or trying to remove the self-deception of another person can cause a great deal of harm that cannot be morally justified. This is especially true in cases where confronting the self-deceiver with the truth has no chance of producing a positive result or helping them in any way.

Consider the following example. A woman dying in the hospital believes that if she visualizes destroying the white blood cells in her body, she will be able to beat the cancer that doctors have told her is inoperable. She refuses to believe her prognosis and religiously practices visualization techniques throughout the day. She reads all the available books on the subject and explains to everyone who will listen that she can feel the cancer disappearing from her body. Her husband, however, is not a believer in new-age 'science' and refuses to go along with her self-deception that visualization exercises will cure her disease. Each time he visits, he tells her that her beliefs are childish and that she should come to terms with her impending death. The more she tries to persuade him that she is getting better and that her efforts are

based on ‘real science’, the more determined he becomes to find books and articles to dispel her delusion. He provides her with the most up-to-date science on her disease and presses the point that she has only a 1% chance of survival. She tells him that she is going to survive; he tells her that she is not, and that she should stop deceiving herself.

In this case, the husband’s insistence on truth for its own sake is likely doing great harm to his wife’s mental and physical well-being. She is desperate for any hope that her life is not coming to an end, and her husband’s attack on her self-deception is cruel, dehumanizing, and perhaps even life-threatening in that the woman’s beliefs, though false, may have been helping to prolong her life in some way. His unwillingness to be complicit in her self-deception has served no greater good than to allow him to uncompromisingly express what he believes is the truth of her condition. Even if the husband is mistaken because he has false beliefs about the efficacy of such visualization and is in this case merely asserting what is false, the fact remains that he believes his wife is in self-deception and is causing her a great deal of pain – and no good – by asserting what he believes, whether it be true or false.

Consider another example. An atheist is trying to convince her religious grandfather on his deathbed that there is no God. He insists that there is, and that he will soon be reunited with his dead wife. She tells him that he is mistaken and explains in great detail how there are ‘proofs’ against the

existence of God. There is no afterlife, this is all there is; there will be no reunion. As in the first case, it is hard to see this woman's actions as anything other than cruel, even if she is merely asserting what is false (for there is no real proof for the existence or non-existence of God). In her mind she is attempting to dispel what she believes is her grandfather's self-deception about the after-world but in the process, she has inflicted upon him a great deal of mental pain for reasons that could only be described as selfish. The real harm, it seems to me, is in trying to take away from a person a belief that gives them so much comfort; committing such an act in the name of authenticity rings more like a moral crime, a dehumanizing act of cruelty, than an act of moral goodness. Disabusing a person of a false belief when it will only cause them harm is, in my view, a moral wrong.

## 4. Two Reasons Why We Think Self-Deception is Wrong

In the next section, I identify two factors (in addition to the belief that self-deception is always irrational) that I believe have contributed greatly to the common perception that self-deception is always morally wrong. The first is the widespread belief that self-deception is always harmful to the deceiver and/or to others, and the second is the belief that authenticity is the supreme value.

### 4.1 Belief that Self-Deception Causes Harm

The most common objections to self-deception are based on the harm principle, the idea that harm is always caused to oneself and/or to others through the action. In this section, I address the claim that self-deception is harmful to the deceiver and/or to others, insofar as holding a false belief is concerned, and then I respond to the charge that the act itself (rather than the specific content of the deception), is harmful to the deceiver and/or to others.

#### 4.1.1 Holding False Beliefs Is Harmful to the Deceiver and/or to Others

In his book, *The Morality of Self-Deception*, Mike W. Martin identifies several traditions of thought that address the various issues surrounding the morality of self-deception. The group that is most concerned with self-deception as it relates to harm, is what he calls the 'Inner Hypocrisy Tradition' (his term). This group is primarily concerned with how self-deception causes harm by allowing the self-deceiver to conceal immoral

facts and character flaws, making him a contemptible, culpable cheat who corrupts his own moral understanding, and harms others in the process. This tradition's Derivative Wrong Principle states that self-deception often leads to, threatens to lead to, or supports immorality, and when it does, it is wrong in proportion to the immorality involved (Martin 1986). According to Aquinas, a natural member of this tradition, "Ignorance is sometimes directly and intrinsically voluntary, as when one freely chooses to be ignorant so that he may sin more freely" (Aquinas 1969).

Evading self-acknowledgement of our faults enables us to avoid painful moral emotions such as guilt and remorse for harming others, shame for betraying our own ideals, or self-contempt for not meeting even our minimal commitments. Self-deception can also shield us from the recognition of something that we really should be, morally, attending to. There are also cases where the harm is self-inflicted by the self-deceiver and we can imagine instances where what is being cloaked by the self-deception is, in addition to being a problem in the agent's character and conduct, a problem primarily *to* the agent, such as a drug addiction or a serious health issue (Martin 1986).

As previously stated, I do not defend all types of self-deception. To be clear, I do not defend any type of self-deception that generates a false belief, or beliefs, that causes any reasonable measure of harm to come to the deceiver or to others. The kind of self-deception that I defend is that which produces no

serious negative consequences, but instead generates a false belief, or beliefs, that serves to protect the self-deceiver from a certain truth or truths that the awareness of could cause the person serious psychological and/or physical harm, and possibly even be life-threatening.

