



DRADEK

Studies in Philosophy of Literature, Aesthetics,
and New Media Theories

Vol. VI Num. 2 2020

ISSN 2465-1060
[online]

Self-Deception in Literature

Edited by
Zeynep Talay Turner

powered by



UNIVERSITÀ DI PISA

Comitato Direttivo/Editorial Board:

Danilo Manca (Università di Pisa, editor in chief), Francesco Rossi (Università di Pisa),
Alberto L. Siani (Università di Pisa).

Comitato Scientifico/Scientific Board

Leonardo Amoroso (Università di Pisa), Christian Benne (University of Copenhagen),
Andrew Benjamin (Monash University, Melbourne), Fabio Camilletti (Warwick
University), Luca Crescenzi (Università di Trento), Paul Crowther (NUI Galway),
William Marx (Université Paris Ouest Nanterre), Alexander Nehamas (Princeton
University), Antonio Prete (Università di Siena), David Roochnik (Boston University),
Antonietta Sanna (Università di Pisa), Claus Zittel (Stuttgart Universität).

Comitato di redazione/Executive Committee:

Alessandra Aloisi (Oxford University), Daniele De Santis (Charles University of
Prague), Agnese Di Riccio (The New School for Social Research, New York), Fabio
Fossa (Politecnico di Milano), Beatrice Occhini (Università di Napoli "L'Orientale"),
Elena Romagnoli (Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa), Marta Vero (Università di Pisa,
journal manager).

ODRADEK. Studies in Philosophy of Literature, Aesthetics, and New Media Theories.
ISSN 2465-1060 [online]

Edited by Università di Pisa



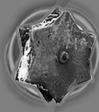
License Creative Commons

Odradek. Studies in Philosophy of Literature, Aesthetics and New Media Theories is
licensed under a Creative Commons attribution, non-commercial 4.0 International.

Further authorization out of this license terms may be available at <http://zetesisproject.com> or writing to: zetesis@unipi.it.

Layout editor: Stella Ammaturo, Marta Vero

Issue Editor: Zeynep Talay Turner



DRADEK

Studies in Philosophy of Literature, Aesthetics,
and New Media Theories

Vol. VI Num. 2 2020

ISSN 2465-1060
[online]

Self-Deception in Literature

Edited by
Zeynep Talay Turner

powered by



UNIVERSITÀ DI PISA

Self-Deception and Moral Epiphany in Flannery O'Connor

Julie Kirsch

Abstract

Self-deception is an important theme in several of Flannery O'Connor's short stories. In this essay, I explore the nature and ethics of self-deception by considering the self-deceived characters in O'Connor's *Everything That Rises Must Converge* and *Revelation*. In the first part of the essay, I look at the contribution that biased and selective modes of thinking, the construction of narratives, and acts of imagination and memory make to self-deception. Following O'Connor, I also consider the possibility of overcoming self-deception by experiencing a shocking and emotionally charged event or encounter. In the second part, I discuss the often-dangerous moral and personal consequences of self-deception. I show that self-deception can interfere with decision making, blind us to our own moral shortcomings, and enable immoral behavior.

Introduction

Many of Flannery O'Connor's characters are locked into an almost impenetrable form of self-deception. Although they may see the world, and themselves, in a way that is internally consistent, their view of things is often distorted, resulting from a biased and self-serving personal narrative. In the cases under consideration, the self-deception is moralistic and allows the characters to see themselves as superior to others. Still, through a sort of epiphany, the characters are, if only briefly, shocked out of their self-deception, and able to view things through a different and more accurate lens. In what follows, I look at the way that all this unfolds in O'Connor's *Revelation*, and *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. I show how these two stories can help us better understand the nature and etiology of self-deception, as well as its potentially dangerous moral and personal consequences.

Here is a preview of the essay: In §2, I consider some of the mental processes that play a causal role in bringing about self-deception, including biased and selective modes of thinking (both intentional and unintentional), the construction of narratives, and acts of imagination and memory. I also consider the possibility of overcoming self-deception through an epiphany or emotionally arousing situation. In §3, I show that self-deception is often harmful because it can interfere with moral judgment, blind us to our own moral shortcomings, and enable immoral behaviors. And in §4, I conclude with some general

reflections upon the lessons to be learned by studying O'Connor's intriguing and multidimensional self-deceived characters.

1. Inside the Minds of O'Connor's Self-Deceivers

As she sits in a doctor's office waiting room, Mrs. Turpin (in O'Connor's *Revelation*) casts judgment upon everyone around her, all the while reassuring herself of her own status and self-worth. There is the ill-mannered boy who failed to make space for her on the couch; his white-trashy mother who wears gritty-looking clothing and whose lips are stained with snuff; and, of central importance to the story, an ugly, fat girl, Mary Grace, whose skin is blue with acne. Mary Grace is reading a book entitled *Human Development*, and casts death stares in Mrs. Turpin's direction for no apparent reason. Mrs. Turpin pities Mary Grace for her ugliness. Although she herself is also overweight, she comforts herself with the knowledge that she has always had beautiful, flawless skin. Even at forty-seven years old, she tells herself, she has not a wrinkle on her face, apart from those around her eyes from laughing too much¹. She also has a good disposition, which she would not trade for even the most attractive, svelte body².

1 O'Connor (1956), p. 194.

2 *Ibidem*, pp. 203-205.

