

Pride and the Power of Self-Deception

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“If we say we are without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

I John 1:8

These words find their way easily into sermons, usually as a pointed reminder of the reality of sin in our lives, and of our need for repentance before God. Yet could it be that this familiarity has prevented us from reflecting on a deeper and perhaps more challenging message of the text?

It is taken for granted in today’s “therapeutic society” that we can and do deceive ourselves. Indeed, pop psychology has encouraged us to ascribe any number of behaviors to self-deception. We casually remark that a friend is “deceiving herself” by seeming to ignore a truth that is all too obvious. Or we may hear that someone is “self-deceived,” or perhaps “in denial,” about a shortcoming or failure that he will not admit.

No doubt these expressions have meaning for both speaker and hearer, yet a moment’s reflection suggests that the phenomenon of self-deception may be anything but easily understood. How is it really possible to deceive oneself? Can a person know what he or she does *not* know? Would a rational person actually believe a self-directed lie? Why would anyone *choose* to be deceived, especially about one’s own sinfulness or moral character? Such questions suggest that self-deception is a theological concept that deserves more of our attention.

The self-deception that obscures moral awareness has been analyzed by philosophers (e.g., Jean-Paul Sartre) and psychologists (e.g., Sigmund Freud) as a problem of self-relatedness. Although theology has given the matter far less explicit attention, its perspective can contribute much to our understanding by showing that self-deception is a more complex problem involving one’s relatedness to both self and God.

John Calvin makes this connection, arguing that “it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face.... For, because all of us are inclined by nature to hypocrisy, a kind of empty image of righteousness in place of righteousness itself abundantly satisfies us.”¹ Ignorance of oneself is more “detestable” than ignorance of external affairs, because it is self-ignorance “by which, when making decisions in necessary matters, we miserably deceive and even blind ourselves!”²

A more recent thinker, Anthony Thiselton, finds theological support for Freud’s analysis of the human capacity for using deceptive, self-protective, and manipulative devices to suppress or disguise one or more sets of opposing interests. He cites a range of biblical insights including those of Paul, in I Cor. 3:18; the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, 3:13; and John, in I John 1:8.

Freud’s emphasis on self-deception, then, entirely coheres with Christian theology. As [Paul] Ricoeur comments, this necessitates a hermeneutics of the self as ‘text’ for the human subject, which, contrary to Descartes and to secular modernity, ‘is never the subject one thinks it is.’ Christian

theology also coheres with Freud's analysis of the self as falling victim to forces which it does not fully understand and which certainly it cannot fully control. The postmodern self at this point stands closer to biblical realism than to the innocent confidence of modernity.³

Helmut Thielicke, however, cautions that self-deception cannot be fully grasped without recognizing that it is motivated by the urge to deny one's sinfulness before God, not just before oneself. "It would be wrong and overfacile to give a mere psychological explanation of this phenomenon. . . ."⁴ He also warns against attributing too much influence to deterministic forces beyond one's control, contending that it is actually human freedom that makes self-deception possible. Conversely, it is through the freedom to enter into the God-relation ("fellowship") that one receives forgiveness and, thus, loses interest in "denying sin or in trying to falsify its true nature." Forgiveness allows one to be "realistic" and "whole,"⁶ rather than obsessed with "moral self-preservation which is supremely concerned that the balance of our actions should be positive, and which is thus forced to resort to every possible manipulation and reinterpretation."⁷

If this is true, the power and prevalence of self-deception in the Christian life must not be underestimated. Stanley Hauerwas goes so far as to say it is "the rule rather than the exception in our lives."

Contrary to our dominant presumptions, we are seldom conscious of what we are doing or who we are. We choose to stay ignorant of certain engagements with the world, for to put them all together often asks too much of us, and sometimes threatens the more enjoyable engagements.⁸

He concludes, "To be is to be rooted in self-deception."⁹

A Biblical Account of Self-Deception

The scriptures attest to the power and depth of self-deception, warning that "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt" (Jer. 17:9). A compelling illustration of self-deception may be found in the account of David and Uriah in the second book of Samuel, though this text is seldom preached with self-deception as the primary message.

