

An addendum to the three part series given at the Catholic Institute of Sydney on the Bible and Self-Deception by Dr Robert Tilley in May, 2012

Charting and Tracing the Contours of our Sense of Self

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Introduction

What you have in the exercises given below is an attempt to collate what I have learnt, culled, and reflected upon in trying to detect self-deception. The sources I have used are many and varied and include religious texts through to psychological and business books, and everything in-between. The content of this work is an attempt at being practical and addresses the question: how do I go about trying to detect self-deception in myself? It ought to be made clear that the exercises are more exactly that, they are exercises not insights, and this means that in order to get anything out of them you have to apply them to yourself. They are meant as aids by which one might *gain* an insight into oneself. Because of this the contents will only be useful insofar as you are willing to keep a journal.

And why is keeping a journal important?

For a number of reasons, not least that you forget things over time (indeed, I would argue, that this forgetfulness is *often* part and parcel of keeping hidden from yourself what you don't wish to know), and by keeping a journal you objectify, or concretise, what is ephemeral and quick to pass away. A journal is, in a way, something of a sign of your willingness to pursue seriously this discipline. What you are trying, first and foremost, to do is to chart the patterns in your thinking in order to discern where your authority resides in respect of how you discern and identify truth and falsity. And by authority we also mean that which orients you, or, if you like, that to which you have oriented yourself.

One of the things you ought to keep in mind is that just because you identify one intention behind one act of yours this does not mean that there are not other intentions as well, for most if not all our actions have multiple-intentions all of which are hierarchically organized. Thus, we can do the washing up with the intention not only to make sure the dishes are clean but to impress our partner or someone we live with. We can, at the same time, do the dishes because it gives us time out, say, from a dinner party, and we might also be doing it in order to

answer to a deeper compulsion that arises out of some deeply felt even neurotic revulsion at the thought of food being left out overnight. None of these intentions rule out the others, but that they are ordered in terms of importance is clear for often one of the intentions would not be enough on its own to motivate you to do the dishes. In sum, you should keep in mind that one action can have multiple intentions, some of which are conscious but many of which are not. The tricky thing is to identify and clarify those *intentionally* forgotten intentions, including of course the intention to forget our intention to forget. Some of the more hidden intentions are those in which we have decided to get at people in subtle ways - passive or covert aggressive ways - but to do so unconsciously, such that when we are confronted about our behaviour we can say, in all apparent honesty, that it was never our intention to irritate or insult someone. We have made ourselves believe that we never intended to do harm, only we did, it's just that not every intention is made recently, and therefore not every intention operates as a conscious intention in the present. But the intention to do harm *was* made, some time back, and so too the intention to forget that intention.

One final point, you must always keep in mind that you may well believe something about yourself because *it's true*, which is another way of saying that your actions may well be honest and justified. Indeed, your justifications may well be valid justifications, for we all recognise mitigating factors and things that contribute to diminished responsibility. We could say that the issue that distinguishes venial from mortal sin is the difference between culpable ignorance and invincible ignorance. And ultimately, perhaps only we and God can know which is which in respect of ourselves. The point I want to stress in respect of the following exercises is that they cannot be absolutised into an always applicable rule. What I mean by this is that you cannot just by the mere presence of certain factors know that it absolutely must signal self-deception. For example, with questions regarding friendships, and workplace relationships, what if you have been a whistle-blower? Clearly, then, there would be reasons other than hidden destructive urges for your friendless state; there would be credible and valid reasons for being paranoid about being ostracised. In sum what this means is that the exercises call for a real *engagement*, neither a dismissive attitude, nor a mock self-deprecating humility, are going to get you very far.

Finally, I would be very interested in what you think of this work; what, if anything, you got from it; and, most importantly, if you have any insights or exercises *you* might be able to suggest. If you do then you can contact me at: rtalley@cis.catholic.edu.au

The Overall Picture

The overall picture I work on is that which I call ‘Blinding the Blinds’. First we have the lie. This creates anxiety so we seek to ameliorate the force of the lie. That is we seek to justify it to ourselves. We can do this by redefining the lie such that we can get ourselves to believe that it isn't, in fact, a lie. Or we might tell ourselves that although it's a lie it's justified in that the person we're lying to deserves it, or that all people lie so why can't I? There are a million such justifications but you have your own special ones. Perhaps your justifications *are* justified, but if they are then you ought to know *why* they are justified. If you feel that you do not have to say why they are justified, that you just *know* they are, then I would suggest you have stumbled upon the first sign of self-deception: evasion.

