

How Do We Know Ourselves? From the Outside In

John A. Teske. PhD
Professor of Psychology
Elizabethtown College
Elizabethtown, PA 17022 USA

Position Paper for a Plenary Dialogue on “Knowing Ourselves” for
The 62nd Annual Conference of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science
Star Island, New Hampshire, USA

Abstract

Part of the epistemological crisis of the 20th century was in establishing that introspection provides very little in the way of reliable self-knowledge, on philosophical as well as empirical grounds. My position takes little contention with the likelihood that embodied and even external forms of cognition must play a large role in how our knowing, our self-knowing in particular, is generated by and constituted within our embodied, embedded, situated and even external and symbiotic relationships with our material, technological, and symbolic culture. Nevertheless, I believe much of this knowledge is unconscious and implicit, knowledge by doing, knowledge of rather than knowledge that, and, however adaptive it may be, is not part of our self-represented selves. While we all recognize that we have full actual selves to which our self-representations do not do full justice, we hold our narrative accounts more central to our conscious experience of ourselves in the world. Hence, my position focuses on the formation and existence of this narrative self, and its relationship to the realities of our lives for which the reliability of its account is problematic. We will explore its relationship to the comprehensibility and meaning of our actions, as well as the cognitive neuroscience behind its limitations. These include an understanding of its relationship to pathological forms of confabulation, the generation of plausible but insufficiently grounded accounts of our actions, and the normal patterns of narrative creation and checking functions. The focus here will be on the clues about self-deception which this may provide. We will then examine the evolutionary logic of self-deception, particularly in the service of deceiving others, and its tactical and strategic advantages. We can recognize that such deception may produce adaptive results, particularly in service of the “commitment strategies,” over and above kin-selection or reciprocal altruism, that give our species access to results otherwise unobtainable. I will suggest that it is largely in our close relationships with other human beings, the relationships so well served by these very strategies, that we may also find the powerful counterbalancing feedback which may provide a route to positive change and self-transcendence. Nevertheless, we will also warn about a shadow side for which our ideological, philosophical, or religious contexts can provide both acknowledgement and hope.

Dialogue Questions

What are the indices of our capacities for and difficulties with knowing ourselves?

How can we understand the differences between embodied, situated cognition and the narrative accounts by which we provide comprehensibility and meaning to our lives?

In what ways are both embodied, situated knowing and our narrative accounts a product of interdependencies and interactions in which we are embedded, rather than what is interior to us?
I what ways can we better learn to counterbalance the excesses of our capacities for self-deception, the implicit knowledge provided by our embodied and interdependent existence, and the more disciplined varieties of rationality found in our epistemic traditions?

Finally, what contributions, advantages, and/or disadvantages might our epistemic traditions, both including and apart from the empirical, provide for the future flourishing of our planetary life?

**Recommended Reading**


**Biosketch**

John A. Teske, PhD, is Professor of Psychology at Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA 17022 U.S.A. He teaches about emotion, personality and the history of psychology, as well as interdisciplinary courses such as “Narrative and Identity,” “Brain, Mind, and Spirit,” and “Neuromythology.” He has published empirical research on nonverbal behavior, environmental psychology, cognitive development, and close relationships. His post-empirical focus has been in the science-religion dialogue, particularly on the cognitive science of spirit, and he has published regularly in *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, including “From Embodied to Extended Cognition” (2013), “Externalism, Relational Selves, and Redemptive Relationships” (2011), “Narrative and Meaning in Science and Religion,” (2010), and “Neuromythology: Brains and Stories” (2006). He is a member of the International Society for Science and Religion. He was President of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science (IRAS) from 2005-2008, was voted an Academic Fellow in 2010, and is the lead organizer for this year’s conference on “How Can We Know? Co-creating Knowledge in Perilous times.