The story is familiar. King David lusts for the beautiful Bathsheba. Her husband, Uriah, is away from home with the king's army, so David summons her to his palace where he satisfies his desires. Not long afterward, she finds that she is pregnant. Calling Uriah home, David hopes in vain that Uriah will sleep with Bathsheba and thus believe that he is the father of the child. The plan fails, of course, and a desperate David sends Uriah back to the front lines of battle with orders to his commanders to make sure he is killed. Upon receiving word of Uriah's death, David marries Bathsheba, and she gives birth to a son.

As much as a year passes, and by all accounts David has an easy conscience—that is, until the prophet Nathan enters the story. He is well aware of David's murderous scheme, a fact suggesting that others—perhaps many others—knew the truth about Uriah's demise. Wisely, Nathan does not confront David directly with accusations of murder and adultery. Instead he tells him a simple parable about a rich man who stole

a poor man's beloved lamb.

Listening to the story, David burns with anger against the rich man and declares, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity" (2 Sam. 12:5-6). Nathan's famous answer is the penetrating statement that speaks to all self-deceivers, "*You are the man.*" David can no longer avoid the truth as Nathan proceeds to recite the details of his adulterous and murderous affair. "I have sinned against the Lord," he confesses in verse 13. David avows his deeds as his own, admitting even to himself that he is guilty.

Bishop Joseph Butler, a British theologian and philosopher of the eighteenth century, shows us that David was self-deceived, that he managed to "delude himself" about his guilt until Nathan forced him to confront the truth that he already knew in his heart:

Hence it is that many men seem perfect strangers to their own characters. They think, and reason, and judge quite differently upon any matter relating to themselves, from what they do in cases of others where they are not interested [i.e., the story of the ewe lamb]. Hence it is that one hears people exposing follies, which they themselves are eminent for; and talking with great severity against particular vices, which, if all the world be not mistaken, they themselves are notoriously guilty of.¹⁰

Butler defines self-deception as deliberate self-ignorance and "self-partiality" motivated by inordinate pride. Those who deceive themselves "will not allow themselves to think how guilty they are, [they] explain and argue away their guilt to themselves; and though they do really impose upon themselves in some measure, yet there are none of them but have . . . at least an implicit suspicion where the weakness lies, and what part of their behaviour they wish unknown or forgotten forever."¹¹

How did David argue away his guilt? We do not know. Perhaps he told himself that as king he was above the law, or that his love for Bathsheba was so great that it outweighed other considerations, or that sending Uriah to the front lines was acceptable because Uriah was a soldier and such is the risk of warfare.

Butler emphasizes that the evil of self-deception goes well beyond its ability to obscure one's sinfulness:

[It is] vicious and immoral. It is unfairness; it is dishonesty; it is falseness of heart; and is therefore so far from extenuating guilt, that it is itself the greatest of all guilt in proportion to the degree it prevails; for it is a corruption of the whole moral character in its principle. . . . And whilst men are under the power of this temper, in proportion still to the degree they are so, they are fortified on every side against conviction: and when they hear the vice and folly of what is in truth their own course of life, exposed in the justest and strongest manner, they often will assent to it, and even carry the matter further; persuading themselves, one does not know how, but some way or other persuading themselves, that they are out of these, and that it hath no relation to them.¹²

The self-deceiver rejects the God-relation and the truth that it may reveal. Self-deception often entails suppressing or evading knowledge of the truth in order to maintain false beliefs that support a desired self-image. David may have tried to deceive others and even God about his sin; however, the biblical account suggests that he succeeded only in deceiving himself. Soren Kierkegaard asks, “Can a man deceive God?” He answers, “No, in relation to God a man can only deceive himself. For the God-relationship is the highest good in such a way that he who would deceive God frightfully deceives himself.”¹³

The Irony of Self-Deception

Despite Butler’s assertions about the immorality of self-deception, the story of David and Uriah demonstrates a great irony: self-deception often results from one’s desire to think of oneself as a moral person. In other words, a person who takes his or her moral commitments seriously may actually be more prone to engage in self-deception in order to maintain a positive self-image in the face of personal deeds that are inconsistent with those commitments. A king with no respect for moral law or obligations to others would have no reason to deceive himself about adultery or murder. Or, as Hauerwas notes, “a cynic is less vulnerable to self-deception than a conscientious person.”¹⁴

