

Narrative and Self-Deception in *La Symphonie Pastorale*

Julie Kirsch *
kirschj@dyc.edu

ABSTRACT

Is it possible to develop a personal narrative that is not fictitious or self-deceptive? In this essay, I will look at the way that personal narratives contribute to self-deception. In so doing, I will consider the narrative that the narrator or pastor of André Gide's *Pastoral Symphonie* develops while reflecting upon his romantic relationship with his blind adopted "daughter", Gertrude. Although the pastor's narrative is largely self-deceptive, we need not fear that all narratives are equally delusional. When a narrative is not self-deceptive, it can make a positive contribution to self-knowledge and moral understanding.

1. Introduction

To what extent are our personal narratives works of fiction? What processes contribute to personal narratives that are largely fictitious or self-deceptive? And is it possible to develop a narrative that is *not* fictitious or self-deceptive — one that makes a positive contribution to self-knowledge and moral understanding? I will begin this paper by looking at the way that personal narratives contribute to self-deception (Sec. 2). In so doing, I will consider a fictional narrative that provides us with a vivid illustration of how this can happen. The narrative that I will discuss is presented by the narrator, or *pastor*, in André Gide's *La Symphonie Pastorale* (1955) (Sec. 3). I will argue that narrative need not always lead us astray in epistemic and moral matters. As my discussion of *La Symphonie Pastorale* will show, we can distinguish in a principled way between self-deceptive and non-self-deceptive narratives.

* D'Youville College, Buffalo, New York.

When a narrative is not self-deceptive, it can make a significant contribution to self-knowledge and moral understanding (Sec. 4).

2. Narrative And Self-Deception

In recent years, philosophers have shown considerable interest in issues involving narrative. They have examined the nature and function of narrative (Currie 2010). They have asked questions about the role that it does, or should, play in our theorizing about particular moral issues.¹ And they have invoked narrative in debates about rationality, action, and personal identity.² But philosophers have said remarkably little about the contribution that narrative might make to self-deception and attempts at self-knowledge. This paper is largely an attempt to fill this gap in our theorizing about narrative.

As Daniel Hutto has pointed out, there is little agreement about what a narrative is. For this reason, it is unlikely that any set of necessary and sufficient conditions for narrative will satisfy all theorists (Hutto, 2007, p. 1). Fortunately, for the purposes of this paper, we can bypass these difficulties and understand narrative broadly. A narrative, as I will understand it here, is an oral or written interpretation of a series of events that is presented in sequential order. Narratives do not just report or list events, they interpret them. As an interpretation, a narrative attempts to provide meaning, purpose, or closure to the events in question. Narratives are constructed from a perspective and are in principle incomplete and selective in what they represent. Although there are weaker and stronger ways of understanding narrative, this account captures the core ideas that are found in most others. Moreover, it highlights the qualities or properties of a narrative that are especially useful when thinking about the etiology of self-deception.

Before we can understand the contribution that narrative makes to self-deception, we need to know what self-deception is. Self-deception in my view, and most views, involves holding false beliefs. As Alfred Mele puts it, this is a “lexical” criterion for self-deception (Mele, 2001, p. 51). By definition, a

¹ For a discussion of the role that narrative should play in our theorizing about ethics, see Misak 2008; hereafter abbreviated ENED. See also Misak 2005; hereafter abbreviated “ICU.” In “ICU” Misak presents a narrative involving her experience with ICU psychosis. On the basis of this narrative, she argues that medical paternalism is appropriate in a certain limited range of cases.

² For a theory of personal identity understood in terms of narrative, see Schechtman 1996. David Velleman develops an account of reasons and agency based in part upon narrative in Velleman 2006.

person who is self-deceived holds at least one false belief. A second widely accepted condition for self-deception involves motivation. A self-deceiver must be motivated to hold the false belief in question: her motivation to believe that p makes a causal contribution to her falsely believing that p . A self-deceiver holds the false belief in question because she is motivated to do so. If it were not for this motivation, we would expect her to see the world more clearly.

