

Queer Revelations: Desire, Identity, and Self-Deceit

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Suppose the following sort of scenario. A man or woman lives a considerable portion of his or her life into adulthood under the assumption, indeed the firm conviction, that he or she is a certain way. For our purposes, the assumption will be that they are heterosexual, but many other examples would work just as well. And let's say that it seems a reasonable enough assumption: as they explain to themselves, most people are, after all, and everyone in their circle of acquaintance is, and they wouldn't want to be any other way. But, over time, the assumption becomes harder to maintain. There are just too many things that don't quite fit the picture, and there was that embarrassing slip the other day with pronouns...Suppose that something happens that finally forces this man or this woman to confront the guiding assumption of their lives and find it wanting. He realises that he really *is* gay; she "comes out" as a lesbian. Either of them might well at some point say in explanation to their friends and family (who are possibly not at all surprised), "really, deep down, I always knew that I was gay; I just couldn't bring myself to believe it."

In this paper, I want to take this scenario seriously, and try to make sense of the concluding statement which is, on the face of it, nonsensical. I contend that it expresses a defensible claim, though it cannot be defended if we use the language in which it is expressed, the language of knowledge and of identity. This way lies paradox. But the epistemology of coming out, I shall show, is not paradoxical at all.

A notably high proportion of the analysis of self-deception that has appeared in the mainstream Anglo-American philosophical literature since 1960 has tended to frame the problem in terms of belief, knowledge, and justification, and has also found itself bedevilled by paradox: the self-deceiver lies to himself, knows what he does not believe, and so on. Since paradoxes are commonly taken to be things that must be removed or otherwise got around, the problem has become one of finding a nonparadoxical account of self-deception that meets the requirements of whatever epistemological programme is the favoured one, but that does not completely annihilate the phenomenon—though how recognisable the phenomenon remains after analysis is a point of division.¹ Robert Audi characterises the situation this way:

¹ See the review of the then current literature (Demos, Siegler, et al.) in Chapters 1 and 2 of Fingarette (1969); see also the more recent collection in McLaughlin and Rorty (1988), esp. McLaughlin, Johnston, and Schmitt as representative of this approach. More recent

...there is continuing disagreement over whether self-deception is to be explained, or explained away. Which view one takes largely depends on how one resolves the dilemma that arises as soon as one reflects on the topic. If self-deception is construed literally, it seems to entail that self-deceivers both believe and disbelieve the same proposition: believing it as victims of deception, disbelieving it as perpetrators of that deception. If self-deception is not construed literally, one is hard pressed to explain why it is so called. (Audi, 92)

Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (in the same collection of essays as Audi's) indicates another avenue of difficulty in theorising about self-deception. Self-deception seems to be an impossibility if we assume a more or less Cartesian self, one that is "essentially unified or at least strongly integrated, capable of critical, truth-oriented reflection, with its various functions in principle accessible to, and corrigible by, one another..." (Rorty, 14). A compartmentalised self seems a more promising bet, because then one part of the self can be imagined to hide things from some other, and we are spared the philosophical embarrassment of direct contradiction in attempting to explain systematic irrationality. This, however, won't do either. "The picture of the self as a loosely confederated system of subsystems, which includes the various activities of critical rationality without giving them any dominant centrality, loses self-deception: it has abandoned the identity of the deceiver and the deceived..." (Rorty, 22), which identity is, after all, the whole point.

To add to these difficulties, the increasing influence of interpretive frameworks derived from French literary theory and European postmodernism (authors such as Michel Foucault in particular) has encouraged a picture of the self as not just "compartmentalised" but positively fluid.² Contemporary critical theories, including the work of Judith Butler and others operating in the expanding field of Queer theory, present analyses of gender, identity, and subjectivity that so radically de-centre the self that it seems self-deception must be impossible, if for no other reason than there is no self to deceive, or no defensible norm by which to measure either truth or deceit—there are only the multiple effects of power and the subversive productions of the especially artful subject.

Given all the foregoing, it would seem on the face of it doubly implausible to suppose the opening scenario to represent a credible phenomenon: as a variety of self-deception it must be either incoherent or impossible; as self-revelation it is a chimerical achievement. Or so it seems.

Although it feels subjectively natural to use the most readily available epistemological terms, i.e., "know" and "believe," in rendering this experience, I contend that it is just this language that makes such a scenario, if not suspect, then at least resistant to philosophical analysis. Explaining these altogether familiar events and situations in terms of the subject's knowing and not knowing, believing and not believing inexorably leads to indefensible or counterintuitive positions. Despite this, there *is* something right in saying "I always knew p even though I didn't believe it," even though the statement is on the face of it logically absurd. In the rest of this paper I defend the rightness of what the speaker is attempting to express in

("deflationary") approaches to the subject nevertheless continue to phrase the problem in terms of belief, evidence, and justification. See, in particular, Mele (2001), and others, e.g., Levy (2004).

² See Schrag (1997), who also poses this problem.

such a claim, though I believe that can only be done by jettisoning the one dimensional language of knowledge and belief to which the statement despairingly resorts.³ Thus, I shall argue for the legitimacy of the above scenario and present a general account of the epistemology of coming-out that is not only applicable to revelation of sexuality, one that can explain how self-revelation is possible given the assumption that the self is a constructed and hence fluid subject, rather than an essentialist given, one that is not only the source of but an effect of its desires and the stories that the self tells about itself and its desires.

The discussion that is to follow is generally applicable, but much of it will be specifically addressed to certain kinds of sexual desire. In one sense, whether the desire under consideration is about same sex objects is irrelevant. However, since the motive for denial of desire and ultimately self-deceit is very often the rejection of identification *as x* or *y*, and since queer theory directly addresses some of these issues of, not only identity, but the construction of self through desire, many of the questions that arise will be explored through this lens. The particular knot I undertake to untie in the following is the epistemology of “coming out” as gay or lesbian; it must be acknowledged that the general structure of this philosophical problem is not wholly unique to this specific situation, though social context gives it twists and urgencies that are not commonly encountered elsewhere.

