PLAYING WITH THE SELF: SELF-DECEPTION AND EDUCATION

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Nothing is so easy as to deceive oneself; for what we wish, we readily believe.

Demosthenes

With the truth, one cannot live. To be able to live, one needs illusions.

Otto Rank

Shelley Taylor notes that the topic of "self-deception has always presented philosophers with a logical paradox: How can a person know and not know information at the same time?"[1] Self-deception poses interesting philosophical and psychological concerns that have important personal, practical and professional ramifications. While I will suggest some instrumental applications to education, I believe more importantly, that the recognition and understanding of how self-deceptions operate in our lives can help to foster the personal growth that will—by extension—improve our professional practice. The advice that Fritz Perls gives to experimental psychologists (scientists) on the value of "self-instruction" in Gestalt therapy, might well apply to educators as they become more aware of the self-deceptions that we all are subject to: "To the extent that it changes them as persons, it will also change them in their professional role as scientists, and perhaps make them more vividly aware of the fact that science, no matter how pure, is the product of human beings engaged in the exciting business of living their personal lives"[2]

Given the ubiquity, and elusive nature of self-deception, perhaps the first step in addressing the matter is to work toward a better understanding of how it functions. Toward that end, I will examine the work of two psychologists on the topic of *self-deception*: Daniel Goleman's *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception*[3] and Shelley E. Taylor's *Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and The Healthy Mind*. At first glance, Taylor and Goleman appear to take diametrically opposed positions on the issue of *self-deception*. Taylor argues for a form of creative self-deception, or as she calls it, the use of "positive illusions." This involves a positive or optimistic view of oneself and the world (a view that might initially be at variance with "reality"—a touchstone of mental health in traditional psychological accounts). By using these positive illusions, Taylor contends that individuals are more likely to live happy, productive and successful lives. Goleman, conversely, focuses on the negative consequences of self-deception (or as he calls them, "vital lies"). Specifically, Goleman describes the blind spots in our awareness, and our failure to be aware that we are not aware. According to Goleman, these commonplace self-deceptions

frequently have deleterious effects for individuals and for society. While Goleman's primary objective is to describe the dynamics of self-deception, he argues that the first step in disabusing these self-deceptions is to recognize that they are taking place.

In setting forth and clarifying these two views, I will note and emphasize their similar depictions of the psychological dynamics of self-deception, as well as their different but—I will argue—complementary strategies they recommend for modifying, creating and constructing a more positive and healthy "self". This exercise in clarification will serve to construct a synthesis of the two authors' views that I call "playing with the self." The ambiguity and innuendo of the phrase is intentional. On the one hand this "playing" involves creative and imaginative strategies (as in a game), and on the other hand it heeds Goleman's warnings about the solipsistic, self-engrossing and blinding effects (effects that have been attributed to masturbation) of self-deception. In conclusion, I will offer suggestions on how "playing with the self" might be applied to education.

Goleman on Self-Deception

The central notions in Goleman's conception of self-deception are gaps in our awareness and holes or lacunas in our attention. These deceptions operate "at the level of the individual mind, and at the social level in the collective awareness of the group" (13). Goleman locates the basis of self-deception in the "trade-off between anxiety and awareness," or said another way; the skewing that results from the "interplay between pain and attention" (21). This trade-off occurs both physiologically and psychologically. *Attention* is used to gather information that is crucial for survival, and *anxiety* results when this information is regarded as a threat. "We can use our attention to deny threat and cushion ourselves from anxiety. In some ways that is a useful self-deception, and in others it is not" (19). Goleman devotes his attention to the latter, as he explains the maladaptive self-deceptions. Anxiety, Goleman stipulates, "is stress out of place or out of proportion to the threat," and it has the effect of narrowing our attention (44). Goleman cites studies on the cognition of stress to explain that when anxiety swamps attention, the mind attempts to provide an antidote, which often involves disattention or denial, with their attendant downsides (46).

The role of one's subjective appraisal in the perception of events is a key factor in this process. It is not the event per se that matters, says Goleman, but one's subjective appraisal. Threat is where you see it, and the psychic upshot is that events are what one makes of them (47). The act of "appraisal begins at the initial instant of orienting and initiates a chain of cognition aimed at finding the most finely tuned response" (50). At the same time, "anxiety spews cognitive static, which makes reappraisal difficult" (52). When reappraisal fails, and the threat does not disappear, then other strategies (such as denial, coping, psychic closing off and the creation of other mental palliatives) are needed. When these

mental palliatives (that reduce stress) "don't prevent adaptive action, they help greatly"(53). Often, however, "mental palliatives skew one's ability to see things just as they are: that is, to attend clearly. When anxiety is at large in the mind, even if capped by an artful mental maneuver, there is a cost to mental efficiency. Denial compromises full unflinching attention"(54).