In most, but not all, cases of self-deception, people are motivated to accept positive or flattering views about themselves and their loved ones. We are all too familiar with such cases: An aspiring young writer may be self-deceived about the profundity of her thoughts. A self-absorbed mother may be self-deceived about how caring and supportive she is of her children. And a small-town chef may be self-deceived about the sensitivity of his palette and the innovativeness of his signature dish. But philosophical disagreements arise when we try to understand the shape that this motivation takes. Some theorists, such as Donald Davidson³ and David Pears⁴ require that self-deceivers intentionally deceive themselves. Other theorists, myself included, deny that this is a necessary condition for self-deception. In my view, a self-deceiver's motivational state plays a causal, but not intentional, role in getting her to believe falsely that p (the belief that she is self-deceived in holding). A person's motivation to believe that p may cause her to gather and interpret evidence relevant to p in a biased way. This, in turn, may make it more likely that she will believe that p rather than $\sim p$.⁵ How might the process of constructing a narrative contribute to self-deception on this account?

As we have already seen, the process of constructing a narrative involves interpretation; narratives do not just report events, they interpret them. Given that narratives are largely interpretive, they are subject to various forms of distortion. Indeed, a recent study conducted by Elizabeth Marsh and Barbara Tversky suggests that the *majority* of stories that we tell are distorted in some way.¹⁰ Marsh and Tversky asked participants, 33 undergraduate students, to record «what, when, and how they told others about events from their lives» (Marsh & Tversky, 2004, p. 491). For each retelling, students filed two forms: one form asked them to describe the original event, and the other asked them to describe the retelling of the event (Marsh & Tversky, 2004, p. 294).

³ See Davidson 1998.

⁴ See Pears 1985.

⁵ See Mele (2001, pp. 25–93) for a detailed account of how this can happen.

Along with these forms, students submitted answers to a number of questions about each retelling. Among other things, students evaluated each retelling for accuracy. Marsh and Tversky report that students labeled 42% of their retellings as “inaccurate” (Marsch & Tversky, 2004, p. 496). Curiously, they labeled 61% of the same retellings as “distorted in some way”; this broad category includes retellings that were exaggerated, minimized, selective, or additive (Marsch & Tversky, 2004, p. 496). Students apparently believed that their retellings could be distorted in one of the aforementioned ways without being inaccurate. What these results imply is that, more often than not, people share distorted accounts of their experiences with others. This finding is especially important given that one’s retelling of an event can influence one’s memory of an event; distorted retellings of events tend to result in distorted memories of events (Marsch & Tversky, 2004, p. 500).

I want to suggest that this practice of telling distorted stories to others can contribute to self-deception. If distorted retellings lead to distorted memories, and memories ground our beliefs, then there is a relatively straightforward way in which distorted retellings lead to distorted beliefs (or self-deception). It is worth noting that this might happen with even greater frequency than the Marsh-Tversky study predicts. After all, the Marsh-Tversky study only provides us with data concerning *self-reported* distorted retellings. It does not provide us with data concerning distorted retellings that are *not reported*. It is reasonable to suppose that we sometimes provide distorted accounts of events to others without realizing that this is what we are doing. The Marsh-Tversky study also (understandably) neglects the number of distorted retellings that we share with ourselves *sotto voce*. If we routinely tell ourselves distorted stories, then we may routinely form distorted or false beliefs.

3. *La Symphonie Pastorale*

Thus far, I have argued that narrative plays an important role in self-deception. The way that a person retells events can influence a person’s beliefs and memories about those events. I should add here that this causal sequence is often reversed: Just as a person’s retelling or narrative can influence her beliefs, so also can her beliefs influence her retelling or narrative. Most cases of self-deception probably involve causal sequences that move in both directions. There is generally an intimate and mutually reinforcing relationship between a person’s beliefs and narrative. It may, therefore, be impossible to sever one

completely from the other and label the former ‘cause’ and the latter ‘effect’. I now want to take a closer look at the way that narrative can make this happen and contribute to self-deception. In so doing, I would like to consider the narrative that André Gide presents in *La Symphonie Pastorale*.