**How Do We Know Ourselves: From the Outside In**

John A. Teske

*The life of a person is not what happened but what he remembers and how he remembers it.*

Gabriel Garcia Marquez

I. **Gnothi Saeuton: Limits to How We Can Know Ourselves**

The key to William Shakespeare’s genius, at the turn of the seventeenth century and the dawning of the scientific revolution, was in exploring the drama of characters lacking self-understanding, being unaware of their own motives, just as he explored the hidden processes of interiority in his soliloquies (Greenblatt 2004). Hamlet’s “divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will” (*Hamlet*
5.2.11-12), is no less modern than Norman Mailer’s: “Consciousness, that blunt tool, only bucks in the general direction of truth; instinct plucks the feather.” No doubt but that one of Sigmund Freud’s contributions to our own most recent century was to foment an epistemological crisis in his demonstration that Cartesian introspection is neither privileged nor incorrigible (Flanagan 1991). The empirical failure of introspection is well documented (Nisbett & Wilson 1977, Wilson 2002). We really do not and perhaps cannot know ourselves from the inside. If our ego defenses form the boundaries of who we are, and they are in fact just a catalog of self-deceptive tactics for hiding, shaping or disowning our experience, then the very formation of the ego is based on a complex set of distortions of the truth. Randy Nesse (Nesse & Lloyd 1992, Nesse 1999) has argued that such defenses are adaptive tactics that are part of our evolved psychological mechanisms. If our conscious self-representations are constructed from these, then our conscious account of own experience is not likely to be the best guide to who we are, and a hermeneutic of suspicion must be applied to our self-understanding.

II. Stultitiae Laus: Confabulation and Self-Deception

A. Narrative, Meaning, and the Narrative Self

Much of self-understanding is in the realm of symbolic language, as we humans can build a conceptual world of symbols, which influences not only our current experience, but enables us to represent things to ourselves and others that are not immediately present to our senses. Jerome Bruner (1986, 1990) makes an important distinction between paradigmatic and narrative modes of understanding. The paradigmatic involves synchronic understanding via logical proof, empirical observations, and causal explanation, putatively more characteristic of science, and only learned late in the course of human development. The narrative, historically more ancient, and developmentally earlier, involves diachronic understanding via storied accounts of “the vicissitudes of human intentions,” organized in time, explanations being not causal but in terms of believable narratives of actors – human and otherwise – striving to do things over time, more characteristic of novelist or poets. According to Juarrero (1999), without narrative, personality traits and human actions are incomprehensible, so it becomes necessary to explain them using a hermeneutic, narrative model, much as the case with other interpretive understandings. Causality does not exhaust meaning. This is not an account that is alternative or opposed to physicality or design but an additional requirement for comprehensibility; it is what we mean by “meaning.”

Although we do not falsify the past, we must use fictional and imaginative power to “make sense” of the facts as we remember them. “Narrative makes sense of a brain’s own behavior, and may underlie the sense of a unitary self” (Roser & Gazzaniga 1994). To the extent that external, objective events do not occur in storied form, narratives are, from a paradigmatic point of view, always selections, fabrications, constructions and to that extent are always fictional. Stories may include actual events, of course, or fail to do so, and there is a facticity that constrains truth-telling in stories. Donald Spence (1982) distinguished between narrative truth and historical truth, where narrative truth is not the truth of logic, science, and empirical demonstration, but more like verisimilitude. Narrative truth is not about providing external descriptions of the world to be judged by their veridicality. Robert Coles, in his work on the moral imagination (1989) highlights the integrative functions of stories in healing what is sick or broken, bringing together what is shattered, helping us cope with stress, and movement toward fulfillment and maturity.

B. Brain Fiction

There is a problem, of course, in distinguishing between the narrative latitude that produces greater verisimilitude and the violation of what historians, and, by extension, those trying to hold to the
historical truth, call “facticity.” There are a number of neurological deficits that result in confabulation, wherein a patient may invent answers to questions, or accounts of events, fully believing themselves to be telling the truth, like a stroke victim detailing his attendance at a recent conference when he has not left the hospital. William Hirstein (2005) argues that such cases are important to understanding the structure of the normal human mind. Rather than admitting ignorance, even normal people can make up an answer to a question or an account of events that is not true, and express it with conviction. In a detailed study of a variety of such cases, Hirstein argues that there is a separation, even on the level of brain function, between the capacity to creatively invent a plausible sounding story, and a normal checking process which allows us to recognize the story as fantasy.

