

Spiritual Formation and Self-Deception: Expanding the Scope of Self-Awareness

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What is Self-Deception?

- Simply stated: Lying to ourselves
- The rejection of any information that would damage or destroy the ideas upon which our lives are built.
- “An external masking-out of something that threatens our self-image.”
- “Fictitious stories we tell ourselves to maintain a positive image in the face of our flaws.”
- “The problem of not knowing you have a problem”
- Our foolish attempt to lie to ourselves, to others, and to God.

“In self deception, I am both the deceived and the deceiver. I am deceiving myself if I am managing my beliefs with no regard for the truth. I am trying to manage my beliefs, but I am not trying to move myself along toward *true* belief.” Gregg A. Ten Elsof, *I Told Me So*, 25.

A Working Definition: Self-deception is a process where we modify reality so that: (1) troublesome emotions are avoided; and (2) our disordered goals might be achieved. Note: Our disordered goals are often unconsciously driven by the need to present ourselves and/or our organizations in the best possible light.

Catchphrases and Sentiments

- “You’re fooling yourself”
- “I was willfully ignorant.”
- “Don’t confuse me with the facts, my mind is already made up.”
- “They don’t know that they don’t know.”
- “He lives a very ‘compartmentalized’ life”
- “Denial is not just a river in Egypt.”

In Literature & Pop Music

“Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others. And having no respect he ceases to love.” Father Zossima to Fyodor Pavlovich in Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 43-44.

- “A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest”
- “He's as blind as he can be, just sees what he wants to see”
- “If loving you is wrong, I don't want to be right”

Varieties of Self-Deception

- Procrastination
- Attention management; confirmation bias; appeal to selective evidence
- Groupthink; homophily; echo chambers
- Face saving (Western culture)?

Closely Associated with . . .

- Pride
- Self-sufficiency
- Shame/guilt/fear
- Hardening of the heart
- Hypocrisy
- Rationalizing sin
- Addiction
- Spiritual immaturity
- Character deficiency

“ . . . a life [of self-deception] is controlled by inertia, habit, bent of character: stuff we really don't pay much attention to, if any at all, and in some cases "stuff" we don't even recognize or admit is a part of "us." Dallas Willard, Foreword, *I Told Me So*, x.

A Biblical Summary

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9).

“The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rock, in your lofty dwelling, who say in your heart, “Who will bring me down to the ground?”” (Obad 1:3 cf. Jer. 49:16).

“Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise” (1 Cor. 3:18).

“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (Jas. 1:22).

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

“For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself” (Gal. 6:3 cf. 1 Cor 13:2).

“But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13).

Note: From the aforementioned texts we may conclude that self-deception occurs when . . .

- We depend on our own strength and ingenuity rather than God's resources
- We minimize the thoughts of God and the power of the Cross
- We believe that we are more spiritually advanced than we actually are
- We forget to practice the Word of God we have heard
- We convince ourselves that we have done all that God requires in our personal holiness
- We believe that we can depart from the living God without suffering consequences

In the History of Christian Thought

Beginning with the Desert Fathers, self-deception has been a subset of spiritual discernment.

"Prelest," or "spiritual delusion" is a developed tradition within Eastern Orthodoxy (i.e., imagination, ecstasy, and rigid opinions)

Gregory the Great (540-604) recognized that vices could masquerade as virtues: "greed disguises itself as frugality, and wastefulness is thought to be generosity... and excessive haste is confused with the efficiency of promptness, while tardiness is taken for serious deliberation." *Book of Pastoral Care*, 76.

Self-deception is sometimes discussed under the topic of the "noetic effects" of sin (i.e., the ways that sin affects human thinking).

The Truth of the Matter

"Spiritual deception is the state of all men without exception, and it has been made possible by the fall of our original parents. All of us are subject to spiritual deception. Awareness of this fact is the greatest protection against it. Likewise, the greatest spiritual deception of all is to consider oneself free from it." St. Ignatius Brianchaninov (1807-1867), "On Spiritual Deception," *Orthodox Life*, July-August 1980.