1.1 Intentional Activity and Self-Deception

Some theorists of self-deception, so-called *lexicalists*, believe that self-deception is best modeled after interpersonal deception, cases in which person *A* deceives person *B* (where *A* and *B* are not the same person)³. In this view, one necessary condition for deception – of either oneself or of others – is a deceptive intention. Person *A* does not deceive person *B* unless person *A* intends or, minimally, tries to deceive person *B*. For reasons that should be obvious, theorists of this kind are sometimes referred to as *intentionalists*⁴. The major challenge for this approach is associated with what Alfred Mele has coined the “dynamic” puzzle of self-deception:

On the one hand, it is hard to imagine how one person can deceive another into believing that *p* if the latter person knows exactly what the former is up to, and it is difficult to see how the trick can be any easier when the intending deceiver and the intended victim are the same person. On the other, deception normally is facilitated by the deceiver's having and intentionally executing a deceptive strategy. If, to avoid thwarting one's own efforts at self-deception, one must not intentionally execute any strategy for deceiving oneself, how can one succeed?⁵

³ Mele (2001), pp. 5-6.

⁴ See Bermudez (2000); Davidson (1998); Pears (1984).

⁵ Mele (2001), p. 8.

Other theorists are less interested in the conceptual structure, or definition, of deception and more interested in accounting for the phenomenon, i.e., actual people whom we describe as self-deceived. Some theorists of this variety⁶ – free from the conceptual constraints that bind the lexicalists – deny that self-deception is intentional. Instead of positing the existence of a self-deceptive intention, such theorists (hereafter *anti-intentionalists*) explain self-deception in terms of the biasing effect that a person’s motivational state (desires and/or emotions) can have upon her beliefs.

Throughout my own work, I have (with Mele *et al.*) taken the second approach, and tried to account for the minds and behaviors of actual self-deceivers. I have argued, with the anti-intentionalists, that self-deceivers do not try to deceive themselves in typical or garden-variety cases. Instead, their motivational state (desires and/or emotions) brings about their self-deception automatically, as it were, and without a self-deceptive intention. However, I have also acknowledged the role that intentional cognitive behavior that is *not* intentionally self-deceptive can play in the etiology of self-deception. Following Mele, we can, and should, distinguish between (1) “intentional activities (e.g., intentionally focusing on data of a certain kind)”, and (2) “intentional activities engaged in as part of an *attempt* to deceive oneself, or to cause oneself to believe something (e.g., intentionally focusing on data of a certain kind as part of an attempt to deceive oneself into believing

⁶ See Lauria (2018); Lazar (1999), Mele (2001).

that *p*)”⁷. As this distinction makes clear, we can intentionally engage in a cognitive activity without doing so in an effort to deceive ourselves. Some cases of self-deception might involve (1) even if they do not involve (2). Activities of type (1) are non-problematically possible and avoid the well-known puzzle associated with intentional self-deception.

Mrs. Turpin, for example, engages in quite deliberate, and often repetitive, patterns of thought that, while not motivated by a self-deceptive intention, please her and provide her with comfort. Consumed as she is by her social status and that of those around her, Mrs. Turpin often occupies herself at night by naming classes of people:

On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them – not above, just away from – were the white-trash; then above them were the homeowners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well. There was a colored dentist in town who had two

⁷ Mele (2001), p. 18.

red Lincolns and a swimming pool and a farm with registered white-face cattle on it. Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven.⁸

Although Mrs. Turpin is intentionally engaged in cognitive activity here, it is unlikely that she is doing so as part of an attempt to deceive herself. While she clearly derives pleasure and satisfaction from carrying on in this way, there is no textual evidence that she does this in an effort to deceive herself. Like a proud mother who repeatedly reflects upon her child's accomplishments, or the decorated general who revisits his many militaristic triumphs, Mrs. Turpin simply enjoys sorting people into boxes with herself located, like a Southern duchess, near the top. Her own position in the social hierarchy is a point of great pride for her and she lavishes in the reminder of her own self-worth.

What is not surprising, however, is that Mrs. Turpin's preoccupation with such thoughts shapes the way that she sees the world and herself. Whenever we give undue attention to our own virtues or accomplishments, while at the same time neglecting our failures and vices, we set ourselves up for delusion and self-deception. We expect that the person who spends all of her time thinking about how smart, beautiful, and charming she is – rehearsing compliments from friends and strangers

⁸ O'Connor (1956), p. 196.

alike – will end up thinking that she is pretty extraordinary at the end of the day. Importantly, this can happen even without a self-deceptive intention. Research in the area of cognitive behavioral therapy (or CBT) provides evidence that habitual forms of thought and action can affect our beliefs, desires, and behavior. Practitioners of CBT use it to treat anxiety, depression, phobias, addictions, among other psychological diseases and disorders. The therapy involves replacing deeply ingrained but maladaptive patterns of thought with those that are more conducive to mental health and well-being. Recent work in the area of brain plasticity corroborates the central insight behind the therapy, revealing that our thoughts and behaviors can affect the physical structure of the brain and prepare us for more of the same. To be sure, repetitive thought and action does not invariably lead to self-deception, or even to a distorted sense of the world and oneself. However, it often has this effect, especially when it is selective and driven by our motivational state⁹.

O'Connor's stories reveal how a person's motivational state can influence her beliefs in more subtle, less deliberate ways as well. Mrs. Turpin's motivational state not only affects the content and direction of her inner speech or dialogue, but also what, in her environment, is salient and captures her attention. As we have seen, Mrs. Turpin is preoccupied with people's clothing and other indicators of class.