### 4.1.2 The Act of Self-Deception is Harmful to the Deceiver and/or to Others

Self-deception is often criticized on the grounds that it undermines one's agency. When it does so, it does so gradually, and in two ways. First, it can become a habit or strategy that one continues to fall back upon. More worrisome, as Marcia Baron writes in her article, 'What is Wrong with Self-deception?', it often requires further self-deception to be effective: "Generally, I want to claim, insofar as self-deception is wrong, it is wrong because it corrupts our belief-forming process. The effect is gradual. We allow our wishes that things be a certain way to play an increasingly dominant role in shaping how we see the world" (Baron 1992).

When the motivation for the self-deception does not disappear, it frequently gains momentum. As with most projects, from writing a paper, to quashing a popular insurgent movement in Latin America, to deceiving oneself into believing *p*, the more one invests in it, the less willing one is to abandon the project. The more one structures one's beliefs and attitudes so as to avoid believing or even seriously considering *p,* the less ready one will be to quit.

But not to quit usually entails further evasion, ignoring, and reinterpretation of what would otherwise be counterevidence. Self-deception also spreads simply by becoming a familiar and useful strategy and by eroding tendencies to open-minded reflection and to self-scrutiny (Baron 1992).

Baron's main objection is that every instance of self-deception runs the risk of being repeated and eventually turning into a habit. The implication is that if we could offer some guarantee that the behaviour would never be repeated, then some self-deception might be permissible. Framed in this way, it is easy to see the problem with Baron's reasoning: if a case of self-deception is morally justifiable once, then it should make no difference to its moral standing if it recurs multiple times, or is an isolated event. Further, the number of deceptions required to support the core deception should not be of any consequence either, so long as each individual deception has met the requirements set for moral permissibility. Lastly, we have no grounds to assume that such a self-deceiver will continue to self-deceive at a later time, for another purpose, once his original sanctioned psychological or physical need has been met. Baron's arguments may be effective in defending against certain kinds of self-deception but they fare less well when the self-deception is otherwise justifiable.

### 4.2 Belief that Authenticity is the Supreme Value

Our intuitions often tell us that there can be nothing more important than truth and that any negative consequences that come as a result of our pursuit or utterance of the truth is unfortunate, yet justified. We visit psychiatrists who promise to help us uncover and confront the 'truth' about ourselves, and we have long equated acceptance of the truth with courage. When we see people deceiving themselves, such as in cases of substance abuse, it is not surprising that self-deception seems obviously wrong in that it is helping us avoid some aspect of reality that we really ought to be facing up to. We have a sense that telling the truth, that truth itself, honesty, are all good things, and we are accustomed to trusting our commitment to it. Indeed, philosophers are particularly guilty of this, with the typical line being that self-deception is irrational, irrationality is bad, and therefore so too is self-deception.

Self-deception disturbs us because it calls into question the purity of this commitment, and of our search for self-understanding and insight into the world. Living a life of pure authenticity, however, appears to conflict with what seems reasonable in practice. Most of us understand that under certain circumstances, it is okay to tell a lie – we do it regularly with children to protect them from certain realities and truths that we deem them too young to understand. We also lie to the elderly, the sick, and the dying, all out of what we think is a sense of kindness and compassion, concealing from them the truths of their fate. We understand intuitively that there is something intrinsically wrong, perhaps even immoral, about telling a sick child that her

disease is terminal, or offering arguments against the existence of God to a man waiting on his deathbed to be reunited in a Christian heaven with his dead wife.

We understand these kinds of deceptions intuitively and even encourage them. The question is why can't we extend the same understanding to the lies we tell ourselves? Perhaps it is the kind of examples that spring so readily to mind when we think of self-deception that derail us in our initial attempts to justify it. We have heard of the alcoholic who refuses to acknowledge his problem, the mother who denies that her child is autistic, and the woman who can't accept that her husband is never coming back. We pass judgment easily, accusing such people of cowardice and an inability to face the truth, vilifying them for causing damage to others along the way, the innocent victims of their denial. Familiar cases such as these make it easy to dismiss self-deception as an obvious wrong, but these examples don't tell the whole story. When we start to dig a little deeper, the intrinsic wrongness of self-deception becomes less clear.

Existentialists are the main champions of the idea that truth is the supreme value, and make up the bulk of the writers in the 'Authenticity Tradition', another tradition in the literature of self-deception identified by Mike Martin. They object to self-deception on the grounds that decisions must be made in a wholly honest way, based on a courageous willingness to acknowledge the

significant features of the human condition, one's immediate situation, and one's personal responses (Martin 1986). While they differ over what these features are, they always select those intimately connected with all aspects of meaningful life, like freedom, personal responsibility, death, individuality, and personal fulfillment. This leads them to trace virtually all evasions of self-acknowledgement to fundamental evasions of significant truths about these features. The result is that all self-deception is to be condemned with the same intensity used to focus on their one value – authenticity (Seymour 1997).

In the next chapter, I further support my contention that authenticity is not the supreme value by mounting a direct challenge to the Existentialists, looking specifically at the work of two of the most influential writers on the subject, Jean Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche, in order to identify and address the problems and inconsistencies within their positions.

# Chapter Three

## Introduction

In Chapter Two, I argued that under certain circumstances, self deception is morally permissible and should take precedence over a concern for truth. I reasoned that in some cases, our survival, as well as our mental and physical well-being is more important than authenticity, as is the opportunity to exercise compassion, empathy, and kindness towards each other by allowing another person's self-deception to occasionally go unchallenged. In Chapter Three, I confront self-deception's staunchest opponents, the Existentialists, who maintain that self-deception is never morally permissible under any circumstances. Self-deception (indeed *any* evasion of self-knowledge, which is the same thing for them) is to be utterly condemned in the pursuit of their highest value, authenticity. In this chapter, I examine their justifications for maintaining such a rigid position and argue that much of their reasoning cannot stand up to scrutiny.