The problem, of course, is that the desire to see oneself as sinless cannot be satisfied for long without a measure of self-deception. And to the extent that self-deception helps us succeed, we merely blind ourselves to those shortcomings that most need our attention. St. Augustine observed, “My sin was all the more incurable because I thought I was not a sinner.”¹⁵ Consider Calvin’s analysis:

I am quite aware how much more pleasing is that principle which invites us to weigh our good traits rather than to look upon our miserable want and dishonor, which ought to overwhelm us with shame. There is, indeed, nothing that man’s nature seeks more eagerly than to be flattered. Accordingly, when his nature becomes aware that its gifts are highly esteemed, it tends to be unduly credulous about them. It is thus no wonder that the majority of men have erred so perniciously in this respect. For since blind self-love is innate in all mortals, they are most freely persuaded that nothing inheres in themselves that deserves to be considered hateful.¹⁶

We thus conclude that self-deception about one’s moral character is most frequently motivated by pride. No recent thinker offers a more insightful analysis of this than Reinhold Niebuhr as he identifies four types of pride—the pride of power, intellectual pride, moral pride, and spiritual pride.¹⁷ He adeptly demonstrates that the self’s own pretensions—of power, knowledge or righteousness—are always justified through deceptions that allow us to believe inordinate claims about ourselves.¹⁸

Niebuhr sees self-deception as a prideful attempt to make oneself or one’s actions what they are not, to accept a false belief that supports one’s desired self-image, while simultaneously suppressing the truth about oneself that does not conform to the desired image. Self-deception, then, is both a consequence and a facilitator of pride. That is, pride is the cause of self-deception, and self-deception is necessary¹⁹ for the maintenance of pride in the face of realities that contradict one’s desired beliefs.

Moreover, because the truth is never wholly obscured by the self-deceptive project, the self never quite accepts its own lies. Thus, we are reminded of David as Niebuhr describes the contributing role of interpersonal deception in achieving and maintaining self-deception. “The self must at any rate deceive itself first. Its deception of others is partly an effort to convince itself against itself.”²⁰

The desperate effort to deceive others must, therefore, be regarded as, on the whole, an attempt to aid the self in believing a pretension it cannot easily believe because it was itself the author of the deception. If others will only accept what the self cannot quite accept, the self as deceiver is given an ally against the self as deceived. All efforts to impress our fellowmen, our vanity, our display of power or of goodness must, therefore, be regarded as revelations of the fact that sin increases the insecurity of the self by veiling its weakness with veils which may be torn aside. The self is afraid of being discovered in its nakedness behind these veils and of being recognized as the author of the veiling deceptions.²¹

Self-Deception Defined Theologically

The theological thinkers consulted above would concur with much of the philosophical and psychological literature concerning the nature of self-deception. For example, there is considerable agreement that self-deception involves a willful, but not necessarily conscious, choice to hold a belief about oneself or one’s situation in reality, while having at least a veiled awareness that the belief is not true. The self-deceiver achieves this by ensuring that his or her knowledge of the truth is less accessible than the false belief. This may involve a deliberate ignorance or self-partiality that is maintained by refusing to turn an eye toward information that would dispute one’s preferred conception of oneself or one’s situation. And for this reason, it often includes a disregard of reproof and instruction.

We have noted that self-deception makes it possible for people to have an easy conscience, even when their actions or beliefs actually conflict with their moral or theological commitments. Moreover, self-deception often involves interpersonal deception, as the self-deceiver seeks to create allies who, having been deceived, can help to reinforce the deceiver’s false beliefs.

We have also seen that the principal motivation for self-deception is pride. In the fields of philosophy and psychology, pride is synonymous with self-esteem and self-sufficiency, which are deemed to be worthy goals. Theologians, however, withdraw this approval in cases where self-deception fosters a false view of one’s character or moral condition. At such times, pride is seen as an idolatrous self-love that denies the truth of one’s sinfulness, creatureliness, and need for repentance and new life in relationship with God.

