

The Bible and Self-Deception: Week Two

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1) The exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees in *John 9:40-41* captures well the paradox of how we can be blind to being blind. Furthermore, it also tells us that this blindness to being blind can be culpable, for we make ourselves blind in order not to acknowledge our sin and our responsibility. One of the primary things we do to exculpate ourselves is to claim ignorance but there is, of course, a difference between inadvertent ignorance (and invincible ignorance) and culpable ignorance. One of the ways in which we can deceive ourselves – and we do this willingly so – is to think that we have truly ‘looked within’ ourselves and because we cannot ‘see’ any evidence of lying to ourselves then, we conclude, we are not lying to ourselves. We have done the ‘inner-journey’ and we have a clean bill of health!

2) The 14th century Augustinian, Walter Hilton, wrote of the “high road to contemplation” and did so stressing how necessary it was to have humility – a radical calling of oneself into question, indeed a radical distrust of oneself. “This is for a man to enter within himself, and to know his soul and its powers, how beautiful it is and how hideous.” Of course, the beauty of our soul is down to God’s work, while the ugliness is all our own.

3) The fascinating thing about being human is how we can both represent and misrepresent ourselves to ourselves – we are our own spin-doctors! And, as has already been noted, we do this by hiding our intentions, not least the intention to lie to ourselves, and we do this by habitually corrupting our memory. This process is aided by the use of specious justifications, not least that which puts off the practice of reflective critique by saying things like “I am too tired,” or the increasingly popular line “this is all too negative and as I already suffer from low self-esteem I do not need this.” We use any and every tactic to stop ourselves from revealing ourselves to ourselves – which is, I guess, what a liar does to cover his or her lies.

4) Since the sixteenth century, the Modern view has increasingly been that all that really counts is the ‘inner me’ and this ‘me’ has been increasingly defined by the idea of autonomous individuality. As a consequence, it has become a commonplace for people to state that all institutions are corrupt, that things like dogma are soul-destroying, and that all objective norms inhibit one’s individuality. Implicit in this is the idea that freedom is arbitrary insofar as freedom is whatever the individual decides to do. And *the* fundamental expression of this line of thinking is the redefinition of ‘conscience’ such that it changes from being understood as an aspect of the soul that is founded upon and oriented to the authority of the other, to it being descriptive of the ultimate autonomy of the self. That is, ‘conscience’ turns from being a sense of deferral to the authority of the other, to being an excuse for doing whatever it is one wants to do. It is not too difficult to see that if one makes of

conscience a justification for seeing oneself as being the ultimate arbiter of what is right and wrong, then one can, in the end, justify just about anything! For this reason, *the corruption of conscience is a fundamental requirement of self-deception.*

5) When we read in *John 1:5* that the light shines in the darkness but the darkness cannot comprehend it, we ought to pause and think. Surely light is light so how can it not be comprehended? But the point that the whole Gospel brings out is that this is possible by reason that the darkness already believes that it sees the light having already defined darkness as being light. Consequently, when real light shines it is totally mystifying. How many of us think we already know ourselves, fully so, because we regularly ‘look within’ and know we are not hiding anything, while those others *they* are self-deceived! How many of us already think that we see the light? We might put it like this, if when we set out to search ourselves for signs of self-deception we find instead that we tend to end up thinking of how *others* are incredibly self-deceived, then we can reasonably be sure that here is *our* infallible sign that we are preventing ourselves from really and truly entering within; from really and truly seeing the glorious image of God.

6) The aim of a con-artist is to flatter us, and alongside this they have also to separate us off from any objective authority. For this reason our consumer world constantly flatters us into thinking we can do without the authoritative guidance of, say, the Church; that we alone really know what is good for us (of interest is that this is the fundamental axiom upon which free-market liberal theory is based). The aim of a con-artist is to separate us off from anything that provides an objective rule, and the con-artist does so by getting us to be guided by our feelings, for our feelings are the most malleable thing about us. Why do you think advertising appeals to our emotions? If we identify conscience with our feelings then we are easy prey for deception – but there’s one benefit at least, our condition will be good for the consumer economy!

7) As Plutarch observed, the flatterer (or con-artist) lies to us where we lie to ourselves: “In our love of self [*the flatterer*] has an excellent base of operations against us. It is because of this self-love that everybody is himself his own foremost and greatest flatterer, and hence feels no difficulty in admitting the outsider to witness with him and to confirm his own conceits and desires.”

8) We might put it like this: you cannot call yourself into question, in the manner that the searching out of self-deception requires, if you allow your feelings to lead you, for your feelings are always oriented towards their own satisfaction. Another way of saying this is that your feelings are oriented towards the ‘same’, that is to their own demands, this is why they are appealed to in a consumer society such as ours. It is also for this reason that contemporary mysticism so-called makes so much of feelings, for when one feels carried away and ecstatic then this seems to be a clear sign of divine heights having been reached. But getting spiritual ecstasies is not all that difficult and tends to be a sign of spiritual immaturity and, yes, pride. As St John of

the Cross noted, and as Blessed Mother Teresa experienced, the most profound of spiritual times is when we feel little or nothing at all, except a sense of emptiness. And yet despite that we journey on following the call of Jesus Christ to take up our cross and follow Him. But whereas Jesus did not deserve His cross, we deserve the one we are called to carry.

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