In *La Symphonie Pastorale*, a pastor recounts the development of his love for a blind girl, Gertrude, whom he has adopted. The pastor finds Gertrude in the home of her aunt who has just died. At this point in the novella, Gertrude can neither see nor speak; she is vulnerable and destitute without any means of support. Against the wishes of his wife, Amélie, the pastor decides to bring her into their home and teach her how to speak and read Braille. The pastor claims that his decision to care for Gertrude is motivated by Christian teachings and considerations of virtue. He describes Gertrude as the “the lost sheep” who is deserving of compassion and privileged treatment. As the novella progresses, one begins to suspect that the pastor’s motives are not entirely pure and Christian.

To his great dismay, the pastor soon discovers that his son, Jacques, is in love with Gertrude. Still not acknowledging his own love for Gertrude, the pastor mistakes his jealousy for indignation. He is furious with Jacques and forbids him from pursuing a relationship with Gertrude. Eventually, the pastor makes some progress towards understanding his feelings for Gertrude and the reality of their situation. Unfortunately, this personal revelation does not spare Gertrude and the pastor of a great tragedy. Gertrude, with the support of the pastor, undergoes an operation that enables her to see. Interestingly, the operation allows Gertrude to see new dimensions of the *moral* world as well as the *physical* world. When she is reunited with the pastor, Amélie, and the children, she can see the sadness in the face of Amélie. It is only at this point in the novella that she appreciates her sin and the gravity of her actions. She also realizes that she is in love with the handsome young Jacques, not the pastor. She tells the pastor that she imagined him to have the face of Jacques while she was blind. Realizing that she cannot have Jacques (who has at this point entered the priesthood) – that their marriage is impossible – she takes her own life.

Towards the end of the novella, the pastor acknowledges that his “earlier self” was mistaken about the nature of his relationship with Gertrude. While he does not admit to being self-deceived as such, he is aware that his earlier interpretation was in some way flawed or naïve. But there is additional textual evidence that the pastor’s interpretation of his relationship with Gertrude is mistaken. We can sense the pastor’s mistake through the words of others

woven into the narrative that he constructs. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the pastor's mistake is provided to us by the perceptive but stoic Amélie. Amélie presents an alternative interpretation of the pastor's predicament through her cryptic and carefully chosen words. When the pastor confronts Amélie about Jacques's relationship with Gertrude, she shares with the pastor her understanding of his mistake. The pastor is angry with Amélie for not having warned him about Jacques's interest in Gertrude. Consider Amélie's reply in the following exchange:

"I've seen it coming on for a long while. But that's the kind of thing men never notice."

It would have been no use to protest, and besides there was perhaps some truth in her rejoinder, so, "In that case," I simply objected, "you might have warned me."

"She gave me the little crooked smile with which she sometimes accompanies and screens her reticences, and then, with a sideways nod of her head:

"If I had to warn you," she said, "of everything you can't see for yourself, I should have my work cut out for me!." (Gide, 1955, p. 145)

Amélie is in the background, as it were, observing the simultaneous development of two interwoven relationships: the relationship between Gertrude and Jacques, and the relationship between Gertrude and the pastor. She takes the pastor to have been blind to both. As the conversation continues, Amélie signals in her "enigmatic" and "oracular" way that the pastor may not know what he really wants (Gide, 1955, p. 146). The implication is that the pastor has romantic feelings for Gertrude but misinterprets them to himself and others.

Thus far, I have said that the pastor takes himself to have made a mistake. He acknowledges that his initial interpretation of his relationship with Gertrude was flawed. While engaged in a moment of self-reflection, the pastor explains what he takes to be the nature and source of his error:

Now that I dare call by its name the feeling that so long lay unacknowledged in my heart, it seems almost incomprehensible that I should have mistaken it until this very day – incomprehensible that those words of Amélie's that I recorded here should have appeared mysterious – that even after Gertrude's naïve declarations I should still have doubted that I loved her. The fact is that I would not then allow myself that any love outside marriage could be permissible, nor at the same time would I allow that there could be anything whatever forbidden in the feeling that drew me so passionately to Gertrude [...]. For I should have

considered love reprehensible, and my conviction was that everything reprehensible must lie heavy on the soul; therefore, as I felt no weight on my soul, I had no thought of love. (Gide, 1955, pp. 152–153)

Clearly, the pastor believes that he had some evidence that what he felt for Gertrude was not love. In fact, he offers a clever little piece of reasoning to account for his mistake: If he loved Gertrude, then he would have felt the weight of this love on his soul. Given that he felt no weight, there must have been no love. The pastor takes himself to be guilty of a simple, unmotivated mistake.