Theologically speaking, self-deception is of deeper significance than the mere acts of holding conflicting beliefs, avoiding unwanted information, or protecting self-esteem. To attempt to be what one is not, to willfully believe a falsehood about oneself or one’s situation, is to attempt a deception before God who is the truth. Self-deception, therefore, is the handmaiden of pride. The false “cover story” of self-sufficiency enables one to deny or disavow one’s need for God. “For if those who are nothing think they are something they deceive themselves” (Gal. 6:3). “This is the sin

of Adam,” Karl Barth reminds us:

We are all, incorrigibly, those who know better—and, therefore, because grace is the truth revealed and known to us, we are all incorrigible liars. The consequences follow. Falsehood is self-destruction. Because man and the world live under the dominion of sin, lying to God and deceiving themselves, they live in self-destruction.²²

Can We Overcome Self-Deception?

This understanding of self-deception’s motivation suggests a clue as to how it might be defeated. Admittedly this is no small challenge, especially given the great capacity of human beings to employ self-deception in everyday life, sometimes in ways that are legitimate and psychologically useful. Consider, for example, the terminally ill patient who convinces herself that she is getting better in order to muster the courage to get out of bed in the morning. Or the father who truly believes his are the most and beautiful and intelligent children on earth. There might occasionally be some benefit in fostering such illusions.

It seems only natural that we rely on this capacity to avoid the unpleasant truth about our own sin. Indeed, the more one desires to be a “good Christian,” the more painful it may be to avow one’s moral shortcomings. An antidote to self-deception, then, must begin with dispelling the prideful notion of self-sufficiency—the appealing, but inevitably frustrating, belief that we are capable of living so well that little, if any, of God’s grace is needed to sustain us.

Against the backdrop of this human reality, Calvin argues, we must first see ourselves as God sees us if we are to lead lives free of self-deception. Does God see the sin in our lives? Yes, all of it. But as believers we can be thankful that the story does not end there. God cleanses us of sin, loving us for who we *truly* are—forgiven people, created in God’s image and “adopted as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:7). Is there any healthier or more realistic self-esteem than this? Perhaps we can learn to live without the crutch of self-deception as we begin to see ourselves through God’s eyes.

Notes

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of The Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), Book I, Ch. II, 37-38.

² *Ibid*, Book II, Ch. 1, 241.

³ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 129.

⁴ Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, vol. 1, ed. William H. Lazareth (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 563.

⁵ *Ibid*, 604.

⁶ *Ibid*, 605.

⁷ *Ibid*, 604.

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 82

⁹ *Ibid*, 95.

¹⁰ Joseph Butler, “Upon Self-Deceit,” in *Fifteen Sermons* (1749; reprint, Charlottesville, Va.: Ibis

Publishing, 1986), 114

¹¹ Ibid, 120-21

¹² Ibid

¹³ Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans Howard and Edna Hong (New York Harper & Row, 1962), 223-23

¹⁴ Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy*, 87 Hauerwas agrees with the psychologist Herbert Fingarette, who writes “The less integrity, the less is there motive to enter into self-deception The greater the integrity of the person, and the more powerful the contrary inclination, the greater is the temptation to self-deception (the nearer to saintliness, the more a powerful personality suffers) We are moved to a certain compassion in which there is awareness of the self-deceiver’s authentic inner dignity as the motive of his self-betrayal” (Herbert Fingarette, *Self-Deception* [London Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd , 1969], 140)

¹⁵ St Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans F J Sheed (New York Sheed and Ward, 1942), 28 But “ you, O Lord, turned my back upon myself You took me from behind my own back, where I had placed myself because I did not want to look upon myself You stood me face to face with myself ” (193-94)

¹⁶ Ibid, 242-43

¹⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol I (New York Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941), 186-88 Niebuhr asserts that pride is the basic sin, he opposes the “rationalist-classical” view that sin is essentially sensuality or ignorance

¹⁸ See Ob 1 3, “The pride of your heart has deceived you you who say to yourself, ‘Who can bring me down to the ground?’”

¹⁹ “Since his determinate existence does not deserve the devotion lavished upon it, it is obviously necessary to practice some deception in order to justify such excessive devotion ” (Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 203)

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid, 206-07

²² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol IV, ed G W Bromily and T F Torrance, trans J W Edwards, O Bussey and Harold Knight (Edinburgh T & T Clark, 1958), 143-44



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