We believe that sanctification is a growth into holiness that involves a movement from foolishness (Rom. 1:21, 31; Eph. 4:15-18) toward wisdom and discernment.

What We Have Observed

- Emotional avoiding: Troublesome emotions such as: shame, fear, guilt, sadness, or anger.

<p><i>Note:</i> A typical human response to pain is diversion, or a distracting of oneself.</p>

- True Self/False Self - “our preferred view of self”
- The ways we tell our stories--”getting the story wrong”
- Denial of desire/guilt
- Living in reality
- Overconfidence (as pride) (unwillingness to admit ignorance)
- Not listening well (as pride)
- Self-righteousness (as pride, insecurity)
- Defensiveness (as fear)
- Protection of power interests (e.g., delusions of dominance; avoidance of vulnerability)
- Limited Life Experience: Without the benefit of lived experience, we are all prone to simplistic, superficial assessments. *Part of what elder maturity entails is the ability to see the complexity of life.*
- Politics & Race 2020

As we seek to be spiritually formed, how do we avoid self-deception?

The invitation

- Love - Tainted and defective motives can produce intellectual darkness. “The more one loves, the more he sees ultimate reality. Love puts one into contact with God and with men as nothing else does. The person who loves fully sees deeply” (Thomas Dubay, *Authenticity*, 38).

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (cf. 1 John 4:7-8).

- Humility: acquiring a knowledge of the self that corresponds to reality (i.e., free of delusion).

“Anyone who hopes to detect the mind of God, to hear him, to learn his ways and to probe his will must expect to be surprised, even to be contradicted. Most of us would expect that the way to the mind of Infinite Truth is diligent study, a searching out of wisdom, ancient and new. This is a way, but it is not *the* way. The first condition for detecting the divine mind is just what we would not expect: smallness, unpretentiousness, apparent weakness” (Dubay, 125).

Psalm 119:130: “The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.”

“Humility is a condition for discernment not only because the simple see, that is, because there is a readiness in their very persons, but also because God chooses to bestow on them what he denies to the arrogant. . . . he favors the little because they are honest. They are real. God loves realism” (Dubay, 127).

“Though the LORD is on high, he looks upon the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar” (Ps 138:6)

“But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:2).

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (Jas.4:6).

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5).

- Authenticity (i.e., honesty, fidelity, reliability, trustworthiness, genuineness)

Note: A humble heart doesn’t always come by means of insight. Disruption and the disorienting dilemmas of life can bring us to a place of brokenness before God.

- Vulnerability (i.e. admitting weaknesses)
- Taking a “wider vision” (i.e., a patient, fuller investigative effort)

“. . . the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind.

No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this; nor is it in the nature of human intellect to become wise in any other manner. The steady habit of correcting and completing his own opinion by collating it with those of others, so far from causing doubt and hesitation in carrying it into practice, is the only stable foundation for a just reliance on it." John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 17.

"To know human nature as fully as possible, it is necessary to explore it from many different vantages, including the biological (genetic, hormonal, neurological, and morphological), [ethnic], environmental (physical, interpersonal, economic, cultural), behavioral, cognitive, affective, motivational, volitional, biographical, characterological, ethical and religious However, knowing things like God knows them requires seeing as much of their multidimensional complexity as possible and also means understanding them in their hierarchical interrelations." Eric L. Johnson, "Christ, The Lord of Psychology," *Journal of Psychology & Theology*, 25:1 (1997): 24.

- Seeking to know, as best as possible, our unconscious motivations--"deceitful desires" (Eph. 4:22)
- Awareness of where we are in a process of purification
- Communal input with a goal of "relational holiness"

Questions for Further Reflection

- Am I willing to allow others to use the Johari Window with me?
- Are there areas of my life where I find self-deception necessary?
- Who, besides my closest family members, best knows my blindspots and can point them out?
- Where am I blind to how my power (i.e., influence) is being used in a disordered way in my life?
- Am I vulnerable to any of the following vices?: laziness, shamelessness, gluttony, fear, greed, envy, deceit, pride, anger?
- Which of your deepest desires and longings might be deceiving you (cf. Eph. 4:22)?