In split-brain cases where the corpus callosum connecting the two hemispheres has been severed, the language-dominant left hemisphere “interpreter” will confabulate an explanation of behavior produced by information delivered to the right-hemisphere (Gazzaniga 1992, 1995). But information may not be freely shared between hemispheres even in normal subjects, the language-dominant hemisphere inhibiting right-hemisphere word-recognition (half-second flash of “tar. get” results in a subject being aware only of the left-hemisphere’s “get,” Gazzaniga 1983). As in Nisbett & Wilson’s (1977) account of introspective failure, normal people regularly confabulate accounts of mental processes of which they are unaware. A confabulation is primarily understandable as an ill-grounded epistemic claim that the confabulator does not know is ill-grounded, and we all have the capacity to vary the strength of our epistemic criteria, say between talking with friends and testifying in a courtroom.

1. Confabulation: Creation and Checking

We appear to be generating accounts of our behavior almost constantly, the left-hemisphere language generation system Gazzaniga (1998) calls the “interpreter.” Such an account must be able to pass (or elude) any checking procedures for it to be expressed. Our normal state, in which we might say that we do not know or do not remember something, appears not to be due to nothing being generated, but to the active suppression of that which is incorrect. Knowing we don’t know something may only come after generating and rejecting a series of answers. Most of the data (Hirstein 2005) suggests that many of the checking processes involve neural circuits in the orbitofrontal cortex. These may include a range of checks, including those mediated by right-hemisphere function such as body representation and audience monitoring, but they are likely to be bifrontal coordinations, including checks against autobiographical memory, factual knowledge, logical and causal consequences, and reward value.

Failure to pass a check may result in the activation of both orbitomedial frontal cortex and autonomic function. There appears to be an emotional component to most cognitive function, and these emotional-autonomic functions may be important to the formulation of intentions to act, or to inhibit an action. Simply knowing one is in error is not enough to stop making a claim based on it, and failures of autonomic function are common in confabulation. Confabulators have lost an emotional component to thought, showing lower skin conductance responses which might be needed for the negative emotional tags needed to inhibit the formation of an intent or an action. Damasio’s (1994) “somatic marker hypothesis” suggests that such connections are crucial to the avoidance of risky or dangerous choices which may be based on ill-grounded beliefs. The orbitofrontal cortex’s sensitivity to reward and punishment enables it to help improve reliability by translating from reward values to truth and falsity.

Confabulators set their thresholds for belief too low, or cannot do the appropriate check because of damage to their brains. While people don’t normally set these thresholds with consciousness and intent, they must be able to sense their level when they evaluate a belief, and the demand for truth and the demand for usefulness can conflict. Clearly, an important part of what scientific training does is to discipline and raise the doubt level, to voluntarily raise one’s thresholds, at least in the appropriate
contexts. The caution reserved for professional conferences and published work is not only likely to be high, but substantially aided by a community of people double-checking. Scientists are regularly frustrated when laypersons or journalists ignore their qualified answers and oversimplify. Such considerations are, of course, highly relevant to political and policy discussions. Here the necessity of acting on the basis of lower probabilities may be crucial in time-limited crises, where full scientific caution may well constitute “pathological doubt,” and need to be guided by questions which are not themselves empirical, but may still be evaluated rationally.

2. Clues about Self-Deception

Schnider (2001) suggests that it is the same orbitofrontal processes that suppress memories not relevant to an autobiographical recollection, the brain in general using functions which usually focus and maintain attention. If I can avoid attending to the sound of passing cars, without being aware that I am doing so, I can certainly avoid attending to some emotional difficulty, and also not be aware that I am doing it. The mediodorsal nucleus of the thalamus (damage to which we also saw in the confabulations of Korsakoff’s patients) may function to block sustained cortical activity, to switch between different thalamo-cortical connections or to suppress unwanted thoughts. The neurophysiological evidence suggests that evolution may have co-opted some areas of the brain to suppress others in self-deception (Anderson, et al. 2004). Neural inhibition of one area by another can also be replicated in producing inhibition by direct external electrical stimulation, inhibition of the anterior pre-frontal cortex decreasing reaction time, physiological arousal, and moral conflict during lying (Karim, et al. 2009). Some classic research shows unconscious recognition of one’s own voice (higher galvanic skin response) under both conscious denial and projection (Gur & Sackheim 1979); conscious self-boundaries contract under failure and expand under success, despite the body’s accurate recognition (GSR response). Interestingly enough, since the limbic level emotional evaluation of a stimulus occurs in the early stages of event encoding, (beginning about 120msecs after onset) this permits limbic (emotional) input to “Shape the content of the encoded experience rather than just react to it” (Halgrin & Marinkovic 1995, 1146).

