



## Self-Deception and the Christian Life

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I'm a college professor; I have been for almost a decade. I work reasonably hard at my job, and I think I do it fairly well. In fact, in my honest and solitary moments, when there's no occasion for false humility, I'd say I'm a better-than-average teacher. I'm in good company. A recent study revealed that 94 percent of the people who do what I do think they're doing a better-than-average job.

At some level, we're all acquainted with self-deception. A mother somehow manages not to notice the obvious signs that her son is on drugs. A wife does the same with respect to her husband's affair. The director of a Christian nonprofit organization manages to find sincerely compelling a perspective from which money donated to the ministry can legitimately be used to pay for an extravagant personal vacation or, perhaps, a private jet.

And Scripture is peppered with talk of the poisonous effects of self-deception. The prophet Jeremiah expressed a kind of amazement at the capacity of the "desperately sick" human heart to deceive itself (17:9–10). The prophet Obadiah (3) explains that it is our pride that often leads us into self-deception. The apostle Paul explains in his letter to the Galatians how self-deception enables people who are nothing to think that they're something (6:3). And in his rather depressing description of the flight from God in the first chapter of Romans, Paul mentions the amazing ability that we have to suppress truths that are plain to us; he goes on to describe the disaster that results when we do.

But there is remarkably little in the way of sustained focus on this phenomenon in our churches and in contemporary literature on the Christian life. What is self-deception, exactly? And how do we get away with it?

How can I manage to be dishonest with myself without catching myself in the act? Where does this phenomenon tend to show up in Christian circles? And what can we do about it? These are questions of profound importance for anyone interested in addressing significant obstacles to growth and progress in the way of Jesus.



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### Consider a few cases:

Not long ago I was visiting a friend who said that he had recently been convicted about the fact that he'd not really "checked into the veracity of his Christian beliefs." So he had recently made it something of a project to look into the evidence for and against the Christian tradition into which he'd been born and raised. He wanted to take a step back and see whether or not the stuff he'd been raised with was actually true. I asked him what he'd been reading. He pointed me to a collection of about eight to ten books on the evidence for and against Christian belief on his shelf—not bad for a busy professional with a young family. But upon closer examination, I noticed that all of the books had Christian authors.

"These books are all written by Christians," I pointed out.

"Yep. I've been making apologetics a sort of hobby. I especially like the stuff by Craig, Strobel, and Geisler."

"Do you suppose there are non-Christians writing on this topic?"

"I suppose there probably are."

“Do you know who they are?”

“No. I haven’t really looked for that sort of thing.”

Now I don’t mean to suggest that what my friend was doing is a bad idea. There’s nothing wrong with trying to shore up your faith with evidence. There’s a wealth of very good material out there on the rationality of Christian belief, and Christians do themselves a favor by getting acquainted with it. But to think of this as a genuine checking into the veracity of Christian belief is a bit of a stretch. It’s a bit like checking into the claims of “holistic medicine” by reading only those studies written by its practitioners; that is, ignoring the critical treatment of these practices in “mainstream” medical journals.

The belief that Christianity is well-supported by the evidence, or at least is not ruled out as irrational by the evidence, is a source of great comfort for me. It’s also a great source of comfort for me to know that I’ve taken a more-or-less careful and objective look at the evidence for and against Christian claims. But an honest-to-goodness inquiry into the evidence for and against Christian belief is hard (not to mention risky and scary) work. If it turned out that Christianity were irrational, I’d be faced with a tough choice: either settle into a commitment to an irrational religion or suspend my belief in the truth of Christianity and suffer considerable social consequences (including the loss of my job and alienation from my closest friends and family to name just a couple). So life offers me a deal. Believe that Christianity is rational whether or not the evidence available to me suggests that it is. Believe further that, at least for a season, I “took a step back” and looked into the evidence for and against Christian claims.

William James said that “my experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items I notice shape my mind.” The most common strategies for long-haul self-deception involve the management of attention. This, then, is an important part of the answer to one of our questions: how do we get away with self-deception? Through habitual and systematic management of my cognitive gaze, I can come to believe things that I wouldn’t believe were I to attend indiscriminately to my surroundings. Through attention management, I exercise a degree of control over what comes into my mind. And this, in turn, affects what I believe.

Ressentiment is another important strategy for deceiving ourselves. Sentiments and emotions sometimes strike us as unacceptable, inappropriate, inconvenient, or otherwise undesirable. Think, for example, of the feelings of anger, envy, spite, or vindictiveness. I don’t like the thought of myself as having any of

these feelings. But, as it turns out, I sometimes do have them. But by means of resentment, I have the opportunity to rename these postures and thereby make myself a little easier to live with.

“I’m concerned about Steve,” says Aaron at the weekly prayer meeting. “I think he’s really gone off the deep end, and I’m afraid he’s headed for trouble. I think we should pray for him.” He spends the next forty-five minutes explaining in some detail Steve’s mistaken beliefs, his bad behavior, and the inevitable pain in store for Steve because of the course he’s taken. Occasionally a stray sarcastic comment bleeds through the otherwise sterile description of Steve’s misfortune. But everything is presented as an articulation of his concern for Steve’s well-being and an invitation to pray for him.

“How have you personally been affected by Steve’s course?” asks Dan.