Goleman acknowledges the pioneering work of Freud on the link between pain and attention. While Freud was well aware of how mental biases, repression and denial could restrict and distort the flow of information, his linear model of the mind and his reductive focus on the impulses of the Id, underestimated the complexity of the "intertwined and mutually interactive subsystems of the mind" (59). Thus, by coupling the insights of Freud with the recent findings of neuroscience and information processing, Goleman presents a model of the mind that he argues allows us to gain "a new sense of how our experience is shaped, and of the hidden forces that sculpt personal and social reality" (22).

Through a complex loop of perception, memory and cognition (much of which functions unbeknown to us) the "contents of awareness come to us picked over, sorted through, and pre-packaged" (65). The entire process takes a fraction of a second, and Goleman refers to the resultant packages that knowledge comes in as "schemas" (74). Over time, schemas accrue from the sum total of our experiences, and come to constitute the 'us' (our self). According to Goleman, the "self," is "an especially potent organization of schemas. Sometimes called the 'self-system' or 'self-concept', it is that set of schemas that define what we mean by 'I', 'me', and 'mine', that codify a sense of oneself and one's world" (96). While schemas are formed in our attempts to organize information to make sense of our experience, they also function as an interpretive grid of sorts, through which we then perceive and assess subsequent experiences. Thus, perception, cognition, and the self—which is largely conceived in functional terms—involve processes that are interactive and constructed (65). We will now consider some examples of how our minds function to censor, filter, and distort information in maladaptive and self-deceptive ways.

EXAMPLES OF SELF-DECEPTION

Goleman cites several visual and perceptual experiments and cases (some of which are explained physiologically) that illustrate how our mental processes function as a filter so that individuals literally shut out or do not notice aspects of the events they are observing. On the basis of these studies, Goleman concludes that we tend to perceive what we are looking *for* rather than what we are looking *at*. Or, as Robert Pirsig puts it: "Seeing is not believing. Believing is seeing."[4]

In Goleman's account, it is our schemas that constitute our beliefs, direct what it is we look for, and consequently frame what we do and do not notice. An important example concerns the diversionary schemas that we develop in order

to protect us against threats to our self-image and to prevent psychic pain. Freud called such diversionary schemas "defense mechanisms," the most notable of which include rationalization, denial, and *repression*, which Freud defined in its most basic sense as "the function of rejecting and keeping something out of consciousness" (quoted, 112). Goleman coins the term 'lacunas' to refer to theses gaps or holes in our consciousness. To the degree that these diversionary schemas permeate our self-system, there is a corresponding decrease in awareness.

Stereotypes and prejudice are another form of self-deception, once again, based on our schemas and the information that they filter out. Stereotypes, as Gordon Allport noted in regard to prejudices, are especially problematic when they are not revised in light of new information that in some cases, contradicts the stereotypes.[5] The individual who is beholden to his stereotypical conceptions may embrace information that confirms his beliefs, while ignoring, not noticing, dismissing, or explaining away information that is not congenial to maintaining his stereotypical beliefs. Language (and stereotypical labels in particular) is yet another schema by which we organize and interpret our experiences. Cognitive scientists and linguists, among others, have cautioned us to be aware that metaphors and concepts can serve both to reveal and to conceal information. If we vigorously and unreflectively embrace and buy into certain metaphoric conceptions, we run the risk of sustaining what Neil Postman called "a hardening of the categories," and its attendant symptoms of cognitive myopia and self-deception.

An individual's memory and the recollection of one's personal history is also fertile ground for self-deception. Goleman discusses John Dean's testimony in the Watergate hearings to illustrate how we skew the facts or "engage in wishful memory in order to portray ourselves in a better light" (95). While the case of John Dean presents a salient example, Goleman is of the opinion that such self-deception is quite common and is in fact facilitated by the mind's design. Goleman remarks: "The ease with which we deny and dissemble—and deny and dissemble to ourselves that we have denied or dissembled—is remarkable" (95).

The anxiety-awareness dynamic, Goleman argues, is also at work at the social level. Groups share relevant schemas that form the collective "we." These groups, Goleman claims, are vulnerable to the same illusions and deceptions that afflict individuals. Families, for example, are marked by implicit bargains, family secrets, and unspoken collusions in denial that are employed to stave off anxiety. Thus, Goleman contends, "the family stands as a prototype for the psychology of all groups" (179).