3. The Meaning of Confabulation

Michael Gazzaniga (1998) connects his concept of a left-hemisphere “interpreter” to lying and self-deception. He asks about the usefulness of a left-hemisphere “spin doctor” when we are such lousy liars, anxious, guilt-ridden, and sweaty. He suggests that this is because the “interpreter” is what keeps our personal story together, and to do that, we learn to lie to ourselves. But the autonomic signs of lying may be connected with the very orbitofrontal processes that provide a check to the explanation-producing process of the interpreter, cast doubt on them, and can prevent them from becoming beliefs in normal circumstances. The function of the orbitofrontal cortex is in the application of standards, social, ethical, and religious, such that we can feel revulsion at products actions, or emotions that do not meet those standards. With damage or inhibition, we do not produce the emotions strong enough to stop us from the inappropriate, the inhibition of which has ethical implications, as the incarnation of our commonsense notions of conscience. Hirstein (2005) speculates that with the intelligence and foresight, confabulation and self-deception are needed to keep at bay the painful truths of our mortality, our insignificance in an immense universe, and the potential for tragedy. Ernest Becker (1973) said the denial of death was the central fact of human psychology.
C. Self-Deception

1. The Evolutionary Logic of Self Deception

There is an evolutionary logic to self-deception, detailed extensively by Robert Trivers (2011, von Hippel & Trivers 2011). Getting around in a socially interdependent world, particularly with the longest periods of childhood dependency of any species (Konner 2012), often involves deceiving others. Parent/offspring relationships are not conflict-free, and many sex differences can be understood in terms of differential parental investment. Cheaters can easily exploit relationships which might have been reciprocal. In such a social species as ours, it may well be, as Nicholas Humphrey (1976) and many others have argued, that deception provided a powerful selection pressure for the evolution of intelligence, via the arms race of deception and its detection. Hence, we are likely to be pretty good at it. Why self-deception? Because, as those “practiced at the art of deception” well know, it is far easier to deceive others if you deceive yourself first.

We deny the truth to ourselves. We project onto others traits that are in fact true of ourselves—and then attack them! We repress painful memories, create completely false ones, rationalize immoral behavior, act repeatedly to boost positive self-opinion, and show a suite of ego-defense mechanisms. (Trivers 2011, 2)

This means that the primary function of self-deception is not defensive, operating beneath the toxicities of our delusions of autonomy and independence (in part created by those same self-deceptions), but offensive, its success measured by how well we fool others.

There is an epistemic cost, of course, to the use of this strategy of deceit by self-deception, in all the ways we are rendered unknowing (or wrong) about ourselves and others. Nevertheless, the biological advantages, in terms of survival and reproduction, are obvious, and the psychological benefit is in terms of feeling better and being happier. While acting on the basis of what is in fact untrue can lead to unpleasant consequences, and alienate us from reality, as long as the cost/benefit proportion weighs more heavily against others and in favor of ourselves, the strategy is a winner. We give off fewer of the cues of intentional deception, reduce the cognitive load by remaining unaware of part of the truth, and have an easy defense against detection in the denial of intent.