1. *Desire*

³ Compare Herbert Fingarette’s criticism of the traditional approach, in Chapter 2 of his *Self-Deception*. I borrow quite heavily from his account, though I shall direct it to problems he does not consider. The approach I shall develop in this paper differs from a standardly epistemological approach that attempts to explain self-deception in terms of the justification for one’s beliefs about oneself, whether they are rational in the sense that one has good or sufficient reasons (evidence) for one’s beliefs; on such a view, self-deception is explained by some part of the approved procedure having gone awry (see, for example, Schmitt). In such accounts, what is of concern is the provenance of one’s self-beliefs, whether they have been come by in the correct way. I shall go in a quite different direction. In part this is because I am more interested in why S (wants to) get it “wrong” than in whether S is (un)justified in her self-beliefs. But mostly because I take justification in the conventional sense to be a dead-end approach here on the grounds that (as theorists like Foucault and Butler have pointed out) these beliefs about the self and desire cannot be justified in a straightforwardly empirical way—when it comes to human selves, there is no concrete fact of identity to support the claim “I am *x*”. Schmitt’s example of “I am a glutton” (189-192) doesn’t work either, as “glutton” does not refer to a thing (say, an individual of the species of beings that are gluttons), so much as a set of behaviours and desires. Thus, whether I am “a glutton” or “gay” isn’t as straightforward a question as whether Mount Athabaska is made of limestone, or even whether I am justified in believing that it is. The question whether my belief that “I am *x*” is justified misses the mark, not only because I am not *x* in the way the question appears to suppose, but because the issue is less about what I am rather than whether I have or experience the desires that would supposedly identify me as *x*. The name “*x*”, while it presents an obstacle of its own, is something applied later—it can only be applied once I have acknowledged the evidence relied on for its application (a) as present and (b) as evidential. It is the name of a pattern that I must first discern as a pattern of some kind.

One way to think of the puzzle before us is in terms of the question: how can I be wrong about my desires? The problem lies in the circumstance that I do not simply have desires; I also have beliefs about them. Indeed, it is unlikely that my desires would be as they are without certain beliefs, especially but not only concerning their objects. Thus, I think that a particular desire I have is for some object, that I desire that object for these reasons rather than those. And, in many cases, I will only have a particular desire *if* I have a particular belief. For example, my lack of interest in getting into heaven is a direct consequence of my firm conviction that there is no such place. Perhaps I can also believe that I have a desire I do not (say, to please another person), or do not have a desire that I do (again, to please another person).

In what follows, I shall not pursue the analysis of desire as such—what exactly is a desire and so on—but how we apprehend our desires, what we think about them, and especially how we integrate our desires into the stories we construct about ourselves.

I am supposing a high degree of conscious awareness of desires—too much, it might be thought, particularly if one has the view that desires are biologically (that is, genetically or hormonally) driven, or that they issue from the unconscious. I think that both these explanations are inadequate, not so much because they are false as because they are beside the point. If desire is simply the reflection in consciousness of an organic process, then, given that I do not and largely cannot have control over what my biological systems do, then I can have no control over my desires. These are passions that wash over and through me and whether I will have them or no is not up to me (though perhaps I might try to resist in some way their practical influence). But this is far too simplistic, not least because I simply do not have desires in this way. Just as genes code only for dispositions, not particular behaviour, organic “drives” cannot explain why any given individual wants one thing rather than another. Part of the problem here is a potential confusion over whether we are talking about appetites or desires. Thinking about something like hunger may help draw out the distinction I want to make here.

Let’s say that humans are programmed to respond to hunger by seeking food. But what are they programmed to eat? Or to want to eat? Generations of vegetarians have endured the claim that humans are programmed and furnished for eating meat—a claim that is patently false for many more reasons than we can explore here. All that need be said is that it is poor programming that can be overridden so easily. The point is that a biological drive to eat (hunger) does not explain why Morton wants fish for dinner and Mortimer craves broccoli. Both Morton and Mortimer are equipped as human beings with the appetite to eat, both experience hunger as a biological drive that has the fortunate effect of keeping them alive, even to the extent that under sufficient duress of imminent starvation they may well not care about the object—anything remotely edible, no matter how unlikely will do. However, few of their desires for food or anything else are experienced in this way. They do not fall upon any potential foodstuff with indiscriminate relish, nor might it be said that they always consume the exact or even approximate amount or type of food necessary for their health and flourishing. They have preferences and those preferences are underdetermined by appetite alone.

Desires are commonly specific as to their objects, or at least semispecific, as when I crave something sweet or salty. If I am unusually hungry and say, when questioned as to my preferences, that I don’t care, I just want to eat, my statement should not be taken literally: I should likely lose all interest in eating were I to be served up something disgusting or horrific. I assume, reasonably enough, that the other understands that while I’m not too picky, I do want to eat something tasty, filling, and not grossly immoral. The point is that while appetites might be characterised as generalised drives, it is desires that focus our interest in things and are to

varying degrees selective. As such, they may require the basic appetite but they also require a certain kind of appraisal of the object as desirable. This appraisal involves both the object itself and my possible relation to it.⁴ Thus my desires are both about an object and about me. Desires get their distinguishing characteristics, including their being characteristically mine or yours, in relation to some set of pre-existing cognitive and intentional constructs, projects, etc. While it is clear that appetites are physiological responses, desires in the sense I am using here, namely desires-for, can only arise given an intentional, and thus cognitive, background.

Desires-for depend for their character on who we are (in a soft sense). Why one person adores sun-dried tomatoes and another detests them *may* sometimes be explainable in terms of neurochemical processes (one can taste certain compounds that another cannot, or one has allergies), but more likely these variations depend on more adventitious factors such as an individual's psychological history (unfamiliarity with tomatoes as a child, violation of deep expectations about tomatoes, trauma related to dried fruit...), or sometimes with the projection of self-concept (anybody who's anybody likes sun-dried tomatoes). How else do we explain why some people go potty about eating, say, oysters while others find them disgusting? Neurochemistry and evolutionary biology may have a role here, but more plausible explanans are likely to be found in psychologically formative events in a person's history (trauma, nostalgia) and a more or less conscious adoption of a programme of self-definition (I choose to be the kind of sophisticate who eats oysters or sun-dried tomatoes).