⁹ See Doidge (2007) for a helpful, general discussion of behavior and brain plasticity, and Porto *et al.* (2009) for a more specific look at the way that CBT alters the brain in the treatment of anxiety disorders.

She is particularly interested in their feet and how their footwear compares with her own:

Without appearing to, Mrs. Turpin always noticed people's feet. The well-dressed lady had on red and grey suede shoes to match her dress. Mrs. Turpin had on her good black patent leather pumps. The ugly girl had on Girl Scout shoes and heavy socks. The old woman had on tennis shoes and the white-trashy mother had on what appeared to be bedroom slippers, black straw with gold braid threaded through them – exactly what you would have expected her to have on¹⁰.

Common sense reveals that our experiences and interests shape the way that we see the world. While watching a parade, or walking through a busy market, a person with an interest in, say, cars, will notice different aspects of her experience from the person with an interest in food or clothing. In some cases, the “noticing” is deliberate, and we intentionally attend to aspects of our environment that we take to be interesting or important, but, in other cases, this happens without our active involvement as agents.

Empirical evidence suggests that our beliefs and desires can influence our attention and perception in various other ways as well. Research on the confirmation bias, for example, reveals that we tend to seek out information that confirms rather than disconfirms a hypothesis. As Mele has shown, this is one way in which our desires can affect our

10 O'Connor (1956), p. 195.

beliefs in the absence of a self-deceptive intention¹¹. As Mrs. Turpin attends to the footwear of those around her, it is possible that the confirmation bias is at work. She may be using the footwear choices of other patients to confirm her hypotheses about their class or social standing. Indeed, after inspecting the footwear of those around her, she notes (as we have seen above) that the white-trashy woman had on “exactly what you would have expected her to have on”¹². Mrs. Turpin’s perception of others is clearly partial and influenced by her own preconceived ideas about race and social class. She does not just see others, along with their sartorial choices, but also sizes them up, using their appearance to confirm what she already suspects. This is, of course, how the minds of racists (as well as sexists, classists, etc.) tend to work: their biased perspective of the world finds confirmation wherever it looks. They attend to data that confirms, and ignore data that disconfirms, what they antecedently believe about the “other”.

2.2 Narrative and Self-Deception

My earlier work also explored the role that narrative plays in contributing to self-deception. A narrative (as I have previously written) is “an oral or written interpretation of a series of events that is presented in sequential order.” Importantly,

¹¹ Mele (2001), pp. 29-33.

¹² O'Connor (1956), p. 195.

narratives are “constructed from a perspective and are in principle incomplete and selective in what they represent”¹³. I now want to add to this that narratives can be constructed and told partially, or completely, in *inner* speech; indeed, the narratives that we develop about our own lives are at times told and rehearsed only to ourselves. Although there is considerable philosophical debate about the necessary and sufficient conditions for narrative, this broad definition will suffice for the purposes of this paper.

Sometimes the narratives that we construct around the events of our lives contribute to our self-deception. This can happen in at least two ways: (1) In developing a narrative around our *past* experiences, we may be selective and partial in what we attend to, spinning a narrative that fails to reflect the richness, detail, and totality of our lives. Our motivational state can affect this process; we may weave our experiences together in a way that reflects positively upon our own character and behavior. But a narrative can also affect (2) our *future* experiences, priming us for more of the same and possibly prompting the confirmation bias.

We can see how all of this plays out in several of O'Connor's short stories, particularly in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. In the story, the adult son, Julian, accompanies his mother on a bus to a “reducing,” or weight loss, program downtown. The mother does not feel comfortable riding the bus alone downtown at night now that the buses have been

¹³ Kirsch (2012), p. 160.

racially integrated¹⁴. She has therefore asked Julian to escort her to class every Wednesday night, which, she thinks, seems but a small gesture in exchange for all that she has given him. The mother has in fact made numerous personal sacrifices for her son. Among other things, she continues to let him live with her even though he is an adult and has been finished with college for a year. But the narrator tells us that Julian, in his role as “martyr,” did not like “to consider all she did for him”¹⁵. It would be much easier for Julian to dislike his mother, he admits, if she “had been selfish, if she had been an old hag who drank and screamed at him”¹⁶. Thus, in playing the role of martyr in his story, Julian attempts to emphasize instances in which he made sacrifices for his mother, or acted as the victim to her overbearing and unjust behaviors. At the same time, he tries to diminish all that she has done for him – pushing it out of his mind – since it is antagonistic to the story that he prefers to tell about their relationship.

Julian is irritated with his mother and her outdated and racist attitude towards black people. Throughout the story, which tells of their interactions with other passengers, particularly black passengers, on their bus ride to class, we are privy to the story that Julian constructs regarding his mother. He does not just observe her behaviors, but also positions them within the context of his story; he attributes beliefs and motives to her, which she may or may not have.

14 O'Connor (1956)², p. 3.

15 *Ibidem*, pp. 3-5.

16 *Ibidem*, p. 5.