I begin the chapter with a general outline of the Existentialist position on authenticity and identify several problems that the position seems to raise, looking specifically at the work of two of the most influential writers on the subject, Jean Paul Sartre and to a lesser extent, Freidrich Nietzsche. The five difficulties I identify are: 1) the problem of absolute truth 2) the problem of absolute freedom 3) the problem of self-creation 4) the problem of dehumanizing expectations 5) the problem of decision-making being valued

over consequences. In Section 3, I look at Sartre's argument in support of his belief that all evasions of self-knowledge are conscious and explain why this point is so central to his view that self-deceivers are morally responsible for their deceptions. I also explain how this point accounts for Sartre's belief that human beings are capable of living lives of complete authenticity. I conclude the chapter with some suggestions as to why so many people might have come to believe that authenticity is the supreme value, when a closer investigation suggests that it probably is not.

## 1. Existentialism and Authenticity

Many Existentialists including Kierkegaard, Camus, Sartre, and Nietzsche have dedicated their central works to the idea that authenticity is the supreme value. For them, authenticity is defined in terms of avoiding self-deception with this emphasis leading to intensified criticism of virtually *all* forms of self-deception as cowardly and dishonest. They criticize it not as a derivative wrong but as the primary or only wrong, which correspondingly transforms the avoidance of self-deception from a limited and secondary duty into the paramount virtue. They believe that decisions must be made in a fully honest way, based on a courageous willingness to acknowledge the significant features of the human condition, of one's immediate situation, and of one's personal responses (Martin 1986). This leads them to trace virtually all evasions of self-acknowledgement to fundamental evasions of significant truths about these features. The result is that virtually all self-deception is to be condemned, and condemned with the same intensity used to focus on the ultimate value - authenticity. Even extreme cases, such as those I argued for in Chapter Two, are not exempt.

If Existentialism didn't reject *all* self-deception unconditionally, then there would be no need for this chapter. Most reasonable people would agree that a concern for truth is a good and noble pursuit, and that authenticity has an important role to play in the life of a moral person. What makes the Existentialist position so problematic is its wholesale rejection of self-deception under all circumstances. In

Chapter Two, I presented what I believe to be a reasonable case in support of a certain kind of self-deception that I argue is morally permissible under certain circumstances and conditions. I believe that I have struck the right balance between a regard for truth and respect for other values, such as survival and one's physical and mental well-being, but even if my analysis leaves room for debate over exactly where the lines of permissibility should be drawn, I maintain that any reasonable position concerning our moral obligation towards authenticity has to allow for a certain amount of self-deception, no matter how narrow the parameters may be.

The problem with authenticity in the way that the Existentialists have imagined it is that it is largely theoretical, allowing it to function well on paper while falling significantly short in its real world applications. In theory, we are free to assume that complete authenticity is possible, but in practice, this does not seem to be the case. In theory, approaching life in an entirely honest way may seem simple (and desirable) enough, but in practice, many of the truths of our lives are not as easy to confront as we might at first think they are. Further, doing so can sometimes lead to severe psychological trauma. The idea that truth for its own sake is a powerful enough motivator (or even reward) to permanently subordinate our desire to self-deceive is simply unrealistic. This point of view represents an idealism that flows freely through the Existential position on authenticity, strengthening it in the theoretical, but only serving to obscure its failings in practice.

## 2. Problems with the Existentialist Position on Authenticity

In this section, I identify several problems that the Existential position on authenticity seems to raise. The first is the problem of absolute truth. If there is no such thing as an objective moral value, then what can justify the claim that authenticity is the supreme virtue? The second is the problem of absolute freedom. Since we are influenced at least to some degree by factors beyond our control, our freedom to choose cannot be as absolute as many Existentialists would have us believe (especially Sartre, as we shall see). The third difficulty is the problem of self-creation. If it is true that I have ultimate freedom to self-create, then why can't I choose to be inauthentic, even if this simply means being less vigilant in my pursuit of truth from time-to-time and allowing myself to be persuaded by bad arguments? The fourth problem we encounter is the fact that trying to do away with all forms of self-deception can be dehumanizing. As I argued in Chapter Two, much good can come from certain kinds of self-deception, including allowing us to exercise kindness, compassion, and empathy towards each other by letting another person's self-deception go unchallenged from time to time. The final problem we encounter is the dangerous assumption that decision-making is more important than resulting consequences. What follows is a detailed discussion of each, with specific references to the work of Jean Paul Sartre and Freidrich Nietzsche.

### 2.1 The Problem of Absolute Truth

Most Existentialists deemphasize or attack the very possibility of objective moral values, as do Nietzsche and Sartre. Nietzsche does not believe in absolute truth and thinks that the death of God (which he proclaimed in *The Gay Science*) is further proof of this. It is belief in God that had, in the first place, encouraged the illusion of universal and absolute truths that people believed they were bound to accept. Just as there are no absolute truths about the world, so too there are no absolute truths about morality. Instead, all our beliefs are nothing more than so many interpretations or ‘perspectives’, ways we have of looking at the world. “There are many kinds of eyes. Even the sphinx has eyes—and consequently there are many kinds of ‘truths’, and consequently there is no truth" (Nietzsche 1968, 291).