This is not to say that we are always right about the intentional object of our desire. Suppose I desire oysters: it could be for their taste, their alleged aphrodisiac qualities, their slipperiness, their social cachet. There are a number of different things here that I might *really* desire, rather than oysters as such, so that any comparable substitute should do just as well. And thus I might misidentify either the characteristic of the oysters that I desire, or even whether it is oysters specifically rather than some other thing that might be substituted (e.g., a variety of mushroom, or a suitably textured soy-based imitation).

2. Choices

What we have operating in the determination of any given person's desires, I contend, are three factors: (i) some set of biological influences that generate non-specific dispositions as background to the formation of specific desires; (ii) socially learned and perhaps enforced "preferences" (which may seem completely "natural" to those who have them); (iii) individual preferences which are the result of the individual interpreting and negotiating between biologically coded directives, socially derived catalogues of appropriate choices, and more or less personally determined projects of self-expression. The last of these may never be quite as individual as they are intended to be, since personal projects are inevitably filtered through socially constrained frameworks. That is, I choose the self I want to be in relation to and under the influence of socially transmitted and acquired expectations of choice, both own and received

⁴ Which is why I don't normally desire things that cannot possibly occur, such as being on next week's interstellar space flight. I may wish for them, just as I might wish for things that are not physically impossible but very unlikely to occur (such as world peace), or that I wish would happen but am not sufficiently motivated to do something to bring about (a change in the electoral system). I am talking here about "live" desires, i.e., those that do have an effect on our practical attitudes and behaviours.

ideas about appropriate selfhood.

If we apply this to sexual desire, genetics and hormones can, of course, account for the fact that we have sexual desire at all, i.e., sexual *appetite*. However, when it comes to the particular desires of any particular human, we have to acknowledge that some amount of *desire* is socially coded (learned) and some, probably smaller, amount deliberately (“freely”) chosen. Small or not, I nevertheless express my sense of self through my sexual choices. Partners can be chosen with an eye to status enhancement (scoring points), in accord with various kinds of affectional needs, or out of religious or ethnic allegiance. I also may be reflectively aware of these considerations or not.

Now, choices are not desires, though they have a close relationship. I am not supposing that we can simply choose to have a desire or not to have it, but I can choose to recognise, to affirm or to deny, my desires—that I am a person who has these sorts of desires. The question is not whether we can incite or eliminate our desires as original objects, but what choices we make concerning those desires. Thus, when I claim that our desires construct the self I am saying two things: that we are created by our desires and that we affect the character of the desiring self by our choices with respect to our desires.

I just remarked that the issue is not whether we can incite or eliminate our desires, but it is worth noting that we do eliminate desires and open the possibility for new ones as we gradually change who we are through our choices. That we desire different things is in fact the mark of our having changed over time. Sometimes, this is a matter of having the same general desires but substituting new objects. If I discover desires for things I have never thought of desiring before, the desire itself may not be new, just the appreciation of the objects as answering to the desire. This is what happens when our desires are, as we say, “educated.” I learn to discriminate among wines or single malts, or develop an appreciation for musical forms that I once thought of as undifferentiated noise; I find myself anticipating the next novel by a writer I hadn’t even heard of a year ago. Advertising and the Mammon it serves rely upon the malleability of desire and our willingness to be led to “new” and unthought-of desires as if they were needs. And yet these are not so much new desires as old ones that have been persuaded that the latest object of desire is so much more satisfying, or at least attainable, than those we cherished before. In any case, if the self changes over a lifetime, and if desires are the expression of that self (what in part defines it as the self it is), then we should expect that there will be new and lost desires, not only desires-for specific objects, but in comparatively gross desires.

Michel Foucault observes in an interview (1997, 166) that desires follow the discovery of new pleasures and pleasure is what the body is equipped for. Provided that our bodies are physiologically capable of experiencing a pleasure, then the only question is whether we will develop a desire for that pleasure. His point is that it is pleasure that is primary, rather than specific desires. Thus, homosexual freedom is liberatory, not in the sense that some people are fundamentally homosexual and their pleasure, as the satisfaction of a specifically homosexual desire, should be enabled along with that of heterosexuals, but that homosexuality is an avenue toward the liberation of the possibility of *human* pleasure: these practices present new possibilities of pleasure, not simply the definition of homosexual identity or strictly homosexual pleasure (i.e., the pleasure of definable homosexuals). And once pleasure is established as possible, desire for that pleasure can ensue (or not).

Thus, in general, we can expect desire to follow the capacity for pleasure. However, there are several reservations to be noted here. First, the subject must be aware of the

possibility of the pleasure in order to form a corresponding desire, and second, the subject may *not* desire the pleasure he is capable of experiencing, because desire interprets the possibility of pleasure and he must do this relative to a framework of expectations, prohibitions, interpretations, etc. Thus, for example, adult human males have the capacity to experience physical pleasure in sex with children and animals; most have no desire to do so, and it has nothing to do with neurological incapacity. Desires, then, are for pleasures, though not all pleasures are desired (the field of the desirable is larger than that of the desired). So we cannot simply say that the reason something is desired is that it is thought to give pleasure of some kind (and is therefore thought to be *desirable*)—this is true, but many more things give pleasure/are *desirable* in this sense than are desired; why, then, is *this* desired? Some pleasures are foregone either because (a) we expect pleasure from them but think it would be wrong to seek such pleasure and therefore we do not perhaps think that they are properly desirable, or (b) we can't imagine experiencing pleasure—we may be neuro-physiologically capable of that pleasurable sensation, but psychologically disgusted, "left cold," etc.