TAYLOR ON SELF-DECEPTION

Taylor's work on creative self-deception was fueled by her research in examining the victims of personal tragedy who emerged to achieve a higher degree of functioning than they had before. Rather than resulting in debilitating mental illness, as Taylor had expected, many victims indicated that the tragedies they experienced had forced them to rethink their priorities and values, and to live more deliberate and fulfilling lives. But, as one cancer survivor told Taylor, "The trick, of course, is to do this without getting cancer" (viii).

Taylor's thesis is that "the mind is, with some significant exceptions, intrinsically adaptive, oriented toward overcoming rather than succumbing to the adverse events of life." She argues: "In many ways the healthy mind is a self-deceptive one. At one level, it constructs beneficent interpretations of threatening events that raise self-esteem and promote motivation; yet at another level, it recognizes the threat or challenge that is posed by these events" (xi). The task that Taylor attempts to achieve is:

> To persuade the reader that normal human thought and perception is marked not by accuracy but by positive self-enhancing illusions about the self, the world, and the future. Moreover, these illusions are not merely characteristic of human thought; they appear actually to be adaptive, promoting rather than undermining good mental health (7).

Taylor places these positive illusions into three categories: self-enhancement, which involves an estimation of one's own attributes as being greater than they are; an exaggerated belief in one's personal control; and unrealistic optimism in which one perceives the future to hold "an unrealistically bountiful array of opportunities" (6). In short, these are illusions about self-worth, control and the future.

As does Goleman, Taylor argues that one's self-image is a composite of self-schemas. However, Taylor cites numerous studies that indicate these exaggerated and optimistic self-schemas have adaptive value in promoting human growth, learning and achievement. Learning theorists, for example, have shown that illusions of control (which are typical and exaggerated among children) serve as a motivating drive for children to explore, investigate, manipulate and attain understanding and mastery of their environments (21-25).

Enhanced self-schemas can also have dramatic effects on motivation and persistence for adults. One's distorted perception that things are inherently controllable can serve as the impetus to embark on a challenging quest or project. For example, the aspiring writer, who is motivated by her positive illusions, might commence her novel in spite of the overwhelming odds that in fact weigh

heavily against her chances of succeeding (32). Hence, positive illusions can prompt individuals to attempt tasks they might otherwise avoid. Moreover, these unrealistic assessments of the likelihood of success may lead people to stick to tasks until they do succeed, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy (59). As Taylor puts it, "This sort of effective perseverance can come only from a person who is convinced, perhaps unreasonably, of the likelihood of eventual success" (61).

Taylor is careful to note that the unrealistic optimist is not oblivious or unresponsive to information. "When people receive objective evidence about the likelihood of risks, they change their estimates accordingly. These qualities most clearly distinguish illusion from delusion. Delusions are false beliefs that persist despite the facts. Illusions accommodate them, though perhaps reluctantly" (36-37). She makes a related point of clarification by citing Epstein's studies on constructive thinking, wherein he makes the distinction between *effective optimism* and *naïve optimism*. Epstein found the former—which is closely tied to a belief in personal control and involves expectations that one can master goal-related tasks—was highly related to constructive thinking. Naïve optimism, on the other hand, involves the simplistic notion that things will turn out well, was found to have little relation to constructive thinking and hence appears to be of little adaptive value (71).[6]

While Taylor presents evidence and arguments for how positive illusions of one's "past self" and "present self" can have adaptive value, she maintains that in many respects, the future provides the greatest opportunity for illusions to operate. Because positive images of the future or possible self require no distortion of real events and are not tied to concrete reality, they can be taken on with abandon. Just as positive illusions of one's present self can promote motivation and persistence, so "illusions about the future self help provide a mechanism whereby people grow and change, moving from a present situation to a far-off desirable future one, by keeping in mind the self they wish to become" (84-85).

As does Goleman, Taylor argues that research in human cognition makes this puzzle more tractable, and they both employ similar explanations for the phenomenon (157). Perhaps what we have, then, is not so much a substantive disagreement between Goleman and Taylor, but rather a difference in emphasis and focus. That is, while Goleman acknowledges there may be instances where self-deception is adaptive, he chooses to address maladaptive self-deceptions. Taylor argues there are conceptual, theoretical and empirical bases for making the following distinction between adaptive and maladaptive self-deceptions such as repression and denial:

> Repression and denial alter reality, whereas illusions simply interpret it in the best possible light. Defenses distort the facts, leading people to hold misperceptions of internal or external reality. Through illusions, on the other hand, people make the most of bad situations by adopting a maximally positive perspective (126).