In Nietzsche’s view, moral ideas are the simple result of human self-interest and the evolutionary urge to survive. ‘Truths’ are only more or less useful, and should not be thought of in terms of true or false, or right or wrong. “How is truth proved? By the feeling of enhanced power – by utility – by indispensability. In short, by advantages (Nietzsche 1968, 249). Nietzsche has essentially given us the right to create our own truths, as they help us achieve power over the world and each other. His fundamental point is that morality cannot be based upon reason alone, or if it is, then my reason may not be the same as yours. Each of us must decide our own virtues.

Like Nietzsche, Sartre too did not believe in absolute truths or objective moral values. His central thesis in *Being and Nothingness* was that “freedom is the

unique foundation of values and that nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value . . ." (Sartre 1966, 76). Conduct, commodities, and people are valuable only because we decide to give them worth. It is a primary form of self-deception to believe that they make objective, justifiable claims on us that obligate us to make these commitments. According to Sartre, most of us engage in this form of bad faith because it is anguishing to acknowledge that we have ultimate freedom to create our own values. It is also anguishing to acknowledge our freedom from having a rational foundation for our values.

The problem here is that both Nietzsche and Sartre claim that there is no such thing as an objective moral value, yet we have already learned that they consider authenticity to be the supreme virtue. If we accept that there are no predetermined moral values, then on what grounds are we to accept their secondary claim that authenticity is the supreme virtue? Both assertions cannot be true. Further, if there is no such thing as preset moral values, then authenticity might not even be a virtue at all, let alone the most important one. A second but related problem is the question of why we should accept their point of view over anyone else's. If we are free to create our own values, then we are under no obligation to accept any value that we have not created for ourselves. It might be a value for Nietzsche or Sartre, but that does not justify them turning a subjective belief into an objective "ought" for the rest of us.

Sartre himself acknowledges that ". . . as soon as there is a commitment, I am obliged to will the liberty of others at the same time as my own. I cannot make liberty my aim unless I make that of others equally my aim" (Sartre 2007). Yet this 'liberty of others' seems to exclude allowing them to be inauthentic. Sartre places a condition on our freedom which he is never able to justify. Interestingly, he never attempts to defend authenticity itself, essentially sidestepping the issue. While this is consistent with his view that no value, not even authenticity, is justified by objective reasons that obligate us to commit ourselves to them, this evasion conveniently allows him to avoid contradicting himself and getting tripped up by his own words.

## 2.2 The Problem of Absolute Freedom

Many of the problems extant in the Existentialist position on authenticity can be traced back to the questionable assumption that our freedom to choose is absolute. The assumption is that we always have ultimate control over the extent to which we are authentic or inauthentic, and by extension, whether or not our decisions are conscious or unconscious. There are two separate and distinct problems that arise from this assumption. The first is that the entire Existential position on authenticity is based on the dubious belief that complete authenticity – and by extension, the avoidance of all self-deception – is even possible. What follows from this premise is the inevitable moral judgment that those who deceive themselves are morally culpable in light of

the ‘fact’ that such actions could have been avoided. (Section Four of this chapter deals with Sartre’s reasoning for this).

Sartre tells us that, “We are free from complete causal determination of our consciousness. There are, of course, limits or constraints on how we may act but these constraints do not force us to think or act in any one way. They merely comprise the hard facts – the “facticity” – that specify the situation to which we respond with complete freedom” (Sartre 1966, 621). We are free to interpret the world and our lives to give them significance (both value and intelligibility in terms of values). This significance is expressed in detail through our emotions and attitudes, which, in Sartre’s view, we also choose. Each moment of consciousness is an act of interpreting what we are conscious of – what we perceive, conceive, imagine, feel, respond to, and so on (Martin 1986).

On the contrary, modern science has contributed greatly to our understanding that ‘free will’ does not exist in a vacuum, and that human beings are significantly influenced in our decision-making processes by physical, psychological, and circumstantial factors. Our freedom to choose is not, and never has been, absolute, even if we are still uncertain as to how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together, and to what extent, if any, our decisions are ever really within our control. Many of the difficulties we encounter with Sartre are rooted in his belief that self-deception is a conscious act and can therefore be

controlled. This also explains why he believes that it is possible for human beings to be fully authentic. (For a more detailed discussion of Sartre's reasoning on this point, please see Section Four).

The second problem that arises from the assumption that we have absolute freedom in our ability to choose is the emergence of an irreconcilable conflict between essentialist and non-essentialist elements. In *Being and Nothingness,* the thoughtful reader will recognize that Sartre has created a dilemma for himself that is never satisfactorily resolved. He famously proclaims that 'existence precedes essence' (Sartre 1957, 438), and denies that there is any fixed or pre-given human nature, rejecting the possibility of any inherent limitations on our freedom. Our actions are not the determined effects of instincts, drives, desires or any other aspect of our natural being but are the products of free and purely individual choice. While Sartre never denies that human beings have drives, needs, and desires that influence us – such factors set the conditions in which we must choose – he maintains that they never completely determine the outcome of our choices: our freedom to choose is absolute and exists in all conditions and in all situations (Sartre 1948).

Sartre tells us that we are 'condemned to be free' (Sartre 1957, 439) and although he locates the true self in choice rather than instinct, in will rather than drive, and in the mental rather than the physical realm, his account of the self nevertheless revolves around an essentialist picture of the self, even

though it portrays just one aspect of the self – will, choice, commitment – as essential. It identifies the true self with simple, immediate, and purely individual free choice. Conversely, it regards desires, instincts, and physical needs as external to the true self and inessential (Sayers 2009). His assertion that there is no such thing as human nature is a contradiction to his claim that freedom is a characteristic, or property which all human beings must possess.