This is the first Blind: invalid or specious justifications are the first line of defence for a lie.

But the thing is we know, deep down, that these justifications often are specious; that they really don't hold water. Hence, we do not want to look too closely at them, nor do we want others to do so. We then employ all sorts of tactics to throw ourselves and others off, chiefly by undermining reason. Thus, we go off at tangents, throw tantrums, get angry, seek distractions, suddenly feel too tired to concentrate, or introduce a million and one different arguments, some of which contradict the others, all with the goal to stop us from following any one argument all the way through. This is the Blind we use to hide the first Blind; we try to throw ourselves off the scent of our false justifications. Hence, we Blind the Blinds.

The other assumption informing much of this work is that the way in which we lie to others is reflected in the way we lie to ourselves. Hence, if we study the way people tell lies to others then we can apply these insights to self-deception. If you don't agree with this assumption then I'd be interested to hear your arguments - but enough of the Introduction now to the exercises!

Some Exercises

1) Try to study your *actual* actions and *actual* feelings, not at what you think you should have done or felt. Look at the actions/works and not at the claims. You should bear in mind that it is often our *immediate feelings* and the thoughts that attend those feelings which is the first line of defence for our self-deceptive ways. The sense of immediacy that accompanies those immediate feelings is one of the first and most effective lines of defence of your blind-spot. A true certainty is *open* to reason; a false certainty *evades* reason. This evasion can take many forms, from simply avoiding the use of reason by way of disparaging reason, to claiming to use reason but strangely enough not submitting this reasoning to independent critical appraisal. One simply *feels* one is the font of reason and thus does not have to listen to others.

2) Try to reflect on why you often *immediately* conclude that you understand yourself, such that you *immediately* assume that there are *no* hidden intentions at work. Ask yourself this, to what degree is what you call your 'intuition' simply this feeling of immediacy dressed up in a spiritual sounding disguise.

3) Try to see if there is pattern in you, one in which you seek distractions and go off at tangents. Is this reflected in your character - is your word reliable? Are you consistent? Try to note the excuses you might make if you are not reliable and consistent, for example look for statements like: "No one owns me"; "I need to be free"; "No one can tell me what to do"; "I didn't *promise* anything."

(The assumption in these exercises is that inconsistency evidences a lack of centre to oneself, a lack that is reflected in our relationships with others.)

4) Pay attention to the margins, the asides, the slips in your speech, for often it is here where the effort to mask what is really the case fails. It is often in asides that a liar tells you what the truth really is.

5) Pay close attention to when you begin to feel irritable, angry, and fearful. Try to recall what it is you've been thinking about preceding and during those feelings. This is why it's important to keep a journal so you can have a diary of sorts to which you can refer.

6) Try to discern the common phrases you use in speech and writing. Write them down in a journal. Over time study what you have recorded and see if you can discern any patterns; common imagery, motifs *etc.*