So there is a sense in which desires can be incited or eliminated. They can only be incited where there is some capacity to experience pleasure, or perhaps to believe that there is; they can be eliminated where the subject comes to believe that pleasure cannot be experienced, or that displeasure would be greater. Or because the subject sincerely believes that such pleasure, even if it could be experienced, ought not to be, whether for prudential or ethical, but in any case rational, reasons. Serotonin is not destiny.

How, then, do we come to have the desires we do? I am concerned here with choices: where I might desire x or y, why do I end up desiring x? Granted, things like education and social conditioning and so on enter into this situation. Like any other primate species, we are taught what is good to eat and which members of the troop to pursue or avoid, and this education affects our desires and the choices we make concerning them. Some desires we may know cannot be fulfilled if we are to stay in good odour in our social circle; some desires may never even occur to us as possible desires. We want to fit in, we want to succeed, to experience whatever pleasures are available with the least social cost. These, of course, are desires as well. So, we are desire-balancing creatures: there are many things we want; we discover quickly that we can't have all of them, and we learn how to navigate the social world of desires by ordering them in such a way as to bring us the most for the least. And it is in what we consider the best, especially in relation to what we consider a cost, that we construct our identity as reflective, choice-capable, persons.

The foregoing suggests that humans are entirely hedonically motivated beings. Of course, people do not only act on the basis of what gives them pleasure—this is both simplistic and false. Insofar as people choose at all, they do so on the basis of reasons, some of which may be good and some bad, and some of which include the consideration of pleasure (fulfillment of desire). And not all desire is hedonic. I may desire, for example, to lead a rational life, or to benefit others, not because it will give me pleasure, but because I think it the right thing to do, i.e., I can offer independently justifiable and logically consistent reasons for doing so, ones that may have nothing to do with anyone's pleasure, even though I think pleasure is a good thing and there ought to be a great deal more of it. Reason is the means humans use to balance the things they themselves want against various complicating conditions, such as the things they need and the things that others want, need, or demand, all of which may be very different. So we are accustomed to the practice of having to justify our choices, including choices involving desires, though we are somewhat less accustomed to justifying our desires, since we assume

that desires are basic and outside of our control whether we have them or not.

But is this last actually the case? Is there a sense in which it can be said that a person chooses their desires? Of course, we can eliminate our desires for certain objects when we come to accept previously unavailable information that demonstrates the undesirability of a specific object. But there are also other cases where the issue is whether we are willing to acknowledge our desires as such. In these cases, which are awkward to analyse, it appears that the subject has a desire that she does not acknowledge as a desire (and so, it must be assumed, does not experience *as* a desire), although if she were to look at the situation differently, she would come to realise that she does indeed have that desire.

These, of course, are cases of self-deceit, where we want to say that someone really does desire some object even though they do not recognise or are not willing to admit or don't know that they do. And these cases seem to force us into saying apparently nonsensical things such as, she desires x, even though she doesn't actually feel any such desire.

At this point, many observers are inclined to make resort to tales of the unconscious, but this move can be avoided. Suppose that Desirée has grown to adulthood having had a number of relationships with men, which have ranged from good to bad to indifferent, but which have not it seems given her any reason to suppose that she is other than standardly heterosexual, though she is puzzled by her inability to find that one great guy she can love with all her soul and settle down to a mortgage with. Now, of course, she knows that there are homosexuals out there, but she also knows that she can't be "one of those" because she just doesn't feel the same way toward other women as she does toward men...

In this case, Desirée does recognise that the difference in her feelings is precisely what is significant; what she doesn't recognise is that (let's say) what she desires in men she only ever encounters in women; her lack of success in finding it in men is simply a mystery or bad luck. Or perhaps being gay is a possibility written off in advance. Desirée's overriding project in life is inconspicuous and unassailable normalcy; homosexuals are, she believes, not normal. Whatever threatens her successful attainment of normalcy cannot (be allowed to) exist; therefore, she cannot be homosexual, and will see no evidence to the contrary. Or perhaps it is worse than this—Desirée was brought up to believe that homosexuals choose to pursue a lifestyle of promiscuity and deliberate perversion; she is conscious of no such choice in her nor is she wantonly "immoral"; therefore, that could not be her explanation.

All of these variations are complex in respect of the different ways in which information is blocked from or by Desirée, thus altering her possible self-explanations. In some cases, this is simple misinformation, in others it is a self-generated distortion, a motivated failure, a refusal, to acknowledge information. In the last of these variations, two factors are involved: a mistaken belief that being gay is a choice (so it is hardly a surprise that she finds no such artifact in herself) and the belief that homosexuality is something shameful (an *immoral* choice). The first issue is possibly an intellectual dodge; it is the shame that is more than likely the real culprit in Desirée's confusion.

In a case like this, where the subject encounters a desire that he or she regards as shameful, there are a number of possible responses that might be adopted. One might be to fixate on that desire, keep it prominent in consciousness as a focus of shame while the subject struggles to overcome it, to eradicate it from the self. Alternatively, the subject might have no experience of the desire as such, but engage in a pattern of desires and concomitant behaviours that, seen in a different light than the subject is currently using, would reveal an aspect of the subject that he or she is simply not aware of. Or, one might experience or suspect a desire in

oneself that one regards as shameful, and find ways to fail to recognise it as such, engaging instead in a reinterpretation of the desire. The first of these possible responses we might describe as resistance, the second ignorance or nescience, and the third is self-deceit.