For the later to be true, there must be at least one aspect of human nature. To say that there is no preset meaning, or purpose to life is one thing, but to claim, as he does, that 'existence precedes essence' is simply wrong if he wants to say that we are all born with absolute freedom to choose. The result is an equally simplistic and one-dimensional picture of human psychology. Up to a point, it is possible to hold one's needs and instincts in check by force of will, but to attempt to deny them altogether is to repudiate essential bodily aspects of human nature and ultimately to negate life itself (Sayers 2009). This view leads Sartre to overestimate how free human beings really are when it comes to being in control of our emotions and how we respond to the demands of our lives. He largely ignores important aspects of our humanity, such as psychological, physical, and emotional needs and does not acknowledge that evolution and our environment have shaped us into certain kinds of creatures that have certain kinds of needs and limitations. Sartre claims as significant truths certain assumptions that he alleges any rational person must accept and, indeed, that we are all somewhat aware of (Martin

1986). The trouble is that some of these assumptions could not be more controversial, especially his extreme insistence that consciousness is free from causal determination and that no values are rationally defensible. Genes, biology, experience, and circumstance all have a role to play in shaping who, what, and how we are, and I believe that the failure to acknowledge this, along with the companion assumption that our freedom is absolute, is in large part responsible for many of the problems that arise from the Existentialist position on authenticity.

## 2.3 The Problem of Self-Creation

Another problem we find in Sartre is the conflict that arises between authenticity and our right to self-create. Sartre believes that the death of God means that there is no such thing as human nature because there is no God to create it. Without a human nature, we are free to be what we choose. There is nothing we ought to do since there is nothing we ought to be. There are no absolutes, no norms or right behaviour – we are on our own. We exist; whatever is uniquely ours, whatever makes each of us an individual – our essence – is ours for the making. We do not discover who we are so much as we make ourselves (Sartre 1966). We are free to approach the world in certain general ways, such as rationally vs. irrationally, benevolently vs. selfishly, free within limits to pursue our goals and to modify the world so as to increase our options, free to interpret the world and our lives, to give them significance, expressed in detail through our emotions and attitudes, and free

to acknowledge or evade acknowledging facts about the world and ourselves, including facts about how we have chosen to interpret and commit ourselves. Inauthenticity is essentially the evasion of our responsibility for our interpretation of the world, a responsibility that falls to us and to nobody else and is, in Sartre's view, one that we are morally obligated to accept (Sartre 1966).

If we are truly free, however, it seems reasonable that we might choose to reject this responsibility. The choice to be inauthentic, to perhaps value pleasure, or peace-of-mind over truth ought to be just as valid as any other choice. If there are no predetermined ways in which we ought to live, then how can any choice, including the choice to self-deceive, be wrong? If my right to self-create is absolute, then what can justify any preconditions being placed on my freedom? Self-deception ought to be as permissible as any other choice a person might make, perhaps even more so considering its proven ability to help us survive, especially when the self-deception is a last resort in coping with a difficult situation, or a stopgap in dealing with a crisis.

I have used the word 'choice' several times in my objections and realize that this requires some clarification. Suggesting that it is possible to 'choose' to deceive oneself implies that the action can be consciously willed, something that I have argued against in Chapter One. To be clear, I only use this language to mirror the Existentialists themselves, who *do* believe that

inauthenticity is a choice. If they did not, how could they hold us morally responsible for it? Their intolerance carries with it the belief that the self-deceiver is culpable for his or her own deception.

If further proof is needed for the contempt that Sartre felt for self-deceivers, one need look no further than the following quote: "In the name of that will to freedom, which is implied in freedom itself, I can form judgments upon those who seek to hide from themselves the wholly voluntary nature of their existence and its complete freedom, those who hide from this total freedom in a guise of solemnity or with deterministic excuses, I shall call cowards. Others, who try to show that their existence is necessary, when it is merely an accident of the appearance of the human race on earth – I shall call scum" (Sartre 2007). Self-deception is wrong because all failures of self-knowledge are wrong. Sartre believes that if you hide behind religion or determinism, you are 'scum' because you have not acknowledged your own freedom. What Sartre never considers is that there might be people who actually *do* acknowledge their freedom, but choose to exercise it by rejecting authenticity in favour of allowing themselves to be self-deceived in exchange for a perceived gain; if we have ultimate freedom and can decide for ourselves who and what we want to be, we might choose to use self-deception to our advantage from time-to-time.

The French mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal, offers us an excellent example of such a situation in Note 233 of his *Pensees*. Pascal famously reasoned that it is a better bet to believe in the existence of God than not to believe, because if it turned out that God does not exist, then no harm would have come from the false belief, whereas if it turned out that God does, in fact exist, then the belief would have generated a great deal of good, including the assumed reward of entry into Heaven. What is especially interesting about ‘Pascal’s Wager’ (as the proposition came to be called), is that in order for it to work, the bettor has to consciously set out on a path of self-deception. Pascal acknowledges that a person who does not already have faith cannot magically will himself to believe, but he maintains that belief can be created if certain steps are taken.