The problem with the pastor's self-diagnosis here is that it is incomplete. While the pastor is forthcoming about this piece of explicit reasoning, he is silent about the role that desire plays in giving it shape and pushing it along. Among other things, his moment of self-reflection overlooks the convenient interplay that we find between his reading of Christianity and relationship with Gertrude. Throughout the novella, the pastor constructs a liberal reading of Christianity that supports his relationship with Gertrude. He does not feel the weight of a "reprehensible" love precisely because he has interpreted away its reprehensibility. He appeases his conscience with his reading of Christianity and the thought that the Lord has entrusted him with Gertrude's sweet and pious soul (Gide, 1955, p. 109).

What makes the pastor's interpretation of Christianity especially suspicious is the fact that he imposes it upon Gertrude through blatant acts of censorship. While teaching Gertrude about Christianity, he omits passages about sin that might distress her. As a result, he presents her with a selective and incomplete understanding of the moral world. This, if you recall, is what she objects to after her operation. But Gertrude confronts the pastor about this concern even before her operation. She insists that he respect her preference for knowledge, not a delusional happiness:

No, let me say this – I don't want a happiness of that kind. You must understand that I don't [...]. I don't care about being happy. I would rather know. There are a great many things – sad things assuredly – that I can't see, but you have no right to keep them from me. I have reflected a great deal during these last winter months; I am afraid, you know, that the whole world is not as beautiful as you have made out, pastor – and in fact, that it is very far from it. (Gide, 1955, p. 164)

The pastor is Gertrude's primary source of information about the visual and moral world. The only world that she knows is the world that he presents to

her. When Gertrude reflects upon this world, she senses that something is not right. Gertrude, from her exceedingly limited point-of-view, judges the pastor's presentation of the moral world to be incomplete.

With this textual evidence in view, I want to suggest that the pastor is not just mistaken, he is self-deceived. The pastor is self-deceived because he holds false beliefs about his relationship with Gertrude that are caused, in part, by his motivational state. I now want to take a closer look at the role that narrative plays in contributing to his self-deception. When reading *La Symphonie Pastorale*, our epistemic situation is very much like Gertrude's, albeit more extreme: our sole access to information about the world is the pastor's narrative. Although we approach the novella with certain background beliefs and assumptions, our only source of information about the pastor's predicament is what he presents to us in his narrative. The brilliance of Gide's novella is that it allows us to detect the pastor's self-deception from the inside, as it were. Even what we learn from other characters in the novella is presented to us through the pastor's narrative.

In constructing his narrative, the pastor imposes a particular order and interpretation upon a series of events involving Gertrude and himself. His narrative is not an artifact that he finds readymade. Instead, it responds to a series of events that leave him with the conceptual space for various forms of modification and distortion. The pastor can bring the events together in any number of ways that provide us with a sufficiently intelligible account of what happened. His motivation plays a crucial role in the way that he does this. In unpacking his motivation, we can identify three salient desires (understood broadly): (1) the desire to preserve his commitment to Christianity, (2) the desire to maintain his relationship with Gertrude, and (3) the desire to think of himself as good, according to the teachings of Christianity. This motivational set shapes the way that he interprets his relationship with Gertrude and those around him. As I have already explained, it causes him to accept an interpretation of Christianity that is consistent with his relationship with Gertrude, as well as an interpretation of his relationship with Gertrude that is consistent with his Christianity: the two are mutually reinforcing.

Notice that this explanation does not require that we view the pastor as *intentionally* deceiving himself. Indeed, we have no evidence in the novella that the pastor tries to get himself to believe anything at all. Instead, the pastor accepts the interpretation that he does because it seems plausible to him at the time. We can account for this appearance of plausibility by appealing to the

pastor's motivational state. Given that the pastor wants to think well of himself, he interprets his relationship with Gertrude in a way that reflects positively upon him. It takes less evidence to convince him that his relationship with Gertrude is innocent than it would to convince him that his relationship with Gertrude is romantic or inappropriate.

