Hermeneutics and Negativism

Existential Ambiguities of Self-Understanding

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1. The question of self-deception

1.1. The paradox of self-deception

Self-deception is a paradoxical matter.[1] It seems impossible in principle and yet it presents an undeniable fact of human life. Classical figures such as Alexey Karenin and Homo Faber demonstrate the phenomenon of self-deception. The challenge to philosophical discussion lies in clarifying whether and how we are able to consistently conceive of self-deception, and how and why it arises. None of these questions has an obvious answer. One may even doubt whether there exist genuine cases of self-deception at all. Jean-Paul Sartre emphasized this challenge by interpreting the phenomenon of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) in terms of lying to oneself. He maintained that we are, in self-deception, confronted with an »evanescent phenomenon«, and that, despite its elusive nature, in practice self-deception takes a definite shape and is for many people a normal part of life; it is, Sartre concludes, a phenomenon that we can neither comprehend nor dismiss.[2]

But what exactly is the puzzle of self-deception? Philosophy and psychology mostly treats self-deception as an intentional act. However, it makes a difference if one is deceived by another or by oneself, or whether one is wrong about oneself. Deceiving seems related to the act of lying: just like the liar, the deceiver must know the truth that he conceals. Even in the case of unconscious dissembling, Sartre says, »I must know the truth very exactly in order to conceal it more carefully.«[3] He who lies to himself, then, must first know what he denies or conceals. Lying to oneself exemplifies the peculiar state in which, according to Allen Wood,

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[2] J.-P. SARTRE, *L'être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 88.
[3] Ibid., 87 (my translation).

»I must believe something as victim of the lie which as liar I disbelieve.«[4] The task of philosophical reflection consists in describing the phenomenon of self-deception without being taken in by its apparent conceptual contradictoriness, in a description that renders its factum consistent, comprehensive, and – not least – interesting.

1.2. How is self-deception possible?

Given the apparent contradiction of self-deception, the most immediate question tends to concern its very possibility. The most plausible way to tackle this question is to distinguish between different dimensions in self-deceptive behavior. The psychoanalytical response refers to the unconscious. The assumption is that there exist, within the subject, non-conscious parts that conceal certain insights and give rise to false beliefs. In this way deceiver and deceived, and liar and belied become separate subjects. Other approaches to the problem replace the idea of a central, unified subject with one of a set of more or less mutually independent subsystems, thus dissolving the puzzling reflexivity of deceiving one*self*. Still other conceptions deny Sartre's presumption that the deceiver really has to be clear about what he conceals, or even go as far as to argue that being a rational subject does not necessarily require being conscious of one's own mental or cognitive states.[5] Self-deception often originates in our unconscious wishes and unintentional biases. Self-deception can arise from wishful thinking, and result in »honest lies.«

1.3. Sense and function of self-deception

However, none of the aforementioned conceptions seem to adequately cope with the dilemma resulting from the paradoxical nature of self-deception in that they fail to provide a rational explanation for it. In order to understand the phenomenon, then, it seems necessary to change perspective and revise the original question. I suggest a shift in focus from the question of how self-deception is possible, to that of how it arises, and what function it has. This question is one pertaining to the sense of self-deception, that is, the question of what purpose it serves, and what place and significance it has in human life. Obviously, self-deception has an important and often ambivalent role to play in our lives. In many situations, it is helpful and beneficial to deceive oneself – be it about the world, about others, or oneself. One can be interested in holding false beliefs without being able to acknowledge or – possibly – even be conscious of it. Illusions can facilitate life, lib-

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4 A. W. Wood, »Self-Deception and Bad Faith,« in *Perspectives on Self-Deception*, ed. B. P. Mc-Laughlin and A. O. Rorty (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 207.
5 McLaughlin and Rorty, »Introduction,« in *Perspectives on Self-Deception*, 2–7.

erate the self from guilt and worries, and simplify complex situations. Self-deception not only presents an obstacle or a fallacy, but it also presents a means to make one's life endurable. Even if attaining a logical grasp of the phenomenon is impossible, it can nevertheless prove a successful problem-solving strategy. Self-deception can relieve (excessive) cognitive and moral demands, and – last but not least -can be useful, practically reasonable, and even kind and humane, despite remaining irrational, psychologically dysfunctional, and perhaps morally problematic.[6]