His recommendation to the non-believer is simply that he start to imitate the actions of true believers – “live as though he had faith” – by doing such things as going to church and praying, until eventually he too, would believe (Daston 1988). Pascal thinks that this is what a reasonable person ought to do since there is no way to prove beyond a reasonable doubt whether God exists or not. He recognizes that self-deception can be used in the service of what he believes is a greater good, or at least the potential for a greater good. This qualifies as a case of premeditated self-deception because Pascal encourages the subject to make himself believe something that he otherwise would not

have believed (remaining agnostic on a position is not belief); whether the new belief is true or false is of no consequence.

We have just seen an excellent example of a situation where a person might freely allow themselves to be self-deceived, in exchange for a perceived advantage. Even so, Sartre's philosophy does not allow for self-deception under any circumstance. He has told us that our freedom is absolute and that it is up to us to create our own values, yet puzzlingly, inauthenticity is not an option and is always morally wrong. The obvious problem here is that if we are truly free to self-create and there really are no objective moral obligations placed on us, then we should be unconditionally free to live our lives in any way we see fit.

## 2.4 The Expectation of Complete Authenticity is Dehumanizing

Another problem we find with the Existential position on authenticity is that it holds us to an impossible standard. Anxiety, terror, loneliness and fear are all very real experiential aspects of our human condition from which we cannot escape, as long as we live. If we accept, as I have argued, that self-deception is sometimes used as a survival mechanism to bring much-needed hope and meaning into our lives, then we must also acknowledge that, at least to some degree, we have the biological potential to occasionally default to a state of unawareness about what is really going on in the world around us. If we are at least, to some extent, prisoners of our own biology, then any philosophy that

does not take this into account cannot get off the ground in any practical sense. The idea that we are capable of living lives of perfect authenticity is simply not compatible with the realities of what it means to be living a fully human existence.

Even if it *were* possible to live lives of complete authenticity, free of any kind of self-deception, it is questionable whether all (or even most) of us would find such a life worth living. There is something distinctly dehumanizing about a mandate that requires a human being to endure the sometimes extreme emotional and psychological pain that is often the inescapable consequence of facing up to all the truths of our lives as individuals, as well as to those of ourselves in the greater context of being human. Existentialism is unapologetically a philosophy that enjoins us to take full inventory of, and responsibility for, all facets of our lives which includes acknowledging the horrific things that exist alongside the glories of a fully human existence, no matter what the situation.

According to Sartre, we must ". . . have a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate" (Sartre 1965, 90). In our roles as authentic human beings, we are required to confront the truths of our human condition at all times – classic Existential themes such as death, alienation, anxiety, dread, the facts and implications of living in a

godless world, the inescapability of suffering – we must face up to all of these things without fleeing into the psychological comfort and safety of self-deception. Sartre believes that anguish is an inevitable emotional response to awareness of all types of freedom. In fact, he simply defines it as the "reflective apprehension of freedom" (Sartre 1966, 78).

It is important to note that central to the Existentialist position on authenticity is the belief that human beings are capable of, and up to the challenge of living fully authentic lives – an idea discussed in more detail in Section Four. Even if it *were* possible to live such a life, however, many of us would suffer greatly as a consequence, and a mandate that morally requires us to do so must answer to the charge of being dehumanizing. Being able to acknowledge the significant features of the human condition and of one's immediate situation without trying to escape into self-deception is certainly a good and noble pursuit for those of us who can manage it, but to maintain that this kind of confrontation is morally obligatory for everyone is in itself morally questionable.

## 2.5 Decision-Making Is More Important than Consequences

The last problem we encounter with the Existentialist position on authenticity is that Existentialists are more preoccupied with the process of decision making than with evaluating resulting actions by reference to objectively defensible values. For them, decision-making is more important that the

resulting consequences. "Decisions, they insist, must be made in a fully honest way, based on a courageous willingness to acknowledge the significant features of the human condition, of one's immediate situation, and of one's personal responses" (Martin 1986). Their concern is not so much with *what* choices are made as with *how* they are made. Since we have ultimate freedom to create our own values, what is most important is not the actual decisions we make, but that we are making all of our decisions consciously, acting from a position of full knowledge and authenticity. For Sartre, this means making our decisions in 'good faith', for in 'bad faith, "it is from myself that I am hiding the truth" (Sartre 1943). For Nietzsche, this means the act of consciously 'willing' something to happen: "But thus I will it; thus shall I will it. Will – that is the name of the liberator and joy-bringer" (Nietzsche 1966, 139).

This way of thinking is founded on the dangerous belief that the process of decision making is more important than the actual choices that are made, and by extension, the resulting consequences of those decisions. This is a precarious position to support, especially for a philosophy that does not believe in objective moral values. If all one need do is claim that a particular choice was made in 'good faith' (Sartre's term for authenticity) and no weight is placed on the resulting consequences of that choice, then almost any decision can be justified. Consequences ought always to be taken into consideration, at least to some degree.

## 3. Sartre and Self-Deception as a Conscious Act

The importance of Sartre's belief that all evasions of self-knowledge happen consciously cannot be underestimated. In this section, I discuss the theory he puts forth in *Being and Nothingness* where he aims to prove that self-deception is indeed a conscious act. This is in striking contrast to the popular theories of the unconscious mind that were prevalent in his day, especially those of Sigmund Freud. It must be noted that Sartre had a great deal invested in his theory, for much of his philosophy regarding authenticity relies heavily on the central notion that self-deception is something human beings can choose to do or not to do. If he is right, then he has justified two of his most important contentions: 1) human beings can be held morally responsible for their evasions of self-knowledge because they have the freedom to choose to do otherwise and 2) it is indeed possible for human beings to live lives of complete authenticity. If he is wrong however (as he most certainly seems to be) then he has succeeded in justifying neither of these claims, both so central to his thought.