Self-deception is not a contradiction in terms because our “full actual self” (Flanagan 1991) is composed of many parts. We are well aware, for example that our self-represented self probably cannot fully be held in consciousness all at one time, which is why we may take a few days to make an important decision. We can also become aware of ways in which our behavior is not consistent with our self-representation, hence commonplace experiences of not feeling or behaving in accord with it (“I just wasn’t myself”). We all know that we can sometimes actively decide to “not think about something” (suppress) while we focus on another task, as I did when I returned and finished leading a research seminar just after learning that my father had suddenly died, only learning the meaning of “keening” when I was forced to pull off the road on my drive home. Self-deception may include a wide variety of ways in which we preferentially exclude true information about ourselves or reality more generally, in different degrees of unconsciousness, for varying lengths of time, from momentarily having something “slip your mind,” to forgetting it entirely. Not having attended to or encoded something in the first place is likely, of course, to be far more efficient, effectively hiding something from oneself to better deceive others. Even when deception can’t be detected against background behavior, there are often a range of behavioral cues (DePaolo et al. 2003, Vrij 2008). These include nervousness, exertion of control belied by overacting, overcontrol, rehearsed responses, and displacements (Troisi 2002). The most critical cues are ones due to cognitive overload (Vrij 2004, et al. 2006).
Trivers (2011) catalogs different categories of self-deception: \textit{Self-inflation} is the most common, increasing our “benefactance” (Greenwald 1980), what our “totalitarian egos” do to appear more beneficial and more effective. \textit{Derogating others} is the other side of the self-inflation coin, deflecting attention and producing better relative comparisons, a tendency that has been experimentally demonstrated in circumstances where one’s own capacities have been threatened (Fein & Spencer 1997). 3) \textit{Ingroup/outgroup biases} are another part of self-deception (Maas et al 1989), even in circumstances where the groups are arbitrary and randomly assigned (Tajfel 1982). 4) \textit{Moral superiority}, the tendency to more harshly judge others than ourselves is common (Batson et al 1999), although putting someone under a cognitive load appears to leave an unbiased internal judge (Valdesolo & DeStano 2008). 5) \textit{Illusions of control} reduce stress and improve performance, though they may actually harm performance when the illusions result in mistakes in judgment, and lack of control gets subjects to see patterns where there are none (Whitson & Galinsky 2008). 6) \textit{False internal narratives} can also help conceal true motivations and provide a ready-made convincing explanation. In all cases, one of the most common aspects of the self-deceptions that help us deceive others is denial, and our capacity to construct a benefectant public persona to better screen our true intentions and real causes. Part of us may still register accurate assessments of self and other, so there may often be a rather more complex self, separated into public and private aspects which may interact.

2. Evolution, Self-Deception, and Commitment

Eduardo Giannetti (1997) points out that while self-deception may often be a curse, it is also a source of the commitments we make to futures we cannot know. In this may reside some of the greatest accomplishments of our species, as well as “the savage, inexplicable hope which feed us and sustains our lives.” As we shall see below, it may also be important to the personal commitments we make to each other, enabling us to obtain greater goods than could be attained without it, and intimacies which may be the best source of genuine self-knowledge, and of the possibilities of embracing the better angels of our nature.

The evolutionary psychology of moral behavior (Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby 1992, Buss 1999, Pinker 1997, Wright 1994), provides a powerful story about the deeper logic that may undergird religious faith as well as other human commitments. Randolph Nesse (1999) points out that while kin selection and reciprocity may provide some understanding of moral relationship, even nonzero sum reciprocity (cf. Wright 2000) cannot account for the kind of good provided by deep friendships or life partnerships where help is given when there is nothing to be gained. Nesse calls it a “commitment strategy” involving a kind of “futures trading” which includes commitments to future actions which would not then be rationally self-interested. Under such circumstances we might realistically hope to get help when we really need it the most, when we are sick, alone, or poor rather than only when we are able to reciprocate. This is the obverse of the same logic of mutual assured destruction that might well have kept the world from nuclear annihilation during the Cold War generation. Why would we believe that our partners would not, in the end, do what was most rationally self-interested, what would give them the maximum cost/benefit gain, and just cut us loose? We believe that they will act in ways beyond self-interest only if the signals of commitment are accompanied by such irrational displays of emotion that we come to believe they would actually follow through. Of course, it might also be in their interest to deceive us about such commitments by themselves being self-deceived, something which our own strategies might well take into account, and they ours. Given that such commitments can provide goods not otherwise attainable, there may be selective advantages to those able to give and receive them, which would provide an evolutionary shaping of the capacity for passionate, emotional commitment. It would also provide the complicated dance of deceptive versions of such expression, of the detection of such deception, and self-deception, which makes our relational lives so poignantly baffling.
Nevertheless, our beliefs about the possibility of such commitments are what make them possible; without the ability to give this deep kind of deep trust, one cannot get it. Fortunately, most of us have existence proof of such commitments, if not in the love our parents share for each other, then in what they give us with no expectation of return. No wonder our early attachments are so predictive of early adult intimacies (Hazan & Shaver 1987). People not socialized with experiences of the trustworthy, or who have repeatedly had their trust betrayed, may not be capable of such strategies.