1.4. *What is at issue in self-deception?*

The above way of characterising self-deception changes the perspective on what is actually at issue here. At first, it seemed that self-deception was an instance of ordinary deception, and thus mainly concerned generating false beliefs or preventing the subject from acquiring true insights. It now becomes obvious that this approach is inadequate for recognizing what it is that makes self-deception a theoretical and practical problem. This is not to deny that some instances of self-deception follow this scheme. We might give in to illusions about our social status, our personal abilities or our real feelings. Seen from a more comprehensive viewpoint, however, it seems there is something else influencing the phenomenon and its typical manifestations; something that might turn out to be very important for the problem of self-deception. For the phenomenon of self-deception is not exhausted by generating and holding false beliefs about oneself, others, and the state of things. Indeed, errors of this kind can usually be corrected by reference to relevant facts, counter-evidence, or – sometimes – by showing how the errors came about. Self-deception, by contrast, appears to be a fundamental failure in the way we understand ourselves or the world. It presents a more basic deficiency in that it concerns not just our cognitive capacities, but our very selves. Distinguished from lying, self-deception comes closer to what existential philosophers refer to as inauthenticity, or existential self-deficiency. If we describe self-deception as a kind of privation,[7] it not only amounts to a shortcoming of cognition but to a failure of understanding; more precisely, to a failure of one's own strife towards understanding as such, to understanding oneself, and – finally – towards being oneself. In order to understand to what extent this kind of privation makes up an existential deficit, and thus presents a philosophical challenge, I first want to elucidate in what sense being is interwoven with understanding.

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[6] M. Löw-Beer, *Selbsttäuschung* (Freiburg: Verlag Karl Alber, 1990), 257.
[7] K. Beier, *Selbsttäuschung* (Grundthemen Philosophie) (Berlin/New York, NY: de Gruyter, 2010), 98.

2. Being Oneself and Self-Deception

2.1. Human beings: (self-)understanding animals

In philosophy, »what is human being?« is not simply one question among others. For Kant, it is the main philosophical question, to which all key questions of philosophy – what can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? – return, such that one can, as Kant says, »in principle, count all this to anthropology.«[8] Remarkably, in modern philosophy, major schools of thought – particularly hermeneutics and phenomenology – refuse to simply adopt the anthropological definition of the human being. They distance themselves both from so-called philosophical anthropology (Scheler, Plessner, Gehlen, Cassirer), which they perceive as built on empirical research in the humanities and social sciences, and from traditional metaphysics, which presupposes the existence of an invariable essence of human beings. They, instead, conceive of the human being as the »undetermined animal«[9] that gives itself its determination. Sartre and Heidegger radicalize this perspective so as to revert the relation of essence and existence.[10] Sartre justifies this move by referring to the freedom of human beings to project themselves onto who they will be. Another motif of phenomenological thought complements this pivotal idea of modern thought: that of understanding.

According to Heidegger, humans are essentially understanding beings, who develop a certain understanding of themselves and the world. Human beings yield self-descriptions by means of which they are what they are. Charles Taylor refers to the human being as the self-interpreting animal, thus emphasizing the essential nature of this feature.[11] Self-interpretation can thus be understood neither as a particular characteristic (such as upright walking or tool use), nor in terms of a metaphysical specific difference (such as reason or freedom) that defines the human being, but as a specific kind of relating to oneself by coming to an understanding of oneself. It is through a hermeneutics of the self that human beings accomplish the task of becoming who they are.[12]

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[8] I. Kant, *Logik*, in *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 9, ed. Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin/Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1923), 25 (my translation).

[9] F. Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5 (Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden), ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin/New York, NY: dtv/de Gruyter, 1980), 81 (my translation).

[10] »L'existence précède l'essence« (J.-P. Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Nagel, 1946), 21); see also M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1963), 42.

[11] C. Taylor, »Self-interpreting animals,« in C. Taylor, *Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 45–76.