Thus, the story that he has constructed about the past also affects how he interprets events that unfold in the present. Julian spends much of the time in his head, we are told, because the people around him, particularly his mother, are so intolerable. While on the bus, he hides behind a newspaper and withdraws

into the inner compartment of his mind where he spent most of his time. This was a kind of mental bubble in which he established himself when he could not bear to be a part of what was going on around him. From it he could see out and judge but in it he was safe from any kind of penetration from without. It was the only place where he felt free of the general idiocy of his fellows. His mother had never entered it but from it he could see her with absolute clarity¹⁷.

The narrator reveals to us here the extent to which Julian's mind is cut off from the external world. He maintains a view of the world that, while internally consistent, is dangerously disconnected from the external world and any kind of criticism that might come with it. More troubling still, and what inspires a certain degree of suspicion in Julian's view of things, is his conviction that he *alone* has a clear view of things and of other people. While his mother cannot enter his mind, he is confident that he can see her "with absolute clarity." He later celebrates this fact when considering how he somehow managed to succeed with everything conspiring against him, particularly his mother:

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

In spite of going to only a third-rate college, he had, on his own initiative, come out with a first-rate education; in spite of growing up dominated by a small mind, he had ended up with a large one; in spite of all her foolish views, he was free of prejudice and unafraid to face facts. Most miraculous of all, instead of being blinded by love for her as she was for him, he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity¹⁸.

As we can see here, Julian not only plays the role of the martyr, but of the misunderstood intellectual as well. He views himself as a kind of genius – “too intelligent to be a success” – and surrounded by feeble-minded idiots, such as his mother¹⁹. His mind is capacious, rational, and unemotional; he can see his mother, and the world around him, with perfect clarity and objectivity.

Upon entering Julian's mind, we also wonder to what extent he is truly free from racial prejudice. At one point, when considering how to “teach his mother a lesson,” he runs through a number of imaginary possibilities. He might marry a “Negroid woman,” or make friends with a “Negro professor or lawyer.” He then adds that he had tried to make friends before with some of the “better types,” with “ones that looked like professors or ministers or lawyers,” but had no success²⁰. The implication here seems to be that the average black person is unsavory and inadequate

18 *Ibidem*, p. 12.

19 *Ibidem*, p. 11.

20 *Ibidem*, p. 15.

in this regard – unfit for his friendship. Julian lacks the self-awareness necessary to see that he has not altogether overcome racial prejudice himself.

Julian's mother is not free from illusion either and, like Mrs. Turpin, seems self-deceived about her own moral perfection and preoccupied with matters of class and social status. As is the case in many of O'Connor's stories, racial tension is at the forefront of the story, along with discrepant (often intergenerational) attitudes towards integration and the abolishment of segregation. The mother, unlike her more progressively minded son, is openly racist, objects to integration, and clings to memories of her childhood and of how things used to be. Julian describes her as "living according to the laws of her own fantasy world, outside of which he had never seen her set foot"²¹. She sees no conflict between her own sense of moral righteousness on the one hand and her intolerant and bigoted attitude towards black people on the other. Indeed, her worldview, and antiquated sense of morality, seems to require this of her. While we have comparatively more access to Julian's mind than to his mother's, it is clear that she is viewing the world through her own well-entrenched narrative.

Todd May has argued that the narratives that we construct around our lives reflect the values that we possess or would like to possess. The 'or would like to' qualification, May admits, leaves open considerable maneuvering space for self-deception²². We can

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

²² May (2019), pp. 178-184.

see this, too, in the narratives that Julian and his mother construct. Both Julian and his mother have self-congratulatory, inflated views of themselves, as reflected in their narratives, but through the lens of different value systems. Through their narratives, we not only detect their pride or self-righteousness, but also the distinct set of values that they use to evaluate themselves and others. Julian's value system is committed to social justice, equality, education, and the elimination of class distinctions, whereas his mother's emphasizes self-respect, familial ties, tradition, and outward displays of propriety and class. As we have seen, it is of great importance to Julian's mother that she knows "who she is" and expresses her worth and status through proper behavior and attire²³.

This sharp contrast between the two value systems becomes particularly clear when Julian suddenly – as an act of rebellion – removes his tie. His mother, momentarily upset and humiliated, asks: "Why must you look like *that* when you take me to town? Why must you deliberately embarrass me?"²⁴. His mother continues her protestations in a similar vein until Julian, fatigued and annoyed by her pettiness, puts his tie back on. "Returned to my class," he mutters contemptuously. "True culture," he tells her, "is in the mind, the *mind*."²⁵

Julian and his mother both view themselves as being right within the narratives that they construct

²³ O'Connor (1965)², p. 6.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

around their own value systems. Trapped as they are within their own stories, with their own set of values, they have little understanding or sympathy for the other. This clash between value systems to some extent resembles what we see today between rival political parties. Both sides of the political divide tend to cling to their own stories with a sense of moral self-righteousness or pride. Psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, has identified five values that underlie the political outlooks of both liberals and conservatives: (1) Care for Others/Do No Harm; (2) Fairness/Justice/Equality; (3) In-Group Loyalty; (4) Respect for Authority; and (5) Purity. Whereas conservatives tend to care about all five values equally, liberals give much greater weight to the first two than to the last three²⁶.

These value differences permeate the stories that each side tells about itself and the other. As Haidt writes, people “bind themselves into political teams that share moral narratives. Once they accept a particular narrative, they become blind to other moral worlds”²⁷. This polarization is exacerbated by the fact that we are often caught in social media echo chambers, closed systems of news and information that reinforce what we already believe. As a result, we are able to maintain an internally coherent, yet often biased, partial, and incomplete understanding of the world and events around us. We are comfortable with our stories and rarely leave the echo chambers that we ourselves have helped to construct.