III. Extra Se: Knowing from Being Known

A. Externalism and Relationality

There is a long history of contributions of the Abrahamic religious traditions, Christianity in particular, to the understanding of individuality as separate from others, interior, and bodily restricted (Cary 2000, Grenz 2001, Taylor 1989). Nevertheless, there are alternative strands in these traditions, consistent with an intersubjectively externalist view. These include Barth’s conception of the imago dei as existing not in individuals nor in the capacity for relationship, but in relationship itself. Indeed, as Stanley Grenz (2001) has argued, the ascendancy of relational ontologies has been widespread across a variety of theologies since the early 20th century, and he suggests that it is in our relationships with others, including the bodily and the sexual, extending into our communities, to which our self-understanding might better be bound. Such views are coherent with externalism in the cognitive sciences (Clark & Chalmers 1998, McCulloch 2003, Rowlands 2003, Wilson 2004, Noe 2009), the view that “the mind ain’t in the head,” but that heads and bodies are proper parts of minds. Mental phenomena are hybrids of physical events in the head and events in the world to which they are often coupled, not least of which are events both within and between other people and ourselves.

B. Attachment, Intimacy and the Boundaries of Self

Our earliest models of self and other come from the bond of love between caregiver and infant which provides support, protection, and a secure base for exploration, the dynamics of which also play out in adulthood (Bowlby 1969, Mikulincer & Shaver 2007). This includes the ways in which adults engage each other in romantic love (Hazan & Shaver 1987). Adult attachment is less about overt proximity-seeking, and more about our working models of significant others (Mikulincer & Shaver 2007). Our adult attachments may tell us as much about how we see ourselves as how we represent others. This is an implicit knowledge of self and other. Those with secure attachments identify with their attachment objects, and internalize the comforting and soothing qualities of the other. This enables the securely attached to be a secure base and safe haven for others.

Our culture commodifies everything, abstracting things from their context. Steven Winter (2011) points out that we all too often treat the self in the same bounded and commodified way. Winter focuses particular attention on the development of sexual autonomy. Sexual autonomy is not about individual privacy. Winter finds this somewhat surreal: “after all, when one is alone, one does not need a condom” (238). If sexual autonomy is a fundamental aspect of human flourishing, it is because, as Plato points out in the Symposium, eros is a sexual desire that attaches to a person. It is something that enables us to treat another being as the person they are, sex being an agency by which we respond to each other through our bodies, interested in a relationship between persons.
Indeed, in the earliest stages of adulthood, sexuality is the domain in which we learn to be responsive and responsible to the other. The successful negotiation of sexuality and, ultimately, intimacy requires one to develop skills and values such as empathy, negotiation, compromise, cooperation, recognition of and respect for the other. (242).

Intimate relationships are one of the primary ways that we seek recognition and establish identity, hence the havoc wreaked upon our sense of ourselves by the pathologies of intimacy, in narcissism, manipulation, and exploitation, or why childhood sexual abuse can destroy the very capacity for agency. An important part of what we expect from intimacy is someone who “sees me as I really am,” and one of the advantages it gives us is the comfort and confidence to be just that, ourselves.