Rather than pitting Goleman against Taylor and arguing the merits of their respective positions, I will attempt to synthesize some of their views in a way that may be of use for educators.

Playing With The Self: A Synthesis

In short, my synthesis involves the promotion of critical thinking skills to identify and rectify the self-deceptions that Goleman addresses, combined with cultivating the optimistic dispositions that Taylor argues for. Before giving some examples of how this synthesis might be applied to education, I would like to mention two sources that I believe present similar dialectic approaches to self-formation. The first is Justen Infinito's recent work on Foucault's ethic of self-formation,[7] and the second source is a brief passage in the *Epistle to The Romans*.

According to Infinito, Foucault advocated a form of "care for the self" in which individuals are actively "involved in their own construction as subjects."[8] Given Foucault's ambiguous use of the term 'subject', this project involves at least two phases. Initially, the individual must become aware and informed of the structural forces of society that function to "normalize" or impose an inauthentic identity on the subject. As the individual comes to understand the nature of this subjugation, the conditions are established whereby he can freely act as the subject/agent in resisting the subjugation and embarking on the quest of self-creation.

The author of the Epistle to The Romans beseeches his readers, "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (12:2, KJV). I take the resisting of *subjugation* and of *conformity to the world* to be analogous to breaking free of self-deceptions and the social forces that are implicated in their perpetuation. And, I consider Foucault's process of self-formation and St. Paul's call to renew our minds to be analogous to the creative use of positive illusions.

Applications to Education, Teaching and Foundations of Education

Since Goleman locates the workings of the unconscious as the source of many of our self-deceptions, it is little surprise that he cites psychoanalysis as a potential means to help us identify and correct these "vital lies." Though I won't attempt to argue for the practicality or desirability of incorporating

psychoanalytic techniques into the classroom, I will propose that the techniques of Socratic elenchus may be used to achieve many of the same purposes. In fact, I believe a careful study of Plato's *theory of recollection*—the notion that each individual possesses the knowledge of the ages which is repressed at birth but can be accessed by dialogue, reflection and critical inquiry—will reveal several parallels between Socrates' "non-teaching" and some commonly held views of the therapist-patient relation.[9]

The value of Socratic dialogue for initiating critical thinking, dispelling misconceptions, and promoting self-examination and understanding is no doubt familiar to all of us. What I would like to point out is a connection between the *theory of recollection* and the use of positive illusions. Following the arguments of Plato scholar Gregory Vlastos, I concur that it is likely Socrates didn't actually subscribe to the rather fabulous metaphysical doctrine of recollection.[10] Nonetheless, it is clear the theory functioned to motivate individuals to mine the depths of their souls to uncover the wisdom that they supposedly already possessed (the most obvious example is found in the *Meno* 80D-81E). Thus, the theory of recollection might rightly be regarded as a classic example of the creative use of positive illusions.

In teaching, then, operating from a perspective of positive and optimistic "illusions" about students' abilities can take a variety of forms: Plato's theory of recollection, the belief that all students possess the "mind of Christ," or some type of Higher Power and God-consciousness, the belief in the power of the subconscious or some form of "infinite intelligence" that is possessed by or accessible to all, or the simple notion that all students possess talents, abilities, and the innate capacity to learn. This does not necessitate that the teacher explicitly expound to students any of these beliefs or their attendant metaphysical baggage. Rather, the teacher can act "as if" these notions are true, and treat students accordingly. This could include such practices as affirming and praising students, the use of neuro-linguistic programming and other forms of reframing perspectives in a more positive light, and holding high expectations for student achievement. Taylor cites numerous studies that demonstrate such practices are highly conducive to promoting student growth, learning and development.

Another example of how this synthesis might be applied to teaching is in addressing such social pathologies as prejudice, stereotypes and bigotry. Goleman's work is instructive in its depiction of the role that the uncritical and imprecise use of language plays in our self-deceptions. Though he doesn't make any specific recommendations on how to remedy these linguistic confusions, it is clear that analytic philosophers and those in the critical thinking movement provide a host of techniques to help educators avoid the traps of what Wittgenstein called "being hexed by language."