[12] See E. Angehrn, »Selbstsein und Selbstverständigung. Zur Hermeneutik des Selbst,« in *Die Vermessung der Seele. Konzepte des Selbst in Philosophie und Psychoanalyse*, ed. E. Angehrn and J. Küchenhoff (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2009), 163–183.

The cognitive relation at issue here exceeds that of the subject's immediate self-awareness, which we describe as self-consciousness. It encompasses self-knowledge in the sense of factual knowledge of bodily characteristics, biographic data, and subjective attitudes as well as covert character traits, secret inclinations, and suppressed wishes. It encompasses everything, that is, that may become subject to spontaneous or methodical self-investigation. Self-knowledge in this sense is not restricted to making observations and giving causal explanations. It aims at genuine understanding, at disclosing the meaning of one's own biography, actions, and qualities; at grasping their significance for one's being oneself.

The transition from cognition to understanding and interpretation is characterized by two things. First, reflexivity: We are concerned with a kind of knowledge that differs from the objectifying cognition of external facts. This is not simply to say that, from an internal perspective, we have privileged access to our own mental states and our subjective experience. Rather, it means that we possess a first-person perspective from which to search, self-interpret, and self-describe. This genuinely first-personal perspective is related to what Taylor calls the »radical reflexivity« of the modern self.[13] It is a kind of self-understanding that concerns a person in his very essence as a human being, as well as in his irreplaceable individuality; it is an attitude of understanding that no one except for himself can seek, acquire, and maintain. Secondly, this kind of understanding comprises both a theoretical and a practical relation to the self, and can be an instance of theoretical or practical self-ascription, self-knowledge, or self-determination. In particular instances, self-description unites forms of self-analysis and self-criticism; interpretation and projection; introspection and expression. All of these aspects contribute to a kind of self-reflection by means of which I become aware of myself and – first and foremost – by means of which I become (or fail to become) myself.

These considerations confirm that self-understanding aims not only at a cognitive understanding of oneself. Rather, self-understanding strives for being, as contrasted with knowing: it is a way of finding and becoming oneself.

2.2. Limits of understanding: Hermeneutic negativism

It is, however, fully possible to embark on this route to self-knowledge and fail to reach it. The twofold aim of self-transparency and becoming oneself can be realized, or it can be missed. Just like understanding in general, self-understanding is concerned with opaque and unintelligible matters; with the fragility of sense. Facing the usual problem of hermeneutics, hermeneutics of the self is always con-

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[13] C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

cerned with the limits of sense; with understanding in tension with non-understanding.[14]

We can distinguish four ways in which we, as humans, are confronted with the boundaries of sense and the problems of understanding. Firstly, not all objects are accessible to the understanding and available for interpretation. There is an ontological distinction between beings that are in principle understandable and beings that are not. We access the world in two fundamentally different ways. On the one hand, we encounter things and states of affairs in the realm of nature, which we describe from the outside and try to explain by reference to external causes. On the other hand, we deal with objects in the human world (tools, actions, traditions, historical events), which we try to understand by their signification. The 19th–20th century neo-Kantian tradition used the ontological distinction between two types of being (nature and culture; matter and mind) as conceptual basis for the separation between the natural sciences and the humanities. We understand a conference, but we do not understand – at least not in the same sense – the structure of a crystal. In special cases, there are interferences between these realms, where the senseful and the senseless permeate one another. In the last decades, phenomenologists, deconstructivists, and cultural theorists have focused on the exteriority of sense and the materiality of communication. Meaningful phenomena are embedded in a context that we cannot make sense of in the same way but which may still affect their signification. Generally, however, we deal with external borders of the hermeneutic space, which do not interfere with our will to understand in any particular way.