C. Projection and Reciprocation

Our relationships are our redemption. We act on each other’s behalf, and show kindness in our bodily presence, with a touch, a kiss of peace, in holding and being held, in assurances of love, in the return of hope, in laughter and in tears. The depth psychologist Robert Johnson (1991, 1983) asserts that: “Romantic love is the single greatest energy system in the Western psyche. In our culture it has supplanted religion as the arena in which men and women seek meaning, transcendence, wholeness, and ecstasy” (1983, xi). He suggests that “falling in love” is the most powerful projection one makes, a projection of our own most noble and valuable aspects onto another human being, and they unto us. The problem is that even if there is divinity in each of us, the projections are not true, and this experience is different from the quieter and more humanly proportioned experience of loving. The intensity of the projection also obliterates the humanity of the beloved, and that while we have loosed the most sublime feeling of which we are capable, we “set ourselves up for the greatest suffering we will ever know” (1991, 66). Researchers in psychology regularly distinguish between the “passionate love” of early relationship formation, including frequent thoughts of the other, as well as idealization of the other’s positive qualities and less awareness of their flaws, and the “companionate love” more frequent in longer-term commitments, with an emphasis on mutual care, which is related to higher satisfaction in life (Diamond 2004, Hatfield & Rapson 1993, Kim & Hatfield 2004).

What may be most important, in both helping us transcend ourselves, and becoming what our narrative selves would have us pretend, as well as to come to understand ourselves better and more honestly, are our intimate relationships with others, including the enemies that often know us so well. It is in these relationships within which we may be pressed to acknowledge our self-deceptions, by the knowing of others not sharing the same motivations to sustain them, or, by those who do, holding us to the commitments made in the name of those deceptions, and making them real by enacting them. It is in such knowing relationships, where such services are often performed reciprocally, whether for our benefit or theirs, are motivated to press us, gently and lovingly, or dangerously and confrontationally, to become our own better angels, to be more than we were before. It is in these relationships that we both come to know ourselves better, in the “checking” functions of others which we may come to interiorize, and by coming to expect more from ourselves, to do better than we have ever done before.

IV. Nolo Contendere: Knowing What We Do Not Want to Know

There is shadow side of ourselves we would rather not acknowledge, but must if self-knowledge is not to devolve to wishful thinking. Failure to address our own darker sides is something which Enlightenment thinking seems to be in denial. I would like to suggest that this may constitute just one example of the sorts of things that we all too easily miss in knowing ourselves, and do so at our own peril and the peril of others, precisely the sort of thing of which “perilous times” is likely to be
constituted, for which our intimate relationships may be the best counterbalance. “Beware the Dark Side, Luke.” Ignorance, temptation, and concepts like original sin are important parts of the Western theological tradition, and its devils, but also of other traditions, the tricksters of mythology, of Coyote and Kokopelli, of Pan with his pipes, of Hermes, god of crossroads and thieves.

Terry Eagleton’s (2009) *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* proposes that, at their most convincing, the Jewish and Christian Scriptures have valuable insights into human emancipation, and much to say about vital questions like death, suffering, love, and self-dispossession. Might there be common ground between science and religion in the “tragic humanism” that Eagleton draws from theology, Freud, and Marx? What may provide a more realistic picture of human nature than “liberal humanism” in a post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima era, and a more useful signifier of the human condition, than the broken body of a political prisoner who has been tortured to death? Eagleton holds out for a more nuanced view of religion than one that reduces it to a flawed explanatory system based on unsupported beliefs about a supernatural agent. Might such a view have value in non-circular justifications of rationalism, and a temperance of the political self-contradictions of an ideology of tolerance and diversity? Most important, from the present perspective, might it help provide a critique of the self-origination, self-authorship, and self-sufficiency which presume “to pull progress and eventual perfection out of our own entrails” (from Stanley Fish’s review).

Yes, there is a “dark and troubled side, too.” But the “sunny side” to which religious communities may be built to direct us, includes family support, wedding vows, social action, and charity (Stark 1996). There are also real religious encouragements against self-deception, and our capacity to see flaws in others, like attending to the beam in your own eye before trying to take the speck out of your neighbor’s (Luke 6:42; Matthew 7:3-5). We have a shadow side of which we are often unaware, but we also have a “golden shadow,” with which we get in trouble when its projections onto others keeps us blind to their humanity, and our own overflowing cups, the banquet we may have for others, the surplus of love from which only fear, uncertainty, and lack of faith prevents us from giving freely, and loving wastefully.

References