It is important to see that the second of these three cases is not self-deceit. Although the subject in such a case may also later come to say “I always knew that p,” unless there was or is now a deliberate project of denial of the circumstances that are now accepted as explanatory, this is only the aftermath of a failure to understand oneself as well as one might.⁵ The self-deceiver, by contrast, doesn’t only fail to understand himself or herself but she *succeeds* at the *project of failing* to understand herself.⁶

3. Self-Narrative

The question now is exactly how does the self-deceiver pull off his or her project, as it were, sincerely? Why any given individual engages in self-deception may not have anything to do with a sense of shame, though this is a powerful motivator, but the most plausible explanation is perhaps simply the following. In developing our sense of self, we tell ourselves (and others) a story about ourselves. Selfhood is a narrative endeavour. I construct narrative explanations, stories, about myself, ones that tell how I came to be as I am now, stories about why I feel certain ways, have these reactions to events, those relationships with other people, how I came to have the beliefs I do, and so on. We may or may not be the central figure in our own life-dramas or comedies, but we do look for understanding and meaning through a particular telling of the events of our lives. These tellings are necessarily selective; not all events are brought into play, some are discounted, some avoided, some merely overlooked, and some forgotten. Our self-narratives are idiosyncratic; it is unlikely that anyone else would tell

⁵ See Fingarette, Chapter 2, especially p. 20.

⁶ The view I am defending in this paper is very close in some ways to Alfred Mele’s “garden variety straight self-deception,” but with some reservations and differences. For one, we differ on the kind of analysis given to the motivation of motivationally biased belief. Mele argues that desire affects the assessment of evidence, but his characterisation of desire is unelaborated, while I have been arguing that desire is a complex of appetitive and cognitive elements that takes a more formative role in the interpretive process. Desire isn’t simply the occasion for a project of self-deceit; it shapes and directs it. Secondly, Mele distinguishes the “hidden intentions” case from ordinary self-deception as an intentional effort to bring it about that one believe p (or $\sim p$). Perhaps there are such cases; I am not interested here in defending them. However, the characterisation strikes me as being slightly off the mark (and, if so, we might question how distinct the categories are). Presumably, while Desirée wants to believe $\sim p$, she does not want to believe $\sim p$ *falsely*. It’s not the *believing* $\sim p$ that is at stake: it’s $\sim p$. If Desirée doesn’t want to believe p, she doesn’t just want not to believe it; she wants it not to actually be true. Hence, in the selfhood cases before us here, the intentional distortion of the evidence so that it is not true. Ultimately, we may suppose that this project is unsuccessful, but it is not simply a project designed to produce a belief; it is an attempt to produce a fact: a self with the desired configuration. This matter of the *truth* (or *falsity*) of the content of one’s belief as the crucial issue, rather than its simply being believed, is pointed out by Bernard Williams (1973, 150), who then concludes the impossibility and incoherence of the project.

our lives exactly as we do; after all, we have access to events that no one else does. So does that mean that I can tell any story I like about myself? Can I make my self into whatever I choose? The question is crucial since what is under consideration here is the self itself, the self that supposedly deceives itself. If my self is the projection of what I take myself to be, my self-story, what is to prevent me from inventing myself any way I like? And if I can, what possible purchase can a term such as “self-deceit” retain?

First of all, a major constraint on the stories we tell about ourselves is the physical world and the means by which we interact with it. Consistency is another. The stories we tell must be consistent, and this also means that they must be consistent with experience of and interaction with the world and other persons. Given that we have physical bodies, i.e., are organisms, and given that mental states are the states of physical organisms, our self-stories have to take adequate account of those physically-generated states. We can imagine, fictionalise, etc., we can make up a lot of our self-story, but there remain real, physical, even physiological, limits to what we can think about ourselves *with justification*. Obviously, any given individual can think anything about themselves that brain chemistry will allow, but not all stories can be defended. Some stories integrate our experiences better than others.

Now, it should be admitted that, all this realist and pragmatic constraint notwithstanding, we can still expect a high degree of interpretative intervention exercised on experience, including physiological experience. I may interpret a given physiological response as x, when it can also be understood as y, perhaps better, given various other responses I have that I am not taking account of in interpreting it as x.

This is where “error” and self-deceit come in. It’s not that I don’t experience the desire that I think I do (i.e., as I interpret it), but that my responses and ancillary desires can be better explained under a different covering theory of my self, which I have yet to develop, as I lack (perhaps) additional explanatory elements. My “mistaken” desire for x, which is “really” a desire for y, is nevertheless really a desire, experienced *as x-desire*; my “mistake” is in failing to understand what it is in x that I desire. I think it is x, all x, but “in fact” it is a specific feature of x (also found in y’s), or it is something that I hope to get from x, or.... The error is not in the desire elicited in me by this x, but in my failure to understand what exactly I desire and whether x can adequately satisfy that desire.

All this would remain on the level of a mistake if it were not for the next step: I don’t want to be the kind of person who desires y’s. I want to be an x-desirer and only an x-desirer; y-desire does not fit my plan for myself. Therefore I cannot be having y-desire. Self-deception enters in when our self-interpretation is motivated in such a way that evidence is ruled out in advance, whether that means that it is not admitted as evidence or it is interpreted in such a way that it cannot count as counter-evidence though there are good reasons for it to do so. In this case, I refuse to ask certain questions about my desires: why I desire x, and what exactly the x is that I desire, and so on. As Herbert Fingarette explains this situation, because I habitually avoid asking certain questions about my desires, I develop increasingly large gaps in my self-story and in my understanding of myself, and my account of myself becomes increasingly shallow and banal.⁷

We do not need to resort to the device of the unconscious; the crucial element is *attention*. This attention model is by no means a recent one in philosophy. Bishop Butler, for

⁷ Fingarette, *Self-Deception*, Ch. 3.

example, in discussing self-deception comments on those who are so set on their own interest that they see nothing else, including the import or justification of their behaviour: “Though a man hath the best eyes in the world, he cannot see any way but that which he turns them” (Butler, 1970, 92). Although we, especially as philosophers, are inclined to identify the self with our conscious life, it is likely that most of our life and selfhood is performed non consciously—by which I do not mean either unconsciously or subconsciously. What I mean is that we do most things, including our intersubjective interactions, without engaging in an act of conscious reflection, what Fingarette refers to as “spelling out” (38-42). I *could* spell out things such as how I walk, the process of making tea, and how I frequently cut off other people in conversation, but I generally don’t. “Rather than taking explicit consciousness for granted, we must come to take its absence for granted; we must see explicit consciousness as the further exercise of a specific skill for special reason” (42). Spelling out is itself a skill, one of wider scope than the activities that can be spelled out, and involves the ability to assess a situation well enough to know when spelling out is called for and when it is not. This in turn implies that “spelling-out is an activity which is not itself spelled-out except when there is special reason to do so (Fingarette, 43).”