²⁶ Haidt (2012), pp. 150-179.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. XXVIII.

O'Connor's stories masterfully reveal how much psychological space can exist between two people within the same, small physical space. As Iain McGilchrist has observed, it is the ability to distance ourselves from the world and our own motivations that sets us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom²⁸. Thanks to this ability, we can exercise self-control and empathize with others in distress. But this psychological distance has a darker side, too: it allows us to deceive others and conceal from them our true thoughts and motives. Thus, this distinctively human capacity is also one of life's great tragedies. You could be physically close to another human being – entwined in a lover's passionate embrace – while he or she could be somewhere else, and *with* someone else, in his or her own mind. Alas, for creatures like us, physical closeness is no guarantee of psychological closeness. Our stories sometimes increase this distance by locking us into our own interpretation of things, and prompting us to misattribute mental states to those around us. Like Mrs. Turpin, we may find ourselves comfortably alone in our story, oblivious to the critics around us. Or, like Julian and his mother, we may be in a relationship with another person that is not quite what it seems, beset by silent conflict and perpetual misunderstanding.

²⁸ McGilchrist (2009), p. 21.

2.3 Memory, Imagination, and Self-Deception

The visualizations associated with memory and imagination can bolster or reinforce our narratives. We now know that memory and imagination have much in common, and that we all too often confuse the latter with the former. Memory is, in many ways, imagination's close cousin; our memories are largely reconstructions of the past, not faithful representations of them.²⁹ And memories, like fantasies, can have a similar effect upon our beliefs, propping up a self-deceptive view of the world.

Donald Davidson explores the role that imagination, or fantasy, plays in Emma Bovary's self-deception (in *Madame Bovary*). Emma, he explains, would read romance novels and long for the experiences and surroundings that she took other people to have. Her longing would prompt "vivid imaginings" of what she desired and believed was her due. She treated the real world increasingly like the imagined world until she was unable to distinguish between the two, confusing the dream world with reality³⁰. According to Davidson, what stands out in her self-deception are "the steps she takes to nourish her illusions"³¹. Emma was no passive victim of her fantasies (if one *ever* is); rather, she indulged in them, playing an active role in bringing them

29 For a helpful and accessible discussion of the reconstructive nature of memory, see Shaw (2016) and Fernyhough (2012).

30 D. Davidson (1998), pp. 14-15.

31 *Ibidem*, p. 15.

about. Engaging in fantasy was a kind of pastime for Emma; something that she *did*. Is it any wonder that she ended up self-deceived? Indeed, Davidson warns that the

extent to which at any moment we vividly imagine another life, that of a robber, ghost, giant, old man, etc., we have taken a first step toward accepting what we imagine. If we dwell on our fantasy, act out small parts of our imagined self, enjoy in daydreams the excitements and triumphs we miss in reality, we are encouraging and motivating a degree of conviction in what, in the beginning, we know is false³².

We can see how easily fantasy slides into self-deception in O'Connor's work as well. Julian fantasizes about how best to retaliate against his mother and punish her for her injustices. All of this plays out vividly, and with considerable detail, in his mind's eye. He imagines that he can only find a black doctor for his gravely ill mother, that he is participating in a sit-in demonstration for black rights, and that he is marrying a beautiful, intelligent, and dignified black woman. Imagining all of this, the narrator tells us, only increased Julian's feelings of indignation at his mother³³. We might view Julian as intentionally dwelling or indulging in his feelings so as to increase their intensity – something that he finds intrinsically satisfying. Like the repetitive or selective thinking discussed earlier (§ 2.1), engaging in fantasy can be

³² *Ibidem*, p. 13.

³³ O'Connor (1956)², p. 15.

an intentional activity that is not intentionally self-deceptive (even if it often leads to self-deception). Intentionally getting lost in fantasy can leave its mark upon the mind, if only by enhancing what we already feel, desire or believe.

It is interesting to note that, in his discussion of Emma Bovary, Davidson does little to distinguish memory from imagination. He seems to recognize, if only implicitly, that the mental processes underlying imagination and memory are very much the same, and can make similar contributions to self-deception. At one point, his discussion of Emma's memories and imaginings runs almost seamlessly together. He describes the way that her reflections upon the recent past transition into her imaginings:

After the ball at the Chateau of the Marquis d' Andervilliers, the memory gives Emma something to "do." She thinks of the Viscount with whom she danced, and imagines him in Paris. She buys a guide to Paris and traces her way about the capital with the tip of her finger, walking up the boulevards, stopping at every turning, imagining the gay, impulsive life of poets in the cafes³⁴.

Emma's mental life, as described by Davidson, is not unusual in this regard; our imaginations frequently begin where our memories end. How often do we first remember a situation – visualizing it in the mind's eye – only to imagine what might have happened but did not? We fantasize about what

³⁴ Davidson (1998), pp. 15-16.

we *should* have done, said, or whatever, watching it all unfold, like greedy spectators, on the inner stage of the mind. On such occasions, there is no definite or perceivable break between the two; our memories transition smoothly into our imaginings.