The pastor's self-deception contributes in an important way to his decisions and actions throughout the novella. We might say that the interpretation that he accepts of himself and his situation enables him to make the choices that he does. If he had felt the weight of an improper love, then he might have acted differently. If he had appreciated the nature of his relationship with Gertrude, then he might not have hidden the truth about the world from her. Instead, he keeps Gertrude and himself in a perpetual darkness. The pastor's self-deception affects others in the novella as well; it extends to both Jacques and Amélie. He is insensitive to Amélie and oblivious to the way that he is hurting her. And he selfishly separates Jacques from the woman he loves while condemning him for such love.

4. Narrative and Self-Knowledge

There are a number of lessons to be learned about narrative and self-knowledge in *La Symphonie Pastorale*. One lesson is that not all narratives are created equal; a narrative can be more or less truthful. We can appreciate this point by contrasting the pastor's narrative with the narrative that Amélie, or an impartial viewer, would likely construct. This would seem to imply that a certain kind of self-knowledge is achievable for us. If we judge some individuals to be self-deceived, then we seem to imply that others are not self-deceived (or are at least *less deceived*, as Philip Larkin might put it⁶). There are good reasons to be sceptical about the possibility of certain forms of self-knowledge. But self-knowledge, understood as that which self-deceivers lack, seems to be achievable for us. The second but related lesson is that we can evaluate the truthfulness of our own narratives. The fact that a given narrative is mine does not render it incorrigible. In *La Symphonie Pastorale*, the pastor comes to see the truth (or the partial truth) about his relationship with Gertrude and revises his narrative accordingly.

⁶ See Larkin 1960.

Although the pastor's narrative is a work of fiction, it represents the way that narrative can contribute to self-deception in the real world. We are all very much like the pastor in that we understand the events of our lives in narrative form. We retell and remember events in an incomplete way and from a particular point-of-view. In weaving together the events of our lives, we can do a better or worse job. The fact that a narrative is selective and told from a point-of-view does not entail that it is riddled with distortions and inaccuracies. While a narrative cannot reproduce reality in its every last detail, it can be more truthful than not and make a contribution to our understanding of the world and ourselves.

In writing about autobiographical narratives, Cheryl Misak has made similar observations. Misak argues that narratives ground our theories in experience and allow us to deliberate in an informed way about important moral issues. Although narrative «is rife with exaggeration, omission, and self-deception» we should not abandon it altogether (ENED, p. 627). If we discover that two or more narratives make inconsistent claims, we should take seriously the possibility that one of the two narrators «got things wrong» (ENED, p. 629). We should not simply retreat to the relativist claim that each person is right or blameless «from his perspective» (ENED, p. 629). In evaluating narratives, Misak claims that we should use many of the same strategies that govern ordinary theory choice. We should assess a narrative based upon «internal coherence, consistency with other evidence, simplicity, explanatory power, and so on» (ENED, p. 630). We should also consider the motivation behind the narrative and whether or not the narrative is consistent with the experiences of others (ENED, p. 630).

As Misak observes, we can evaluate narratives in a non-arbitrary or principled way. Your narrative is not just as good as mine because yours reflects your perspective and mine reflects my perspective. It might be objected here that while these principles may be of some use, they cannot help us choose between narratives in difficult cases. Consider, for instance, the disputes that sometimes arise in response to published autobiographical works. The writer Isabel Allende has commented on the fact that her family members often reject the way that she retells events in her memoirs. Indeed, her stepfather called her a mythomaniac (Allende, 2011). In an interview, Allende explains why her family – specifically her stepfather – rejects her autobiographical narratives:

Yes. He [Allende's stepfather] says that I am liar. When I was writing "Paula" it was the first time that I wrote a memoir. In a memoir one is expected to tell the

truth. My stepfather and my mother objected to every page because from my perspective the world of my childhood, of my life, is totally different from the way they see it. I see highlights, emotions, and an invisible web – threads that somehow link these things. It is another form of truth.