I began this thesis with a discussion in Chapter one of the various paradoxes that the concept of self-deception seems to raise and outlined a theory put forth by Herbert Fingarette which I believe offers the best explanation of what is really going on when we self-deceive. All theories of self-deception that manage to avoid falling into paradox acknowledge in some way that there are unconscious elements at play in the phenomena that explain how it is possible

for a person to both believe and not believe *p* at the same time. Fingarette asserts that part of the solution is to stop taking explicit consciousness for granted and instead start taking its absence for granted, treating explicit consciousness as something that only happens when we exercise a 'specific skill for a special reason' (Fingarette 1969, 36). This implies that something other than full awareness is our default position, and that explicit consciousness only springs into action when there is good reason for it to do so. Clearly, anything painful or unpleasant that one might have reason to repress is not going to be a good candidate for bringing into 'explicit consciousness.

While Sartre predated Fingarette and therefore would not have been aware of his work, he was certainly familiar with Freud's theories of the unconscious and emphatically rejected his claims that in self-deception, certain mental processes are kept out of our conscious mind by unconscious mechanisms of "repression". In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre criticizes Freudian psychoanalysis (particularly its concept of the unconscious) in two separate discussions. The first is in his discussion of "bad faith" at the beginning of the book and the second is in his discussion of his own 'existential psychoanalysis' on freedom and agency later on (Sartre 1966). Freud's theory of the unconscious was already widely accepted in Sartre's time and claimed that the web of unconscious mental states which is required to explain people's behaviour is sufficiently large and complex that it makes sense to

regard unconsciousness as “a regular and inevitable phase in the processes constituting our mental activity; every mental act begins as an unconscious one, and it may remain so or go on developing into consciousness, according as it meets resistance or not”. Far from being true that consciousness is the hallmark of the mental, Freud maintained that “what is mental is in itself unconscious” (Freud 1949).

Because Sartre rejects Freud’s theory of the unconscious as a solution to the problem of the paradoxes that self-deception seems to raise, he is committed to accounting for self-deception as an entirely conscious process. As a result, the special Sartrian concept of “bad faith” refers to this wholly conscious type of self-deception (Wood 1988). The problem of self-deception, as we have seen, is that it seems like a contradiction for me to believe *p* and yet at the same time and in the same respect to disbelieve *p*. Sartre claims that these two apparently contradictory states are really compatible and argues this through an appeal to something allegedly special about the nature of believing and disbelieving. “The true problem of bad faith comes evidently from the fact that bad faith is *faith*,” that is, belief. “But if we take belief as the adherence of belief to its object when the object is not given, or is given indistinctly, then bad faith is belief, and the essential problem of bad faith is a problem of belief” (Sartre 1966).

Sartre maintains that the typical case of belief is one in which belief is combined with disbelief. “To believe is not to believe,” he declares. “No belief is enough belief. One never believes what one believes . . . no belief, strictly speaking, is ever able to believe enough” (Sartre 1966). Some sense can be made of this if we recognize that Sartre is alluding to what might be called the *imperfection* of beliefs, taking that term in its etymological meaning. That is, he is describing belief as a project that all too often fails, which falls short and is consciously left incomplete, owing to the unfortunate circumstances of our lives. When this happens, what we are left with as beliefs are things that are made to do the job of beliefs but which we recognize as insufficient to do this job. Insofar as what must serve as the belief that *p* is forced to serve in this capacity it may be said that I believe *p*. But insofar as I recognize this same item as insufficient to do the job of a belief, I consciously disbelieve *p*. As a result, it can be simultaneously true that I believe *p* and that I disbelieve *p*, since my disbelieving *p* does not entail that it is false that I believe *p* (Wood 1988).

Freud and Fingarette are in agreement that self-deception takes place at an unconscious level and both offer theories that are much more plausible and convincing than Sartre’s. There is no good reason why the workings of our mind might not be better explained by a theory that attributes unconscious mental states to us rather than by one that limits itself to conscious mental states, but the implications of such a theory are devastating to Sartre’s view on

authenticity and self-deception as they take away his justification for two of his most important premises – that self-deceivers are morally responsible for their evasions of self-knowledge, and that living a life of complete authenticity is actually possible.

## 4. Why Authenticity Might Have Come to Be Viewed as the Supreme Value

It is often thought that authenticity is the supreme value and that nothing can morally justify evading or not telling the truth, even though people do it all the time. Even so, I have come to the surprising (and counter-intuitive) conclusion that it is often easier to justify being inauthentic than authentic, with the added irony that this is in no small part thanks to some of the arguments presented by the Existentialists themselves, meant to justify the opposite. All too often, we find ourselves defending truth for its own sake, which has its obvious limitations. Why then, do so many of us have such a strong intuition that truth is always the supreme value when, at the very least, and as I hope this paper has shown, it is not a simple issue? I think the question is important enough to warrant at least minor consideration, and I would like to make the suggestion that the widespread emergence of the belief that authenticity is the supreme value is a product of modernity, at least in part a consequence of the two-fold influences of the 19th century emergence of psychology, and the proliferation of Existentialist thought and writing.