Now it just so happens that our projects of self deception provide just such a reason for not spelling out what we are doing. In effect, (explicit) consciousness is not something we should take for granted, but it is a skill, an active form of human engagement rather than a passive state. The self deceiver is someone who persistently avoids spelling out some aspect of his or her engagement but who must be sufficiently skilled at spelling out to be able to avoid doing so.⁸ This is a policy decision, not a lack of self-skill. So, it is not simply a matter of not spelling out when one could; here one has made a policy decision not to spell out.

As with all the more benign cases of failure to spell out what we are doing, the information is all there, available for conscious interpretation if only one wanted to examine it. What is needed is two-fold: the attention focussed on the problematic areas, and the willingness to develop a new interpretive strategy. The information just isn’t sorted in a sufficiently revealing way. Once this does happen, and the subject does adopt the new interpretation of desire, this is presumably because the new picture is more comprehensively explanatory (and perhaps also represents other desired projections of self better). Was something hidden from the subject, that they later discovered in themselves? Did she have unconscious desires, inadequately acknowledged? Desires inadequately acknowledged, yes; unconscious, no. If they are unconscious, they cannot be desires; if they are legitimately desires, they must be “alive,” but perhaps of limited or distorted effect, in part because they are not recognised as what they are—they are dismissed as anomalous, or mistakes, or because they do not fit into the “official” self-explanation; this does not make them hidden or unconscious in any profound sense.

So, now we are in a position to reconsider part of the claim “I always knew that...” The confusing part of this claim is (as Fingarette (34) points out) the emphasis on *knowing*. This is what generates paradox, but unnecessarily so. The epistemology of self-revelation, of coming-

⁸ See Butler (1970) again: “...there *frequently appears* a suspicion, that all is not right, or as it should be: and perhaps there *is always* at bottom somewhat of this sort” (95).

“...[I]t is much the same as if we should suppose a man to have had a general view of some scene, enough to satisfy him that it was very disagreeable, and then to shut his eyes, that he might not have a particular or distinct view of its several deformities” (96).

out, seems paradoxical because of the transparency supposed in knowledge claims: I cannot claim to know *p* and yet not believe it; therefore, there must be some sort of dualising mechanism that allows me to hide knowledge from myself—all of which makes no sense. But this isn't what happens in these cases, because this isn't what happens in self-deceit. As was said earlier, I have all the information, I can even be said to *know* all the relevant facts; the problem is that I don't believe now what I later do (and perhaps will even take to be obvious) because I don't look at the information and/or I don't have or make use of a pattern of interpretation that would lead me or anyone else to that later belief regarding my own desires, of which I am already aware. I did not know all along *if* what we mean is that I always had this present belief and this present framework for understanding myself; I did know all along *if* what we mean is that all the evidence was there and not hidden from me. The difference is that back then I didn't *want* to know.⁹

Given that what the former self-deceiver does in becoming “sincere” is to adopt a more actively conscious self-narrative, thereby acquiring a more powerful and, one might be persuaded to say, revealing technique of self-interpretation, can we now say that she has acquired knowledge of her true self? Indeed, does she now “know who/what she is”? While I have argued that there are both realist and pragmatic limits to self-narrative, I think there are compelling considerations against concluding that therefore self-examination will lead the subject to discovery of *the real self*, if what is meant by that is some fundamental or essentialist version of the self, as if the self was a substantial and subsisting thing, independent of the manifestations of self and personality in the activity of desire and self-construction that must be interpreted by that same self (i.e., that activity of interpretation). Granted, it is necessarily a physically, temporally, linguistically, etc. situated activity, but the self *is* its activity, including that of self-interpretation; it is not an independently existing thing that happens *also* to desire, interpret, believe, and self-deceive.

4. Identity

The relationship between identity and desire is an important one. After all, the reason why any given self-deceiver engages in the project may as often as not be that a desire, behaviour, or external circumstance does not fit the identity that they conceive of themselves as possessing or to which they aspire. And so we may at times affect desires that we think are appropriate for ones such as ourselves, or refuse to acknowledge ones that we think are appropriate to “one of those.” In a sense, this is all about identity.¹⁰ However, a number of contemporary theorists, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler the most notable among them, have argued against the notion of a core identity or a true self that can be discovered or that should be asserted as an ideal to guide the expression of personality.

Foucault's claims that sexuality is not a natural given or an obscure domain the truth of which we must labouriously uncover, but an historical construct that fulfills the disciplinary needs of knowledge and power, and that sex is not a given upon which the structure of sexuality is imposed, but itself a product of the deployment of sexuality, are by now sufficiently

⁹ Similar scenarios are offered by Scheman, Moulton, and Frye with regard to women's consciousness-raising and the understanding of their own suppressed anger.

¹⁰ As Fingarette recognises, 66-70.

familiar that I will not rehearse his account here.¹¹ What is significant for the present discussion, however, is Foucault's oft-repeated insistence that the traditional techniques of self-examination and confession (including psychoanalysis) do not reveal a *true self* that hides behind and is responsible for the elaborate obfuscations of self within which the subject lives, but that this "self" is at best the creation of those techniques as their justification for application.¹²

Thus Foucault questions the efforts to establish a gay identity as being potentially as oppressive as the efforts to erase gayness as deviant and perverse—either approach involves an exclusionary and stifling categorisation and consequent limitation of the possibilities of human pleasure and desire (1997, 166).