Secondly, we deal with objects that in principle carry certain meaning, which, however, we are unable to understand in the concrete situation. Ancient texts, exotic cultures, and pathological behavior are all objects whose meaning we find difficult to grasp. In such cases, there exists a temporal, cultural, or social distance between production and reception of sense, which stands in the way of our understanding. The hermeneutic work aims to mediate between the production and the reception of sense by way of explications, translations, and interpretations. This is, so to speak, the normal condition of hermeneutics. An ideal comprehension would consist of a convergence between the sense as it was originally intended, and its reconstruction by the reader or observer. In what respect and by what means a complete understanding can be reached depends on the topic at hand as well as on the methical orientation with which it is approached. One may raise the question of how far we are capable of achieving a clear and full understanding at all. Many theorists hold that sense cannot be universalized, and that every interpretation encounters an undissolved remainder. Human behavior, histories, and emotions are too complex to be analyzed in their entirety. Classical hermeneutics,

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[14] See E. ANGEHRN, *Sinn und Nicht-Sinn: Das Verstehen des Menschen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

as well as critical conceptions – e. g. deconstruction – insist on the openness and infiniteness of interpretation. But even if understanding remains open and incomplete, the discussion concerns something that is in principle intelligible, i. e. something that is »not yet« understood by the reader or observer, but which decipherment, contextualization, and interpretation shall gradually help transfer into sense.

Thirdly, the limits of sense concern an expression that is unintelligible even to the subject who expresses it. The hermeneutic problem does not, in this case, concern the distance between reader and author, but the latter's distance from himself. Paul Ricœur's paradigmatic »hermeneutics of suspicion« deals with precisely this. There, Ricœur talks about utterances that appear obscure and incomprehensible to the speaking and acting subjects themselves. Examples of such distorted and obfuscated expression include pathological symptoms, ideological beliefs, and demonstrations of the will to power, as described by Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche – a trio Ricœur refers to as the »masters of suspicion.« Meanwhile, these types of expression indicate a more general issue in hermeneutics, namely that we are strangers to ourselves; that utterances are opaque in themselves. To a certain extent, this defines the normal condition of speaking and understanding. We encounter problems not only in our communication with others, but also in self-reflection, and in trying to understand our own feelings and intentions. For Gadamer, the gap between meaning and saying, the speaker's search for the right words, and our failure to completely express our intentions constitute the innermost core of the hermeneutic problem. In concrete situations, both limits of sense, not understanding oneself, and not understanding the other, can interfere with and reinforce one another. A lack of transparency can occur in the communication *between* subjects, but also on the speaker's side, or the hearer's, and it is obvious that this manifold opacity aggravates the difficulty of understanding. Someone who is unclear about themselves will have even more difficulty unravelling the alienness of the other.

Finally, there is a fourth negation of sense, where an utterance is not only unintelligible to others or in itself, but where it directly opposes understanding and meaning as such. Examples of this include manifest nonsense, absurd sentences, and contradictions in speech or action. However, from the perspective of hermeneutics, the problem concerns not only, nor primarily, linguistic inconsistencies and theoretical rule violations. The negation of sense as addressed here refers, rather, to a practical negation. There are states of affairs that – due to their intrinsic negativity – can be neither justified, rationalized, or even understood. Ever since its conception, this problem has continued to pose a crucial challenge and provocation to rational thinking in theology, anthropology, and metaphysics. Every attempt to rationally explain the origin of evil, be it *malum physicum* or *malum morale*, as suffering, or as sin, seemed to result into an insolvable aporia. The limits of sense, however, appear more radical than the pure impossibility of a rational explanation or justification of evil. The limits already occur as a limit of lan-

guage; in the inability to express anxiety and shame, to remember, and to articulate extreme suffering. Victims of violence fall silent, and traumatic experiences are expulsed from consciousness. The most basic hermeneutic challenge consists in regaining speech, and the most urgent task of negative dialectics is, according to Adorno, to »lend a voice to suffering.«[15]

Now, all these limitations of speech and understanding are lodged in self-understanding. They indicate deficiencies that are not just cognitive in nature. For the subject, being situated on a continuum between the poles of understanding and non-understanding means being affected in their very state of being. The limits of self-understanding originate partly in the subject's constitutive limitedness, partly in contingent restraints, and partly in fundamental problems of existence. There exists in us a fundamental structural inability to achieve encompassing transparency and rational comprehension of the self; a blind spot of (self-)knowledge that precludes full self-transparency. This structural boundary is reinforced by our human dependency on historical and social conditions, as well as by our particular physical and psychological constitutions. No one is capable of becoming (fully) aware of his or her own specific existence. We have only partial access to our biography, our cultural condition, and our affective moods. What we are and what we feel, how we became what we are, and even what we really mean and want is never entirely available to us. At the same time, our efforts to understand ourselves may fail due to negative experiences or repressed parts of our character that we refuse to assimilate into our self-image. Finally, the problem of self-understanding is radicalised when we expand the concern beyond the subject matter and into the understanding as such. That is, apart from the obscurity of the subject matter, also the subject's own constitution resists understanding.