- 7) What are your recurring daydreams, fantasies, wishes? What flights of fancy commonly spring up when your brain goes on automatic?
- 8) What pictures, symbols, images appeal to you?
- 9) What are your favourite films and novels and what do they have in common?
- 10) Write down what you think happiness is; write a 'picture' of happiness.
- 11) Write down every 'superstition' or vague paranoia you have. All those vague, half-thought out notions such as, "They don't really like me"; "They're out to get something from me"; "I'm just not attractive/interesting to people"; "They really think I'm stupid"; "Deep down I'm having myself on"; "I'm really faking this, but *they're* really good at this."
- 12) Write down those vague 'religious/spiritual' suspicions: "Perhaps I'm cursed"; "I'm destined to be damned"; "The world/God/cosmos is set against me"; "Satan/demons are dogging my every step"; "The stars are against me."
- 13) Go over and over the last two exercises. If you've written a few things try and see what the common theme is. Try to discern on what authority you think these things (be it God, minister, guru, text, television show, internet site, etc.).
- 14) Conjure up images of those you have disliked/hated, perhaps still do. In respect of each figure, write down what it was you didn't like about them. Rewrite and rewrite until you find the essence. What did those people have in common?
- 15) If you say that you've never disliked/hated anyone then think of those people who only ever remained acquaintances. What stopped/hindered you from being closer to them?
- 16) Try to discern how people respond to you in conversation. Do they stay and engage, or do they quickly make excuses and leave? Following a social engagement try to remember and reflect on what the people to whom you spoke said. Did you listen? If not, why not?
- 12) Do people follow up conversations with you, or do they often simply nod in agreement, change the subject, or simply leave?
- 13) Do you have many 'deep and meaningful' conversations with people? If not why do you think that is?

14) What do you find irritating in other people?

15) What are your fears?

16) If you have, or have had, nightmares write them down. Try to do this with every nightmare you can remember. What was it in the dreams that made them so terrifying/disturbing? Was it anything specific, or just a general atmosphere? If it was just the 'general atmosphere' try to describe it.

17) When you recall a dream try to concentrate on remembering your *feelings* in the dream. That is, not just the content but how you felt concerning what was happening.

18) What, if any, compulsions do you have? Do you feel an irritating necessity to check locks, gas taps, power-points, ovens *etc.*, more than you know is reasonable? Do you hide this from others thinking it's so odd, that most others do not do likewise? Try to describe the 'threat' you feel if you do not follow the compulsion. What is it exactly that you fear will happen? If you think it is a fear of the house burning down, or burglars breaking in, or something like that correct yourself, for clearly this is not the case - but what then is the case? What is it that you *really* fear?

19) Have you ever been anxious and/or depressed and not known what for? Did you ever find out, and having found out it got better? Why do you think you can experience anxiety and not know that it *is* anxiety that you feel? Furthermore, how is it that you can feel anxious and yet not know its cause? How is it that you can misrepresent to yourself what it is you are feeling? Why is it that you do not let yourself know the cause of what it is you feel except through self-examination?

20) How many levels of awareness can you discern in your conscious state? What does it feel like to go from a state of consciousness in which you are engrossed in something, and then, all of a sudden, become aware of yourself being engrossed in something? When you reflect what is the mental image you have of yourself *as* you reflect on yourself? What is the feeling that accompanies that image?

21) Do you believe that if you think positive thoughts positive things will happen? Do you think that if you think negative things about yourself then something bad will happen? Why?

22) Do you think that if you say things are bad and not going well, that then they *will go well*? By doing this do you feel that you'll be able to evade some kind of bad luck/evil eye?

23) Do you believe that if you think something good about yourself then something bad will happen? If so, what do you think is the principle agent of causation that is behind this reaction (e.g. God, gods, demons, 'karma', a malevolent cosmic conspiracy, some kind of spiritual universal force *etc.*)?

24) What measures do you use to judge/evaluate others (e.g. astrology, coincidences, the Bible, a gut feeling *etc.*)? Try to clarify why you think that it is a good way to evaluate people. On what grounds do your principles operate? Or is it the case that you do not know on what grounds you accept your system of evaluation? Do you argue that it "just feels right"? Would you like to be evaluated by the same criteria?

25) Do you tend to think on things and argue a point by reference to non-specific generalities, and, when pressed for specifics, do you give as an excuse for your inability to give specifics that you have a poor memory, and yet, nevertheless, still *insist* that you *know* what you say is true anyway?

26) When discussing philosophy/religion/spirituality/truth do you often have recourse to phrases like: "I think with the heart not the head"; "That's true for you"; "That's their opinion"; "There is no absolute truth"; "I know this is true, I just feel it"; "Reason has no place in spiritual matters"; "What do those theologians/scientists/doctors/academics know?"; "I don't have any doctrines," and so forth. If you do use these or like statements how do you know they are true statements? Have you ever reasoned them out? If not, why not?