It is interesting that Allende refers to her memoirs as a *form* of truth, and not as the truth full stop. By claiming that her memoirs present readers with a form of truth, Allende seems to acknowledge that her retellings are not entirely truthful. But this may not be exactly what she intends to say here. It may be the case that what Allende writes in her memoirs is not false, but imbued with interpretation. In weaving together the events of her life, she includes information about their highlights and emotional character. But notice that this is exactly what one does when creating a narrative or writing a memoir. Should we conclude from this that discrepancies about certain narratives are inevitable? Is the narrative that Allende's stepfather would write just as truthful as her narrative? Can we ever make decisions about such cases?

In support of Allende, it might be argued that she, as an artist, is able to recognize qualities of events that her family members would overlook. In a Millean vein, we might suppose that people differ in terms of their natural aesthetic and intellectual capacities. After all, we admire great writers not just for their technical skill, but also for their sensitivity and ability to interpret and express emotion. If this is the case, then we may have grounds for thinking that Allende's narrative is superior to that which her stepfather might construct. While his narrative may be more truthful than not, it may be incomplete and deficient in this respect. What this shows is that we not only want a narrator to be truthful, we also want her to be sensitive, perceptive, and discerning. When evaluating a narrative, we are not just interested in the number of events presented, but in the way that these events are represented; quality matters as well as quantity. A person's history, education, and natural abilities can all play some role in determining what she is and is not sensitive to. We would not expect a great poet to perceive a situation in the way that a five-year-old child would, and vice versa.

Not everyone will be completely satisfied by this explanation. After all, as I have argued elsewhere, the fact that Allende is deep and imaginative may make her especially vulnerable to self-deception and other forms of distortion (Kirsch, 2009). Perhaps, as her stepfather would likely suggest, Allende is more inventive than she is sensitive; she creates more than she observes. The more general concern might be that all narratives involve a certain degree of

invention. Indeed, this may be something that we as a society support and encourage. We applaud those who seek the hidden meaning behind a divorce, a reunion, an injury, a recovery, or any other more or less momentous happening in life. Are we not encouraging people to invent meaning where there is none to be found? Are we not prompting them to engage in self-deception?

Consider one of Jean-Paul Sartre's well-known stories on a similar theme. When Sartre was in prison, he met a "rather remarkable" Jesuit man who shared with him the story of how he joined the order (Sartre, 1975, p. 356). This man had suffered numerous tragedies and failures in life. At the age of eighteen, his sorrows peaked with the demise of a sentimental affair and the failure of his military examination. In response to these sad events, the man could have regarded himself as a complete failure. Instead, as Sartre observes, he "cleverly" interpreted his most recent failings as a sign from God that only religious achievements were possible for him (Sartre, 1975, p. 356). In Sartre's view, the man made a *choice* to view his situation in this way. After all, Sartre points out, he could easily have chosen to become a carpenter or a revolutionary (Sartre, 1975, p. 357). If Sartre is right, there is an element of choice in the way that we tell our individual stories. God's sign was not written in the events themselves; rather, the Jesuit man "invented" the sign or chose to see it there. While I would not describe the Jesuit man as having made a "choice" to interpret his life as he did, Sartre's account is largely correct. In constructing narratives, and in interpreting the events of our lives, we are often selective, partial, and in search of meaning.

When evaluating narratives, it is not the case that anything goes. Your narrative is not beyond criticism in virtue of the fact that you "wrote" it. As I have tried to show, we can and do judge narratives, including our own, to be more or less truthful. However, in certain cases, it may be difficult or impossible for us to distinguish between competing narratives. Narrators should be sensitive, perceptive and discerning, but not deceptive and inventive – unless they are just trying to sell books. It is this conceptual space for interpretation that self-deceivers exploit in deceiving themselves. Although we are probably all guilty of some distortions in telling the stories of our lives, we are not all systematically self-deceived or self-deceived on a grand scale. In real life, as in fiction, we can distinguish between the pastors and the Amélie's.