We are here concerned with a kind of self-inhibition for which the subject bears responsibility – whether it derives from inertia, internal resistance, or self-made inability. This is, after all, not a deficit in the capacity for self-understanding, but in one's striving for understanding oneself, which – in extreme cases – turns into a denial of even trying to understand oneself. In such cases, self-understanding is not endangered by the withdrawal of the subject-matter from understanding, but by the internal ambivalence of self-understanding. What is endangered here is not only the subject's (self-)knowledge, but the subject's very being. The denial of understanding itself stands for the denial of being oneself.

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[15] TH. W. ADORNO, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. ASHTON (London: Routledge, 1973), 17; see also ibid., 362.

3. Self-deception and self-deficiency

3.1. Self-deception and akrasia

The above aspects of self-deception reveal its relation to another traditional problem of philosophy: the problem of *akrasia*, or weakness of the will. This relationship is not confined to the two phenomena sharing a nearly unintelligible paradoxical structure while presenting a contrasting familiarity in everyday life. More importantly, the relation becomes visible when we analyze self-deception against the background of the failure to understand oneself and when we find this failure to be rooted in a weakness or denial of the will.

So far, my analysis has gradually developed the failure of understanding from not understanding to being unwilling to understand and, finally, to being unwilling to understand oneself. The failure of understanding thus leads to a kind of reflective unwillingness, more precisely to a contradictoriness within the subject's will, whereby the subject simultaneously does and does not will. Practical contradictoriness may seem less problematic than its theoretical counterpart since it makes more sense to have contradicting desires and intentions[16] than to make contradicting judgments and assertions. On second glance, however, contradictoriness of the will presents a point of existential distress as much as a conceptual paradox. *Akrasia* is not about a tension between intentions with mutually incompatible content, but about a dissociation of the will. In a sense, it concerns a performative contradiction within one and the same disposition of the will.[17] The same goes for self-deception: it, too, is not primarily concerned with contradictory contents, i. e. with our meaning or wanting something whilst making ourselves believe something else, but with an internal dissonance of the will, the inconsistency of which is aggravated in the case of self-understanding. For in this case, one's (un)willingness concerns not a contingent aim, like quitting smoking, but something fundamental to our very existence. Willingness to understand and willingness to be are forms of willing that constitute the essence of human being. Nietzsche's suspicion that man is not at all interested in truth, and Heidegger's remark that the refusal to know complies with our everyday way of being both refer to counter-tendencies to the fundamental tendency of life, which is directed at truth and knowledge.[18]

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[16] A. W. Wood refers to Zerlina's aria »Vorrei e non vorrei« in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (Wood, »Self-Deception and Bad Faith,« 216).

[17] An analogous figure is Hegel's conception of the criminal whose deed is the basis of equally negating and not negating, or acknowledging and not acknowledging, respectively, a particular person's legal status. Accordingly, the function of punishment consists in dissolving this contradiction (apart from restitution and retribution). See G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. by A. W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §§ 82–83, 97–100.

[18] See B. Merker, *Selbsttäuschung und Selbsterkenntnis. Zu Heideggers Transformation der Phänomenologie Husserls* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1988).

3.2. Existential deficiency and self-alienation

Having traced self-deception back to a basic reversion of the will, it seems less like a cognitive deficit, and more like an existential weakness; a fundamental failure of the human being. The reversion sees the subject becoming at odds with himself, eventually resulting in self-alienation. In this state, the subject approximates what existentialists have called inauthenticity, and what philosophers in related fields refer to as a subject's disagreement with himself; a fundamental self-deficiency. The questions are what does this deficiency consist in, where does it originate, and what does it mean for human life?