Davidson, as we have seen, warns that deliberately engaging in a fantasy is a first step towards self-deception (or, to be more precise, “accepting” what we imagine to be true when we initially take it to be false). However, given the similarity between imagination and memory, and the tendency for the two to overlap, much the same could be said about memory. Even when our memories are accurate, continuously rehearsing them can cause us to become stuck, as it were, in the past. We may have a difficult time accepting, if only emotionally, that the world has changed, and that we, too, have changed. It is important to Julian’s mother that she know “who she is”; however, her identity is based upon memories of a time that no longer exists – relatives who are now deceased, a house in state of disrepair, and a neighborhood that is crumbling and lost its splendor. Matters become even more serious when our memories are flawed or inaccurate. When this happens, we become entrenched in a past that never really existed. At such times, the line between memory and imagination becomes even more blurry and indistinct.

2.4 Self-Deception and Epiphany

It is not until the very end of the story that Julian and his mother are shocked out of their self-deception and experience a kind of epiphany. Against Julian's remonstrations, his mother condescendingly offers a shiny, new penny to the "cute little black boy" getting off the bus. The boy's mother, insulted by the act of charity, whacks Julian's mother to the ground with her purse, thereby causing her to have a stroke³⁵. Importantly, Julian had earlier admitted (in thought) to wanting to teach his mother a lesson *without pushing her far enough to have a stroke*. This earlier confession foreshadows her death, for she is "taught a lesson" that culminates in her demise. As she lay dying, calling out for her black childhood caretaker, Caroline, to take her home, Julian for the first time in the story sees his mother *as* his mother. He cries, "Mother! . . . Darling, sweetheart, wait! . . . Mama, mama!"³⁶. Before this moment, Julian was so caught up in the story playing out in his head that he could not connect with his mother emotionally, or truly appreciate the sacrifices that she had made for him. It is not until the end of story – at the moment of her death – that the two stories tragically *converge* (as suggested by the story's title).

Mrs. Turpin's epiphany is precipitated by events that are similarly momentous and emotionally charged in *The Revelation*. As we have seen, Mrs. Turpin is locked into her own self-deception,

³⁵ O'Connor (1956)², p. 20.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

contentedly casting judgment upon those around her. However, toward the end of the story, Mary Grace, the girl whose ugliness she pities, launches at her, grabbing her neck and knocking her to the ground. As she lay on the floor, Mary Grace glares at her with knowing blue eyes³⁷. Mrs. Turpin was aware, the narrator tells us, that the girl “knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition.” Bravely, she asks Mary Grace “What you go to say to me?” and then waits, holding her breath, “as for a revelation”³⁸. To Mrs. Turpin’s horror, Mary Grace responds, “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog”³⁹. These words cut right into Mrs. Turpin and eat at her throughout the rest of the story. Finally, when she is back home and attending to her hogs, Mrs. Turpin has a vision in which she sees that even the people in her class are flawed and imperfect:

A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little

³⁷ O'Connor (1956), p. 207.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. . . . Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.⁴⁰

It is fitting that, in both of O'Connor's stories, a truly shocking and emotionally arousing event jolted the characters out of their self-deception, if only temporarily. Martha Nussbaum has aptly described emotions as prompting "upheavals of thought" (which is also the title of her book).⁴¹ Intensely emotional experiences can overwhelm us and redirect our thought and attention. Nussbaum recalls how the news of her mother's grave illness, and subsequent death, led to an experience of this kind. It is often when we face serious illness or death, in others or ourselves, that we experience "revelations," or gain important insights. If anything can do the job of shattering our self-deception, it seems as though a truly shocking and emotionally charged experience – a violent attack, a brush with death, or a reminder of our own mortality – can. In a letter, O'Connor once said, "I don't know if anybody can be converted without seeing themselves in a kind of blasting annihilating light"⁴². Through her carefully constructed short stories, O'Connor provides her characters with the light they need to overcome self-deception and see the world and themselves more clearly.

40 *Ibidem*, p. 218.

41 See Nussbaum (2001).

42 O'Connor (1979), p. 427.

3. The Dangerous Moral and Personal Consequences of Self-Deception

Self-Deception does not always lead to morally and personally problematic consequences, but it often does. By considering O'Connor's self-deceived characters, we can better understand the threats that it poses to our moral and personal lives. In this section, I show that self-deception can (1) interfere with decision-making, (2) blind us to our own moral shortcomings, and (3) enable immoral behavior. I also look at the role that proud, and moralistic, narratives play in making all of this possible.

3.1 Self-Deception Interferes with Decision-Making

When we possess true beliefs, we are – to this extent, at least – able to reason and respond to the world as it really is. To be sure, I am not suggesting here that we generally see the world exactly as it is – that our perceptions are accurate representations of “things in themselves”, as Kant would put it. Instead, I want to make the more modest claim that, in the ordinary sense, true beliefs tend to put us in touch with reality, i.e., the world of friends, family, work and play. They allow us, as Linda Zagzebski aptly describes it, to make “cognitive contact with

reality”⁴³. In my earlier work, I refer to the ability to reason and respond to the world as it really is as ‘rational real-world self-governance’⁴⁴.

Most of us value rational real-world self-governance. Importantly, we want to make decisions in response to the world as it really is and not just as we take it to be. That is, we do not just value autonomy, understood as the rational capacity to make decisions, but also the ability to exercise autonomy in response to the real world. This is one reason why there is a strong moral presumption against interpersonal deception. When we are deceived, we lose cognitive contact with reality and make decisions based upon the picture of the world that the deceiver helps to paint in our minds. To appreciate this point, consider Immanuel Kant’s well-known false promise example.