When narratives are truthful, they can help us make sense of our personal and moral lives. The process of constructing a narrative involves bringing

together a series of disparate events into one more or less unified story. When this is done well, constructing a narrative makes it possible for us to reflect upon aspects of our lives that might otherwise go unnoticed. The information that we acquire in the process provides us with moral orientation and allows us to understand our obligations to others. Without it, we are like the blind Gertrude, lost in moral darkness and oblivious to the sorrows of others. On a theoretical level, we can also benefit from the autobiographical or real-life narratives of others. They can provide us with valuable moral insight and, as Misak has shown, ground our abstract moral theories in experience (ENED, p. 626).

At this point, a sceptic might question the explanatory force or usefulness of understanding self-deception (and, with it, self-knowledge) in terms of narrative. It might be objected that narrative only describes the way that people pursue or acquire self-knowledge when narrative is understood broadly. But when our understanding of narrative is sufficiently broad, we deflate it of any conceptual intrigue or significance; it becomes conceptually bankrupt.⁷ Why not abandon talk of narrative altogether? First of all, the purpose of this paper has not been to present an account of self-deception in terms of narrative alone. Rather, I have tried to show that narrative can enhance our understanding of self-deception and supplement current theoretical work on the topic. Even a broad account of narrative can help us understand the causal processes that contribute to self-deception. Thinking in terms of narrative highlights the role that selectivity, perspective, and interpretation play in the way that we retell the events of our lives. While I would not object to considering these properties of narrative individually, thinking of them collectively has its advantages: (1) It allows us to see how they interact with each other in a familiar way. (2) It encourages us to look at autobiographical and fictional narratives that can deepen our understanding of how self-deception works. And (3) it reveals how one false or self-deceptive belief can spread and infect others. Theorists often focus upon a single isolated belief, the belief 'that p ,' in accounting for the nature and possibility of self-deception. Thinking about self-deception in terms of narrative can help us appreciate the global nature of self-deception and its tendency to spread. It is often the case that a person's self-deception is not limited to the belief that p ,

⁷ For a critique of the narrative approach in general, see Strawson 2004 and Lamarque 2004.

rather, it spills over into her other beliefs and is woven into a narrative that she constructs about her life.

It is worth noting here that my discussion of narrative and self-deception (and, with it, self-knowledge) is compatible with most accounts of self-knowledge. Nothing that I have said thus far is contingent upon a conceptually demanding account of self-knowledge. Nor does it depend upon our having immediate, introspective access to our mental states. Indeed, the view defended here is even compatible with interpretational accounts of self-knowledge, such as the one advanced by Peter Carruthers (2010). According to Carruthers, we acquire knowledge about ourselves by observing our external and internal behavior (where this includes both inner speech and imagery, p. 83). It is possible, I would like to suggest, that we develop autobiographical narratives in response to this kind of observation. Carruthers and others have gestured in this direction in accounting for *self-knowledge*.⁸ However, in so doing, they imply that all narratives are in the same category and equally fictitious. In their view, our narratives are all alike in being so many stories that we invent in an effort to make sense of our behavior. My account of self-deception provides us with some grounds for resisting this claim. Even if a narrative is based entirely upon behavior, it can be more or less consistent with what really happened (or with the actual behaviors in question). Admittedly, there may be deeper theoretical reasons for being sceptical about the possibility of self-knowledge in general. But it is not within the scope of this essay to address these formidable concerns – concerns with which I am deeply sympathetic.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been to show that narrative can make an important, though not unavoidable, contribution to self-deception. Given the avoidability of self-deception, this paper is just as much about the possibility of self-knowledge as it is about the possibility of self-deception. As soon as we divide the world into self-deceivers and non-self-deceivers, we acknowledge that a certain kind of self-knowledge is possible for us. This self-knowledge is the kind that the pastor in *La Symphonie Pastorale* lacks. By examining his narrative, and comparing it with the insights and interpretations of others, we

⁸ Daniel Dennett presents a version of this account in Dennett 1991.

can see where he goes wrong. We can imagine a pastor who is not self-deceived, or who is at least *less* self-deceived. If self-knowledge is within the realm of the possibilities for the pastor, then there may be some hope for the rest of us.

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