### 4.1 The Emergence of Psychology

The birth of modern psychology in the late 19th century emphasized the importance of digging deep into our psyches to probe the riches of truth that lay buried there, beneath the layers of repression and self-deceit. According to Sigmund Freud, “The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a

knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind" (Welsh 1994). To live in a state of denial was to be sick, while to confront and accept the truth was to be cured. The human mind was the new frontier, and it appeared to be knowable too. Psychoanalysis became all the rage, as it passed on a legacy that continues to this day, where the therapist's couch still remains the metaphorical workbench for 'knowing thyself'.

At the same time that psychologists were busy probing the depths of the human mind for the common good, they were also becoming increasingly aware of the great lengths to which the human body and mind would go to keep some truths from becoming conscious. Repressed memories, transference of feelings and beliefs, split and multiple personalities – all these phenomena were emerging as iron defences against the surfacing of certain truths. Surely something important was at work here: common wisdom might have told us that the truth would set us free, but our bodies were telling us something entirely different.

### 4.2 The Rise of Existentialism

The second major influence that I believe helped shape our modern ideas about authenticity, was the emergence of Existentialist thought in the 19th century. In many ways, Existentialism was just as much a literary phenomenon as a philosophical one. Sartre's ideas were – and still are – better known through his works of fiction such as *Nausea* and *No* Exit, than

through his more purely philosophical ones such as *Being and Nothingness*, and *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Many Existential writers objected to traditional systematic or academic philosophy, claiming that it was too abstract in both style and content to really be addressing concrete human experience. Because of this distaste for more traditional philosophical tracts, most Existential thought can be found expressed in literature. Dostoyevsky, Sartre, Camus, Nietzsche, Kafka – they all wrote books and short stories, creating fictional contexts within which to give their ideas form.

The problem with literature is that it is not subjected to the same rules of clear argument that academic philosophy is. Even more slippery is the fact that literature can, and does, rely heavily on eliciting an emotional response from the reader, which can often be manipulated and contrived, all the while contributing to the obfuscation of the actual ideas themselves. There are characters and feelings, situations and events, elements not normally found in more traditional philosophical tracts, where ideas are presented as transparently as possible. Certainly literature, with all its devices and powers of persuasion, has its place, but one must be careful not to be swayed by style over substance, which is sometimes a risk.

If we are to take its philosophical ideas seriously, then no work of fiction can be allowed to escape our scrutiny. If we have had an emotional response to it, then all the more reason to carefully tease out the arguments to see if they can

withstand a vigorous examination, removed from their fictional context. It is my view that many Existential ideas (the most important of which is the notion that authenticity is the supreme value), were able to take root in the popular imagination precisely because they were presented within works of fiction. This made their appeal mass, but also assured that there was little opportunity for any criticism or objection to reach non-academic audiences, leaving the seeds planted but the ideas largely unchallenged. The Existential position on authenticity is one that stands up well in theory, but fares far less well in practice—not unlike many things that can survive and thrive within a work of fiction, but could never exist beyond the page.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I further supported my contention that authenticity is not the supreme value by mounting a direct challenge to its most ardent defenders, the Existentialists. I gave an overview of the Existentialist position on authenticity and self-deception and identified several problems that the position seems to raise, looking specifically at the work of Sartre and Nietzsche. The five difficulties I identified are: 1) the problem of absolute truth 2) the problem of absolute freedom 3) the problem of self-creation 4) the problem of dehumanizing expectations 5) the problem of decision-making being valued over consequences. In Section 3, I outlined Sartre's theory that all evasions of self-knowledge are conscious, and explained why his being correct on this point is so central to his views on authenticity. Finally, I concluded the

chapter and this thesis with some suggestions as to why so many people might have come to believe that authenticity is the supreme value, when a closer investigation suggests that it probably is not.

# Conclusion

In Chapter One, I began by making the case that self-deception is indeed a real phenomenon, as the concept has raised so many apparent paradoxes that many scholars have rejected that it is even possible. I defined what we mean when we use the term 'self-deception' and then looked at the role that consciousness plays in most discussions of the morality of self-deception. I then discussed the problem of paradoxes, applying an argument presented by Herbert Fingarette to try to resolve the epistemological dichotomies that the concept of self-deception seems to raise.

In Chapter Two, I argued that self-deception can be rational if we take a means-ends view of rationality and emphasize its usefulness in serving legitimate, non-harmful desires, wants, needs, and values other than those involved in a concern for truth. I then made the case that under certain circumstances it can be morally permissible to deceive oneself, especially when the deception is contributing to one's physical and mental well-being. I also argued that it can occasionally be morally permissible to allow the self-deception of others to go unchallenged, especially in cases where the opportunity to exercise compassion, empathy, and kindness towards each other takes precedence over a concern for truth. I then took the argument one step further and claimed that attacking or trying to remove another person's self-deception can at times itself be a moral wrong.

In Chapter Three, I confronted self-deception's staunchest opponents, the Existentialists, who maintain that self-deception is never morally permissible under any circumstances. I began the chapter with a general outline of the Existentialist position on authenticity and identified several problems that the position seems to raise, looking specifically at the work of Sartre and Nietzsche. The five difficulties I identified are: 1) the problem of absolute truth 2) the problem of absolute freedom 3) the problem of self-creation 4) the problem of dehumanizing expectations 5) and the problem of decision-making being valued over consequences. I then considered Sartre's argument in support of his belief that all evasions of self-knowledge are conscious and explained why this point is so important to his contentions that self-deceivers are morally responsible for their deceptions and that human beings are capable of living lives of complete authenticity. I concluded the chapter, and this thesis, with some suggestions as to why so many people might have come to believe that authenticity is the supreme value, when a closer investigation suggests that it probably is not.

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