Someone asks to borrow money from you, promising to pay you back at a later time. However, this person has no intention of paying you back; he is just saying this to get you to loan him the money⁴⁵. In this case, the person making the false promise does not destroy or undermine your autonomy, understood as the rational capacity to make decisions; your decision-making powers are still intact. Nevertheless, by creating a false sense of reality in you – by feeding you false beliefs – he prevents you from making a decision about the world as it really is. And what most of us want, most of the time, is the ability to make decisions in response to the real world.

43 Zagzebski (1996), p. 167.

44 Kirsch (2005), p. 421.

45 Kant (1785), p. 35.

Now, when we are *self*-deceived, we are in the same cognitive predicament. It is as though we are cut off from the real world and living in a kind of fantasyland. Indeed, we often describe self-deceivers in these terms. Julian, for example, says that his mother lived in “fantasy world, outside of which he had never seen her set foot”⁴⁶. This can be problematic from the perspective of morality. In order to live a decent, if not exceptional, moral life, we need to have a more or less accurate picture of the world. Although we may not need to know exactly how many leaves are on the trees, we need to have the kind of information that enables us to make sound moral decisions. Now, exactly what we need to know to satisfy the demands of morality will, of course, vary from moral theory to moral theory. If our moral obligations extend to people suffering in other countries (as Peter Singer would have it⁴⁷, for example) then we may need to possess information about their plight. But, minimally, morality would seem to require that we possess mostly true beliefs about those around us and ourselves. Again, depending upon the moral theory in question, we may need to possess information that allows us to cultivate and exercise the virtues (virtue ethics), reduce suffering/increase happiness (utilitarianism), or act in accordance with the moral law from a sense of duty (Kantian ethics).

⁴⁶ O'Connor (1956)², p. 11.

⁴⁷ See Singer (1972).

3.2 Self-Deception Blinds Us to Our Moral Shortcomings

In the grip of self-deception, we may judge others more harshly than we judge ourselves. Blind to our own moral shortcomings, we may only take notice of the character flaws and moral transgressions of others. Julian, as we have just seen, is keenly aware of his mother's moral shortcomings but completely oblivious to his own. His picture of himself is excessively positive and omits all of his faults, while his picture of his mother is excessively negative, and omits her – if only limited – virtues. He lacks the self-awareness to recognize his own lingering racism, malice, smugness, and so forth.

It is not until the very end of “Revelation,” guided by a vision, that Mrs. Turpin seems to have any real sense of her own moral and personal failings. Even her wrinkles – or laugh lines – are testament to her own good nature. The symbolically named Mary Grace sees through all this and prompts Mrs. Turpin's revelation. Importantly, O'Connor, a devout Catholic, makes Mrs. Turpin's revelation a divinely inspired one; God reaches out to Mrs. Turpin through Mary Grace and presents her with an opportunity for redemption. O'Connor once wrote that “all good stories are about conversion, about a character's changing. . . . The action of grace changes a character. . . . All my stories are about the action of grace on a character”⁴⁸. At the end of the story, Mrs.

48 O'Connor (1979), p. 275.

Turpin, touched by God's grace, recognizes her own imperfections and those of others within her class.

When we recognize our own moral shortcomings, we are often more charitable in our estimations of others. We recognize that we, like others, are morally imperfect but – hopefully – working towards becoming better versions of ourselves. What stands out in O'Connor's writing is the extent to which a moralistic pride is bound up with her characters' self-deception. Julian, his mother, and Mrs. Turpin all take themselves to be paragons of moral virtue but are quite willing to dole out the most unforgiving criticisms of others. They can pull this off because they craftily compose narratives that present them in a partial, incomplete, but ever-so-flattering light.

3.3 Self-Deception Enables Immoral Behavior

Given that self-deception blinds us to our own moral shortcomings, it can have the further effect of enabling immoral behavior. Bishop Butler wrote that the greatest danger of self-deception is that “it will carry a man almost any length of wickedness, in the way of oppression, hard usage of others; and even to plain injustice, without his having, from what appears, any real sense of it”⁴⁹. It allows us to see even the most horrendous of our own actions in the best possible light. According to Butler, it prevents

⁴⁹ Butler (1914), p. 156.

our conscience, or internal light, from functioning properly and directing us away from wrongdoing⁵⁰. Self-deception can in this way be an *enabler* of immoral behavior; it allows us to act in morally reprehensible ways without having any sense of what we are doing. In the absence of this recognition, we may fail to experience morally appropriate emotions, such as guilt or shame, for having harmed others. Relatedly, we will not have the doxastic self-awareness necessary to take responsibility for our actions and atone for our sins.

It is helpful to compare how self-deception is enabling of immoral behavior with the way in which interpersonal deception is enabling of immoral behavior. As Kant observed, when others deceive us, they bypass our rational decision-making capacities, or autonomy, and treat us a tool – as a mere thing to get what they want. In many cases, their deception enables them to treat us immorally. The lying promise-maker, for example, tells a lie so that he can borrow money without paying it back. The lie enables him to do wrong. On this analysis, he commits two wrongs: the first (1) is the initial act of deception, and the second (2) is the failure to repay the money borrowed.

