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Self-Deception in Literature

Edited by
Zeynep Talay Turner

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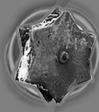
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Introduction

Zeynep Talay Turner

The phenomenon of self-deception is an intriguing one: in what circumstances do we deceive ourselves, and when do we let others deceive us? Is self-deception something that we should avoid, or can it have positive consequences for the person? These and similar questions have been discussed by philosophers and psychologists. However, it seems that there is no agreement on a definition of self-deception, and so no agreement on exactly what happens to us when we deceive ourselves. While most current studies of self-deception mainly focus on the cognitive aspect of the problem, the five papers in this special issue explore some other dimensions, and do so by focusing in particular on literary treatments of the topic.

In “The Wrong End of the Stick: Self-deception in Nabokov” Charles Turner seeks to understand the narrative architecture of *Lolita* through the sociologist Erving Goffman’s *Frame Analysis*, the key to which is the idea that the reality status of our experience depends on the devices we have available to maintain it, that some people may be better equipped to define that reality status than others, and that those most willing to ‘shift levels’ in order

to manipulative others may themselves, as in the case of Humbert Humbert, be the most vulnerable to self-deception.

In “The Sobering: Delusions of Authenticity and Reality in Philip Roth” Frank Chouraqui focuses on a common trope in Roth’s fictions, namely the difficulties of overcoming the delusions of authenticity. According to Roth the delusions take either the form of self-identity or self-imitation, both of which can produce existential aporias. The question is then how these can be overcome, and indeed what is it that is to be overcome? For Roth what is to be overcome is realism about self and world, and in this attempt Roth’s characters deal with different challenges in their lives, seeking to sober up from delusions of self-ownership, or of manhood or of fatherhood etc. However, Chouraqui argues, Roth builds his literary characters in and through this attempt motivated by a form of self-deception, misconstruing itself as an object to be attained and fulfilled.

In “Self-Deception and Moral Epiphany in Flannery O’Connor” Julie Kirsch focuses on the self-deceived characters in O’Connor’s “Everything That Rises Must Converge” and “Revelation.” In the first part she gives us an account of how biased and selective modes of thinking, the construction of narratives, and acts of imagination and memory can lead to self-deception, as well as how self-deception can be overcome by experiencing a shocking and emotionally charged event. In the second part, she examines the ways in which self-deception which

may result in moral shortcomings and immoral behaviours.

In “Self-deception, Self-affirmation and Self-sacrifice: The Case of Raskolnikov” Zeynep Talay Turner firstly gives an overview of the two prominent approaches in the philosophical literature on self-deception, the intentionalist and the non-intentionalist. The former claim that the self-deceiver “consciously” and “strategically” collects the relevant data to believe what he desires and/or wishes to believe, while the latter claim it is our desires and emotions that make us easily collect the relevant data to believe what we want to believe, but that this does not happen intentionally. She then turns to Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* to explore the moral consequences of self-deception. She concludes that Raskolnikov’s possible motivations for murder point to the idea that self-deception involves a kind of awareness, but an awareness that does not necessarily involve a conscious and strategic act.

In his “Self-deception and the Dynamics of Self-knowledge. Proust and Contemporary Philosophical Debate,” Robert Pilat concentrates on a famous scene in *Swann’s Way*, Legradin’s greeting. He examines the way in which the dynamic properties of self-knowledge can turn it into self-deception. He argues that the process of self-knowledge is to do with absorbing previous cognitive or emotional states into the new one and this is also a process of self-governance. The process that leads to self-deception, on the other hand, involves a failure to govern this process as a consequence of satisfying one’s desires

or of reducing one's anxiety. This reduction, Pilat argues, does not occur after the discomfoting anxiety occurs; rather it is achieved by an act which may be called a prior rationalisation.