Another thing to distrust is the tendency to relate the question of homosexuality to the problem of "who am I?" and "What is the secret of my desire?" Perhaps it would be better to ask oneself, "What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?" The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex, but, rather, it use one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships. And, no doubt, that's the real reason why homosexuality is not a form of desire but something desirable. Therefore, we have to work at becoming homosexuals and not be obstinate in recognizing that we are. The development toward which the problem of homosexuality tends is the one of friendship. (1997, 135-6)

What we must work on, it seems to me, is not so much to liberate our desires but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasure [*plaisirs*]. We must escape and help others to escape the two ready made formulas of the pure sexual encounters and the lovers' fusion of identities. (1997, 137)

Thus Foucault's attention is directed toward the question, not of what we *are*, but what might we *become*, and this in turn is directed to the enhancement, the proliferation of possibilities, including the multiple diversification, of pleasures (1997, 283-4). "We have to understand that with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality: it's a possibility for creative life (1997, 163)."

For both Foucault and Butler, adoption of an identity is problematic, and refusal to do so does not necessarily imply self-hatred.¹³ The demand for outness can be totalising and oppressive. Consider one of Sartre's three examples of bad faith, outlined in *Being and Nothingness*. A man commits a number of homosexual acts, but refuses to admit to his friend "I

¹¹ See especially *The History of Sexuality Vol. One*, but also *Volumes Two and Three, Discipline and Punish*, as well as the collections of interviews and essays in *Essential Works of Foucault, and Power/Knowledge*.

¹² See also Butler, 1990, 140f.

¹³ See Butler, 1996, 372-3.

am a paederast¹⁴,” instead he has an armload of alternate explanations: “His case is always ‘different,’ peculiar; there enters into it something of a game, of chance, of bad luck; the mistakes are all in the past; they are explained by a certain conception of the beautiful which women cannot satisfy; we should see in them the results of a restless search, rather than the manifestations of a deeply rooted tendency, *etc., etc.* (107).” As Sartre explains, the man, while aware of his actions, “struggles with all his strength against the crushing view that his mistakes constitute for him a *destiny*. He does not wish to let himself be considered as a thing. He has an obscure but strong feeling that a homosexual is not a homosexual as this table is a table or as this red-haired man is red-haired.” Thus, taking advantage of the circumstance that his being cannot be fixed in the way that a physical object’s being is, he contrives to deny that he really is a homosexual—in that sense.

His friend is exasperated by this pose and presses him to assume this being of being a homosexual so that he can then be free of it. As Sartre comments, “this contradiction is constitutive of the demand for sincerity. Who cannot see how offensive to the Other and how reassuring for me is a statement such as, ‘He’s just a paederast,’ which removes a disturbing freedom from a trait and which aims at henceforth constituting all the acts of the Other as consequences following strictly from his essence.” The critic demands of his victim “that he constitute himself as a thing, that he should entrust his freedom to his friend as a fief, in order that the friend should return it to him subsequently—like a suzerain to his vassal” (108-9).

In this example, it is hard to be sure who is deeper in bad faith: the closetted gay man or the “sincere” would-be outer. Clearly, the “friend” is attempting to fix the identity of the other not only as homosexual but as an abject Other—someone whose entire explanation is in terms of this “true,” hidden, and static being. His freedom, his capacity for becoming, is utterly denied. On Foucault’s account there would be nothing wrong with refusing this identification.

However, although identification appears to be a core issue here, it is really something of a red herring; the problem of the closet is not that of refusing one’s true identity, since no one has such an identity as Sartre’s “sincere” interlocutor is attempting to foist on his victim; the problem is that of refusing one’s desires *as one’s own*. In more simple terms, the issue is not Jack’s refusing to admit that he *is* “gay”; it’s Jack’s refusing to acknowledge his desire for sex with Jason. We designate such desires as “homosexual” and categorise those who have them as “gay”. And the fact that we do may well be at least part of what is getting in the way of Jack acknowledging his desires, but that is not the central issue in Jack’s self-deceit, his refusal to see himself as he is, *that is*, as someone with certain (abject) desires.

Self-understanding remains a valuable goal even if we wish to reject the tyranny of conformist identifications. One of the things that Jack has to do in gaining self-understanding *and* control over his own self, is recognise how the micro-powers that operate through categorisation and regimentation of behaviour operate in him, redefining his desires. It may be that Jack is refusing to acknowledge his desire for Jason because “that’s gay” and he’s “not gay”, which means to him something weak and effeminate, or left-wing, or too constraining a definition of himself, or something else altogether. Jack needs to understand what his motives are in refusing the identification. Doing so will perhaps help him to acknowledge those desires

¹⁴ Sartre’s apparent equation of “homosexual” with “paederast” is, to say the least, unfortunate; however, I will leave his language as his own and contrive to draw the more general point from it.

as his. But the point is that he is no freer in refusing the identification if it continues to alienate him from his own desires. Saying instead that “labels are unimportant” is not a liberatory posture if he does not also, if it gets in the way of, his acknowledging that some of his desires are for others of his own sex.

Is coming out simply learning how to apply categorisations to oneself (ones already supplied by one’s larger social milieu) or is it about claiming one’s desires as one’s own, owning up to them? Plainly, in practice, it is a bit of both. The former aspect is potentially, but not inevitably, negative; the latter is surely positive, a step towards self-ownership and responsible agency. What one’s desires *mean* is in any case a question that can only be settled after one has acknowledged that they are indeed a part of one.

Rejecting an essentialist picture of the self does not commit us to the view that nothing can be learned about the self (as Butler effectively admits (1993, 1-3, 15, 94-5)). Otherwise the disciplinary technologies of the self that Foucault so carefully describes would not succeed in producing new knowledge. The knowledge so produced is contingent, provisional, located, and yet as real as it gets. While Foucault suggests that our sexuality, with its array of desires and pleasures is highly contingent, Butler points out that as variable as it might be, and as much as gender is performed (as a verb) rather than determined (as a noun), we do not get to re-design ourselves from the ground up on any given morning (1990, 25; 1993, 94-5).