We can appreciate the enabling quality of *self*-deception by considering the way that Julian justifies his harsh treatment of his mother. Julian, as we have seen, admits that it would be easier to dislike his mother if she had always treated him badly. In order to be cruel to her, and maintain his indignation, he must

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 158.

ignore all of her virtues and acts of sacrifice for him. He focuses instead upon her superficiality, pettiness, and intolerance. His thoughts and imaginings fuel his indignation and frustration, thereby enabling him to be cold and unkind to her. To be sure, Julian is not entirely mistaken about his mother's character. She is, so far as we can tell, superficial, petty, and intolerant (not to mention blatantly racist). But this is an at best incomplete account of her character; for, like the rest of us, she is a complex and multidimensional being, comprised of the good, the bad, and the ugly (even if, in her case, there is decidedly more of the latter than the former).

I have thus far focused upon the dangerous *moral* consequences of self-deception. As we have seen, self-deception can (1) interfere with decision-making, (2) blind us to our own moral shortcomings, and (3) enable immoral behavior. However, it can give rise to dangerous non-moral but *personal* consequences in each of these areas as well. The person who is romantically self-deceived, for example, may reason in response to a warped understanding of her relationship. This may prompt her to make decisions, such as pursuing an ill-fated marriage, which she would not make if she had a more accurate understanding of her situation. Her self-deception may also cause her to judge her partner more harshly than she judges herself, for she may be well aware of his faults but oblivious to her own. Finally, in the grip of her self-deception, there may be nothing to stop her from acting in any number of personally destructive ways. Her own "good sense", let us say

(the parallel of Butler's conscience), will be unable to prevent romantic catastrophes of various stripes if, due to her self-deception, she does not see the world as it really is.

4. Conclusion

By considering O'Connor's self-deceived characters, we can better understand the nature and etiology of self-deception. We can detect her characters' self-deception through their own internal dialogue, which is often proud, self-righteous, and intolerant of others, and the often discrepant world around them. Importantly, O'Connor captures the extent to which self-deception locks us into our own psychological space, thereby preventing meaningful contact with the world around us and other minds. Still, she shows that a truly shocking and emotionally arousing event can (thanks to God's grace, for O'Connor) help us overcome our self-deception and see the world and ourselves more clearly. Such an event can recalibrate us, as it were, and prompt a moral epiphany. O'Connor's short stories reveal our great susceptibility to self-deception while also leaving open possibilities for self-knowledge, conversion, and moral improvement.

Bibliography

- Bermudez, J. L. (2000): *Self-Deception, Intentions, and Contradictory Beliefs*, «Analysis», vol. 60, no. 4, pp. 309-319.
- Butler, J. (1914): "Upon Self-Deceit," in: Id., *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel, and a Dissertation up on the Nature of Virtue*, London: G. Bell & Sons LTD, 1969, pp. 149-163.
- Davidson, D. (1998): "Who Is Fooled?" in: Id., *Self-Deception and Paradoxes of Rationality*, edited by J.P. Dupuy, Stanford: CSLI Publications, pp. 1-18.
- Fernyhough, C. (2012): *Pieces of Light; How the New Science Of Memory Illuminates the Stories We Tell About Our Pasts*, New York: Harper Perennial.
- Haidt, J. (2012): *The Righteous Mind; Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, New York: Vintage Books.
- Kant, I. (1785): *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. edited by M. Gregor, J. Timmerman, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Kirsch, J. (2012): "Narrative and Self-Deception in *La Symphonie Pastorale*", «Humana.Mente, Journal of Philosophical Studies» vol. 5, no. 20, 2012, pp. 159-174.
- Ead., (2005): "What's so Great about Reality", «Canadian Journal of Philosophy» vol. 35, no. 3, 2005, pp. 407-427.
- Lazar, A. (1999): "Deceiving Oneself or Self-Deceived? On the Formation of Beliefs 'Under the Influence'", «Mind» 108, 1999, pp. 265-290.

- Lauria, F. (2018): "What Does Emotion Teach Us About Self-Deception? Affective Neuroscience in Support of Non-Intentionalism", «Ethics Forum» vol. 6, no. 4., 2018, pp. 70-94.
- May, T. (2019): *A Decent Life; Morality for the Rest of Us*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- McGilchrist, I. (2009): *The Master and His Emissary; The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Mele, A. (2001): *Self-Deception Unmasked*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. (2001): *Upheavals of Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Connor, F. (1956): "Revelation," in: *Everything that Rises Must Converge; Stories by Flannery O'Connor*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965, pp. 191-218.
- O'Connor, F. (1956)²: "Everything that Rises Must Converge" in: *Everything that Rises Must Converge; Stories by Flannery O'Connor*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965, pp. 3-23.
- O'Connor, F. (1979): *Letters of Flannery O'Connor; The Habit of Being*, edited by Sally Fitzgerald, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Pears, D. (1984): *Motivated Irrationality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Porto, P., Ribeiro, L., Oliveira, J., Mari, E., Volchan, I., Figueira, and Ventura, P. (eds) (2009): "Does Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Change the Brain? A Systematic Review of Neuroimaging in Anxiety Disorders", «The Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences», vol. 21, no. 2, 2009, pp. 114-25.

Shaw, J. (2016): *The Memory Illusion; Remembering, Forgetting, and the Science of False Memory*, London: Penguin Random House.

Singer, P. (1972): "Famine, Affluence, and Morality", «Philosophy and Public Affairs» vol. 1, no. 1, 1972, pp. 229-243.

Zagzebski, L. (1996): *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.