According to Heidegger, inauthenticity is the normal condition of the human being, a condition, he says, that obtains »proximally and for the most part.« Although Heidegger insists that his talk of everydayness and inauthenticity does not carry a pejorative sense, the negative connotations are obvious in that this state is the opposite of the ideal of existing »authentically.«[19] The reason that we do not meet this ideal is either that authenticity is a constitutive or, alternatively, a contingent feature of human life. Inauthenticity is an essential feature of human existence inasmuch as it reflects the finiteness of human beings, and their dependency on physical and mental, historical and social conditions. The imperfection and inauthenticity of human existence is constitutive of its anthropological nature. In contrast, self-deception seems contingent whenever it derives from additional, contingent circumstances. Critics of ideology interpret the delusion of consciousness as an effect of being mastered by another, while psychoanalysts investigate it as an effect of internal pathologies of the mind. Experiences of the reality of negativity, of illness, violence, and injustice can deprive the subject of the possibility of coming to terms with himself and of making sense of the world. Philosophers of history and culture understand the disintegration of the individual in the context of a social crisis or an encompassing decline of civilisation. Nonetheless, the question remains how far the grounds for the inadequacy and inherent falsity of existence lie within the subject himself.

3.3. The origin of self-alienation

Basically, this is the case if non-identity is regarded part of the ontology of the subject. Kathi Beier maintains that the phenomenon of self-deception can be adequately explicated only in ontological, rather than epistemological or psychological, terms.[20] Sartre trenchantly points to self-deception being a matter of ontology

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[19] Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §§ 27, 35–38.
[20] Beier, *Selbsttäuschung*, 5. The key to her explication is the concept of privation, specifically that the phenomenon of self-deception logically, explanatorily, and normatively depends on another one, namely the concept of self-determination.

when he proceeds from the question »what Man must be in his being if it ought to be possible for him to deny himself«[21] and responds that the necessary condition of inauthenticity consists in »that, primordially, I am and am not what I am.«[22] His classical and obstinately repeated thesis reads that the human being is a being »that is what it is not, and is not what it is.«[23] In how far such an answer satisfactorily elucidates the phenomenon is open to doubt. The paradoxical behavior at hand is traced to a paradoxical essence. Importantly, Sartre interprets the implicit negation not only as a constative, but also a performative one that is present in inauthenticity as self-denial, or as flight from one's own being.[24] The ontological structure of the subject ensures that (self-)consciousness is not only inauthentic, but also in perpetual danger of falling prey to inauthenticity.[25] We are concerned with a tendency that is due not just to an ontological weakness, but to a tendency that has ethical implications, and presents a danger to what human beings want and ought to be, and not merely to their projects. In a sense, Heidegger apprehends the ontological-ethical perspective against a religious background and paraphrases it in religious terms. Instead of speaking simply of a human danger or a constitutive »inclination« to fall into inauthenticity, he speaks of *temptation*.[26] Although Heidegger explicitly emphasizes that this must not be understood in a religious sense, the question concerning the grounds of inauthenticity is associated with the question concerning the origin of evil.[27] The danger is replaced with the »continuous temptation« to fall: the human being, says Heidegger, is essentially »temptable,« that is, susceptible to the propensity for evil as Kant describes it.[28] The Christian tradition's cycle of temptation, falling, and redemption is inscribed in the deep structure of subjectivity; in the contrasts between falling and authenticity, concealment and truth. In a certain analogy to Sartre's paradoxical formula, *The Epistle to the Romans* describes the contradictoriness of the will and locates its origin in evil: »For what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I;« »Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.«[29]

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[21] SARTRE, *L'être et le néant*, 85 (my translation).

[22] Ibid., 106 (my translation).

[23] Ibid., 97 (my translation).

[24] Ibid., 85.

[25] Ibid., 111.

[26] M. HEIDEGGER, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2002), 20.

[27] M. HEIDEGGER, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles: Einführung in die phänomenologische Forschung* (Wintersemester 1921/22), in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 61, ed. W. BRÖCKER and K. BRÖCKER-OLTMANNS (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985), 154.

[28] HEIDEGGER, *Sein und Zeit*, 177 (my translation).

[29] Epistle to the Romans 7:15, 7:17.