27) Do you feel that when people challenge you to back up what you've said that they're just being judgmental?

28) When you feel certain about something, that "This is right, I just *know* it!" see if you can stop just there and reflect critically on this feeling. Can you ask yourself, "How *do* I know it is right? What proof do I have apart from my gut feeling/intuition?"

29) Do you feel that your gut feeling/intuition is based on: a mystic intuition; a spiritual insight beyond words; an intelligence based on general impressions that can't rigorously be defined; or, simply, that "It *just* is right, I don't know how I know this but I know that it is!"

30) Try to reflect on this: when you were certain that you were right but now know that you were wrong, what was that feeling of certainty like? What does it feel like to be wrong and yet to have thought you were right? If you cannot recall ever having thought you were certainly right when you now know you were wrong, ask yourself why it is you cannot recall any such circumstance; is it because you have never been wrong when you thought you were right?

31) Have you ever apologised to anyone? If not, why not? When was the last time you apologised to someone?

32) Think about this: is there any difference in your feelings when you believe in what is false and when you believe in what is true? Or are your feelings of being 'certain' the same in both cases? If they are, do you think that that might pose a problem for following your intuition or for being guided by your gut feelings?

33) Do you feel that these questions are judgmental? Why? Do phrases like “No one's perfect,” or “There's a hidden agenda here,” or “These questions are going nowhere, they're stupid and impractical,” or “I can't remember, this is frustrating,” come to mind?

34) Do you like noise around you (the radio or television or sound system on in the background)? Is it somehow comforting?

35) In the recent past how many times can you think of that you sat quietly and reflected?

36) Have you enrolled in many self-help courses and read many like books, joined many different groups, and often thought “*this* is it,” only to think the same thing of another group or book some time later?

37) What if anything, did these groups, courses, or books have in common? Look for the obvious.

38) Can you stick to an argument or do you keep going off at tangents, do you keep asking questions or making statements that lead you and the one whom you are speaking to away from the original point?

39) Or do you think that your questions *were* to the point? If so, next time try to remember what your questions were and what the other person was saying. Write them down. When you have done this examine them and see if it would

be obvious to someone else that they were to the point. Write down why *you* think they were to the point.

40) Do you often make resolutions - such as diets, exercise, to read more, spend less time on the computer, watch less TV *etc.* - that you start enthusiastically but then trail off, and ditch? List the reasons for having done this.

41) Do you tell people you'll ring and then don't? Why?

42) Try to think of the times when you've told someone you'll do something for them and haven't. What excuses, if any, did you make?

43) Keep a diary recording what time you arranged to meet someone and what time you actually arrived. If you catch yourself fudging ask yourself why. If you have an excuse, write it down.

44) Do you feel bad when someone helps you out? Do you feel that you owe them? Do you think *they* will think that you owe them? Do *you* feel that way when you help someone? Do you feel that you have a favour to call upon sometime in the future?

45) Try to list close friendships in the past that have drifted and/or split apart. Is there any pattern that you can discern? (This is *not* about who was or was not at fault.)

46) Do you have negative views of certain racial/national/religious groups? If so, write down your *actual personal experience* of members of that group.

47) What lies have you told in the past and why did you tell them? This includes 'passive' misrepresentations such as when we do not correct a wrong impression, as well as outright lies. Make a list, examine it and see if there is a common theme.

48) What ideals did you have in your youth? Which ones did you put aside because they weren't practical? Do you think you were correct in doing this? Why?

49) If you had a blind spot about yourself what would it look like? Or even what would it *not* look like? How *do* you think you would hide something from yourself?

50) Have you ever caught yourself thinking in a kind of intended ‘fuzzy’ way deciding to do something that you know is morally suspect?

51) Can you think of occasions in which you have done one action and this action has been attended by multiple intentions? (Whether or not the action was good or bad or morally indifferent is here beside the point.)

52) What do you think is the overall intention of your life?

53) What authority do you pay heed to?

54) How would you define the concept of ‘authority’?

55) How would you define obedience?

56) How would you define conscience?

57) Are *you* aware of ever having deceived *yourself*?

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