It is important to remember that all self-examination is an exercise in self-narrative, not simply taking inventory. What we try to do here is to decipher meanings and connections between events and “facts” (such as desires, emotions, impressions, etc.). We are trying to link psychological “items” in a way that makes sense. Why did I act that way, why did I feel like that, etc.—I look for reasons, I tell a story. Foucault’s point is that this process is not one that can get to a *real me*—a fixed identity—that very idea is itself a product of a particular knowledge-discipline, one that seeks to establish the self as fixed, for the purposes of the discipline itself (its own validation as a discipline and its exercise of power/control). We should resist the idea of a fixed identity, he thinks, and create our own selves as works of art. A different discipline, one that aims to maximise self-expressive possibilities would not aim at discovering what one *is* but what one might *become*. In other words, a technique with multiple narrative possibilities. So, instead of following a technique of self that is ultimately oppressive (discovering oneself as a “homosexual”) and simply re-valuing it (coming-out, pride), the better option is to resist categorisation of this kind; instead of concentrating on figuring out what one’s desires are about *really*, one should explore the many possibilities for pleasure. In this case, presumably, gay identification works only as a resistance to heterosexuality as an exclusive normativity, a way to ultimately dismantle all sexual identifications as limiting of pleasure.

If what Foucault’s critique amounts to is the rejection of a highly normative telling of self in favour of one that is more open-ended, then it doesn’t ultimately present a problem for the account I am putting forward. There is still a body, with neurologically transmitted sensations; there is still a consciousness that apprehends, is the subject or product of, these sensations, and that orders its experiences in some sort of meaningful way. Sometimes certain experiences or sensations are overlooked or omitted in a more or less systematic manner. The subject makes decisions about how to tell “its” self usually under the influence of some socially received framework of interpretation. These provide some of the reasons for telling one way rather than another, for sorting experiences in a particular way. Some ways, in any case, may be “better” than others. We then have to deal with the question why one way (one narrative technique or production) is better than another. But none of this supposes that there must be a

fixed self to make this work, or that the lack of one makes it impossible either to do or to choose between possible narratives. Some narratives will be more accurate than others—there *are* facts about myself: I am tall/short, athletic/sessile, kind/mean, I like/despise Desirée. In these various ways, I can be wrong about myself.

Conclusion

As Fingarette observed, the primary motivator for self-deception is identity.

The self-deceiver is one who is in some way engaged in the world but who disavows his engagement, who will not acknowledge it even to himself as his. That is, self-deception turns upon the personal identity one accepts rather than the beliefs one has....In general, the self-deceiver is engaged in the world in some way, and yet he refuses to identify himself as one who is so engaged; he refuses to avow the engagement as his. Having disavowed the engagement, the self-deceiver is then forced into protective, defensive tactics to account for the inconsistencies in his engagement in the world as acknowledged by him (67).

If theorists like Foucault and Butler are right, though, there is no identity to find, so it would seem that this is a false problem—we should all be denying identity whenever possible.

There are at least two possible responses to this (supposing it is even a fair characterisation of those critics' positions). First, even if this is so, that doesn't stop people thinking that they are or can be identified and trying to avoid it; so even if there is ultimately no true self or core identity, there may still be cause to self-deceive (as in the case of Jack in the preceding section). Secondly, it is not the case that there is no self to be revealed, though we have to be careful how we understand this term. There is still the "self" that I am, not as some unalterable kernel of being, but as the product of my history; there is my body, my desires, the things I have done, the physical and social environment, my accumulations of beliefs and interactions with others, my relationship with all this as my construction of self. I do not get to invent my world at any arbitrary point or in any way I happen to like. I do get to interpret it, and my interpretations are what is core to my identity as my self. But, simply put, my interpretations have to *work*. There are pragmatic constraints here that place both rational and realist limits on self construction.

The constraints on a person's self-story are both internal and external: a self-account is preferable if it is more complete, that is, it explains *more*, both past, present, and future. A self-story is preferable if it is more consistent, though I am skeptical about whether perfect consistency is either possible or desirable. Nevertheless, as Fingarette argues, suspect self-stories are those with large gaps and inconsistencies.

Any account of the self must meet an internal requirement of consistency and an external requirement of completeness. It is very tempting to say that a self-story must account for the facts about a person, but this is no help, since the facts are themselves constructed by the story, often at quite a profound level. It may be more helpful to think of the situation this way: a self is constructed by an *embodied subject*, where both the embodiment and the free consciousness of the embodied subject have a "say" in the identity of the self produced by both. This language is regrettably dualistic, all the more so since I take the relationship between the "two" to be dynamically unitary rather than reductive. The fact that subjects do not exist without bodies I take to be decisive in imposing limits on narrative; likewise, however, that

human experience is fundamentally narrative prevents a reductively materialist explanation of that existence.

The account of desire then becomes a crucial test of the adequacy of a self-account, as desire is perhaps the most classically contested ground between “body” and “mind,” reducible to neither one nor the other with sustainable plausibility. How the self incorporates its desires in its account of itself, how completely and consistently the account explains the reality of the desires felt and acknowledged and acted upon, or endured, or denied, is a crucial test of whether the self and its personal narrative is sincere or deceived.

Self-deceit is a rational strategy of self-construction in the sense that it is not paradoxical or inherently contradictory. However, it is a defective and hence irrational strategy insofar as there are better and worse ways to narratively construct the self, with better ways being those that more adequately (i.e., completely and accurately) reflect what can defensibly be said about the self.

And it is at this point that my operating prejudices are made transparent—I grant that there is no “true self” in the essentialist sense, but I nevertheless hold that there are truths about the “self” because I hold that there is some truth about the world, to which the self belongs. What complicates the explanation is that establishing one’s identity, one’s self, is an activity that is at once creative and constrained by material and contextual factors. The self is made, not found, but it is not made out of thin air, or dense words. Dealing with what one (already) *is* is a crucial step in making oneself what one wishes to *become*; the avowal of an identity is both an admission of past fact and a reaching forward to a possible self. To try to limit oneself to only one of these is to fall once again into self-deception.

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