3.4. Anxiety (Angst) as the origin of self-deficiency – the challenge to freedom

These and other dogmatic descriptions remain conceptually unsatisfactory insofar as they derive the negative from the negative. Temptation refers to the devil as the principle and instigator of evil. The same goes for considerations that, referring to the later Freud's drive theory, declare the death instinct or the destructive drive the core of the willing subject's self-inversion. Such conceptions are supposed to fill the explanatory gap that opens up when we speak of anthropological weakness and finiteness, which can only explain the possibility – not the actuality – of evil and self-destructive behavior. Ricœur finds a similar gap in the anthropology of fallibility, which comprehends only the disposition, not the act, of evil. The act remains theoretically unexplainable and can only be explicated by way of narratives of the Fall of Man and the symbols of evil.[30]

It is possible to carry out an analogous hermeneutic reflection on the basis of Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's respective theories of angst. Angst is here inextricably intertwined with the problem of freedom while simultaneously entangled with the origin of (self-)deficiency.[31] Angst originates in the experience of freedom, the confrontation with indeterminacy, and the unfixedness of the possibilities onto which human beings project themselves. Generally associated with a lack of determinacy and diffusion of boundaries, angst is in its core directed towards insecurity. The temptation consists in escaping this fundamental uncertainty by means of determination. The attempt to escape from freedom is the primordial ground of self-deficiency, and leads to inauthenticity. The original temptation aims at our arranging ourselves within the actual world in order to escape from that basic fear. Authentic existence thus requires that we withstand this fear and take responsibility in the face of contingency, confusion, and instability.

The relation between fear and freedom refers back to self-deception. It is obvious that self-deception is often rooted in fear. Phenomenally, self-deception appears as a motivated, though unintentional, disguise of unpleasant facts. Experiences of pain, shame, and fear can lead us to close our eyes to facts and soothe ourselves with false assumptions. This suppression and cultivation of illusion brings reassurance, relief, and release. Heidegger holds that the general »burden« of *Dasein*, who is responsible for itself and »has to be,« causes *Dasein* to for the most part avoid self-disclosure.[32] *Dasein* has even more reason to do so if it has to cope with suffering and guilt, or has to find orientation in a meaningless world. This picture

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[30] P. Ricœur, *Finitude et culpabilité I: L'homme faillible, II: La symbolique du mal* (Paris: Aubier, 1960).

[31] S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* (Kierkegaard's Writings, vol. 8), ed. and trans. R. Thomte and B. A. Anderson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980). The subtitle of this work of Kierkegaard explicitly anxiety to the problem of original sin: *A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*.

[32] See Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 134.

presents self-deception as the paradigmatic manifestation of inauthenticity. It not only waives the challenge of negativity but denies it, replacing it with a false image of the world and the self.

Still, there is more at issue here than surmounting particular instances of suffering and contradiction. The deep structure of the phenomenon is framed by fear less of this or that particular danger or lack of sense than of the chasm of one's own freedom. The most fundamental kind of self-alienation threatening human beings consists in alienation from their own freedom. This is not overcome by Marx's or Hegel's suggested removal of objectification, and undoing of externalisation. This kind of self-alienation takes place within the boundaries of the self, before any kind of externalisation can occur; it represents a kind of deficiency that resides at the very heart of subjectivity.

Let me try to draw a conclusion. The train of thought I have developed here has led us from self-deception to self-understanding and its failure, to unwillingness, and finally to the fear of freedom. Along this road, I have laid out a fundament and a core element of self-alienation, both in a double sense.

On the one hand, the burden and fear of freedom was shown to be the problem that actuates human self-alienation. Fear of freedom is the foundation of all self-estrangement, since it defines the deepest ground of a subject's fear of itself.

On the other hand, the problem of understanding and self-deception brought me to consider self-estrangement. Although self-alienation could consist in alienation from one's primary needs, duties, and own nature, its core still lies in alienation from self-understanding and – ultimately – from the willingness to understand oneself. This kind of self-understanding forms the basis for all other dimensions of self-relatedness, self-projection, as well as acceptance of one's own biography, characteristics, feelings, and inclinations. Whenever a human being's fear threatens their willingness to understand themselves, a kind of estrangement takes effect that is prior to all other kinds of self-alienation. Self-deception presents not only a paradigmatic case, but a core of self-alienation.