Furthermore, as Aldous Huxley pointed out almost fifty years ago, and as the proponents of philosophy for children have demonstrated, the tools that promote a critical understanding of language can be employed at every level of schooling, from elementary to graduate studies.[11] The tools of critical and philosophical thinking can be effectively used to inform and cultivate desired ethical and affective dispositions: For example, to help dispel stereotypes and prejudice, and to foster social harmony and understanding. Christine Bennett cites research supporting and illustrating this synthesis, and she concludes that logical thinking, positive self-image and a positive view of others are perhaps the strongest defenses against prejudice.[12]

As a philosopher of education, I believe those in our field have done and are doing a great job on the critical thinking "side" of the synthesis I am proposing. Our focus on critique and analysis has enabled us to uncover and address inconsistencies, inaccuracies, flaws, mistakes, injustices, and inequities in educational theory, practice and policy. I am convinced of the importance of these endeavors, especially in our current sociopolitical-economic situation. Yet, I wonder how successful we are in terms of improving and bettering the very conditions we point out as lacking. It might be fitting to pose the stock question of psychotherapists that has been popularized by Dr. Phil, "How is this working for you?" In terms of influencing educational policy, obtaining positions in schools of education, establishing cooperative relationships with teachers and school administrators, and effecting social and political change, I would conclude that it might not be working too well.[13]

Furthermore—and I will not attempt to judge to what degree this takes place—some in academia, particularly in schools of education, have expressed the opinion that foundations scholars (including me) are overly critical, negative, caustic and pessimistic. Perhaps a complimentary emphasis on the second "side" of this proposed synthesis (the use of positive illusions) might serve to balance our work in a way that is more appealing, influential and eventually successful in improving education. Famed film director Billy Wilder once told an interviewer, "If you have anything worthwhile to say, better be sure that it is wrapped in chocolate so they will swallow it."

Concluding Thoughts

I recall a cartoon in which Santa Clause was lying on the psychiatric couch and the therapist says, "Remember, you are only responsible for your own happiness." In the spirit of this paper, I remind myself that real growth and change starts with one's self. If those who read this find these ideas helpful, that is fine. However, I realize that in some deep and important sense, all conversation and discourse is—at least in part—directed at our selves. In my own personal journey I am discovering a newfound appreciation for the ideas and literature that share similarities with Taylor's work on positive illusions. These include

works in the pop psychology, self-improvement, positive thinking, wisdom literature and personal success genres.

This is not to say that I have abandoned my critical sensibilities as I approach this literature. Rather, I attempt to use my thinking to critically appraise it; selecting and appropriating what is useful, relevant and applicable to improving my life and taking care of myself. This is in contrast to the times when I felt compelled to attack, dismiss and destroy those ideas that in my opinion failed to muster sufficient philosophical rigor. While I am beginning to understand and take responsibility for these compulsions, I will say that my philosophical training provided me with the "tools/weapons" to carry out such assaults. But it is not the tools that are at fault, but it is the way that we use them.

In essence, I am growing weary of all the battles—real and imagined—I believed that I must wage. As Philip Carey, the main character in my favorite novel concludes: "It might be that to surrender to happiness was to accept defeat, but it was a defeat better than many victories."[14] As I explore and experiment with the ideas in this paper, I must admit that it feels good. Maybe this is the beginning of a beautiful relationship: playing with and taking care of my self.

NOTES

1.   Shelley E. Taylor, *Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and The Healthy Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1989). Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically by page number.

2.   Frederick Perls, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1951).

3.   Daniel Goleman, *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985). Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically by page number.

4.   Robert M. Pirsig, *Lila: An Inquiry Into Morals* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 336.

5.   Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

6.   This distinction between effective and naïve optimism is similar to the distinction Dewey makes between *imagination* and *fantasy* in *Our Common Faith* and also in *Art As Experience*.

7.   Justen Infinito, "Ethical Self-Formation: A Look at the Later Foucault," *Educational Theory* 33 number 2 (Spring 2003): 155-172.

8.   Ibid, 158.

9.   These parallels are explored in William L. Fridley, "Some Pedagogical Functions of Plato's Theory of Recollection," *The Journal of Philosophy and History of Education* 53 (2003): 48-55. Specifically, the parallels are drawn to the views of the therapist/client relationship depicted in Sheldon B. Kopp, *If You Meet The Buddha On The Road, Kill Him! The Pilgrimage of Psychotherapy Patients* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972).

10.   Gregory Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 29-37.

11.   Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958).

12.   Christine I. Bennett, *Comprehensive Multicultural Education: Theory and Practice*, third edition (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), 20-21.

13.   Several of these issues are addressed in Rene Vincente Arcilla, "Why Aren't Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?" *Educational Theory* 52 number 1 (Winter 2002): 1-12, and in a subsequent issue of *Educational Theory* that was comprised of respondents to the article.

14.   W. Somerset Maugham, *Of Human Bondage* (New York: Modern Library Books, 1942 originally 1915).