Aaron explains that there were some early interactions that were deeply hurtful. Steve had said some pretty nasty things, he explains. At first he was angry. But he’s forgiven Steve, and now he’s mostly just concerned for Steve’s well-being. Everyone buys his answer. After all, many of them have been hurt by similar interactions with Steve, and they can relate. They have forgiven him too. Finally someone suggests that they should actually get down to praying. So for the next seven minutes or so, a summary Steve’s failings are presented to God as evidence that Steve is in need of rescue.

As it turns out, Aaron’s still mad at Steve. He knows that he’s supposed to forgive Steve, and he thinks (mistakenly) that if you’ve forgiven someone, you won’t be mad at him anymore. So he must choose between thinking of himself as not having really forgiven Steve or as not being mad at Steve anymore. He chooses the latter. But the anger still operates. It drives him to constant criticism, cynicism, and vindictiveness toward Steve. It has, of course, been renamed. It has been recast as “concern.”

Concern is a convenient disguise for the anger since “concern” for someone is a perfectly legitimate sentiment; it seems to justify many of the behaviors one would expect from someone who’s just plain hurt and mad. Interestingly, his friends, who would recognize the ruse in almost any other situation (the occasional sarcasm is a dead giveaway), are slow to detect anger’s covert operation, since they are caught up in the same resentment. They’re angry with Steve too. Were they to recognize it in Aaron, though, their own game would be up. So they reinforce one another’s pretense

that it is “concern” that motivates the discussion. They congratulate themselves for having done Steve a service by bringing his sad case before the Lord.

When we’re angry with someone and we’re not willing to think of ourselves as harboring anger toward that person, we’ll find some alternative characterization of our affective posture. Sometimes we’re “concerned” for someone. Other times, we’re “sad.” We’re not angry with him; we just feel sorry for her. Yet another ploy is to be frightened for others that might be injured. “I’m not angry with him,” we say. “I’m just worried that he’s going to hurt someone else and so something needs to be done to stop him.”

Envy is another primary example of an emotion that might be recast because the person who feels envy deems the affective response to be inappropriate or unattractive. I can’t stop thinking about Brian’s brand-new wall-mounted flat-screen TV. It’s not that I’m envious. I’m just worried about Brian. Didn’t he and Bethany already watch too much TV? This high-definition temptress is just going to lure them into more and more mindless entertainment of the sort that rots the soul. And what about poor Isaac (their ten-month-old boy)? He’ll grow up in a living room that has a huge television (of all things) as the focal point. What sort of impression is that likely to leave on his mind? Yep. Somebody’s got to talk to Brian. This is absolutely not good for him.

Attention management and resentment, then, are among the important strategies that we employ in our self-deceptive machinations. But sometimes we aspire to heights of self-deception unattainable as individuals. In such cases, we must call on the resources of group-think. Madness, suggests Nietzsche, “is rare in individuals,” but in groups “it is the rule.”

I live in Orange County, California. Have for most of my life. By any reasonable standard, Orange County California is one of the very richest regions in the history of human existence (not just one of the richest in the world, but one of the richest in the history of the world). I’m surrounded by people with wealth beyond the wildest imagination of most people who’ve ever lived. These same people struggle with discontent over the material possessions they don’t yet possess. I’m such a person. For the past two weeks, I’ve checked Craigslist every single day (often multiple times during the day) for a table saw. I don’t have a project going just now that requires a table saw. But I’m just itching to have one and would be oh-so-much happier if I had one in my garage! Materialism is epidemic in my culture. By any reasonable standard, virtually all of the people in my immediate acquaintance are hoarding

and storing up treasure on earth. We can’t go for any appreciable period of time without a new purchase of some significance.

The Bible is clear, it seems to me, that this kind of materialism is a crippling barrier to the way of Jesus. Jesus taught that your heart will follow your treasure . . . automatically, as it were. The teaching suggests, at the very least, that it is extremely difficult to have treasure without growing attached to it in your heart in a way that precludes full participation in the way of Jesus. So I live in a context in which the dangers associated with having one’s heart carried away by wealth loom larger than they have in virtually every other society in the history of the world.

But I’ve attended churches in Orange County nearly my whole life, and I can count with just my fingers the sermons I can remember directly calling attention to this epidemic in our midst. It seems we have decided together to be blind to the exorbitance of the average Orange County lifestyle. We’ll challenge one another to tithe, of course, and to give generously to good causes. The assumption in our midst is that if I am making it a practice to give generously, I am free from the crippling effects of materialism—even if my lifestyle belies a sort of addiction to expensive entertainment, conspicuous consumption, and regularly buying new and nice things for myself.

If you want to ruffle feathers in Orange County churches, raise the question of whether the purchase of a new BMW for personal use can be justified in our world economy. You don’t even have to present an answer. Simply raising the question violates the game of “happy family” we’re playing together with respect to nice cars (not to mention entertainment, fine foods, new appliances...).

Rule A: Don’t question the moral legitimacy of buying a new BMW.

Rule A.1: Rule A doesn’t exist.

Rule A.2: Do not discuss the existence or nonexistence of Rules A, A.1, or A.2.

Interestingly, it’s folks who spend time away from the “family” that find themselves painfully aware of the game we’re playing. Folks who come home from short-term missions trips to third-world countries find themselves wanting to violate Rule A. They often struggle, at least for a time, with the moral legitimacy of Orange County lifestyles. But, if they’re typical, they can be brought back into the family. Procrastination will prevent them from really doing anything with these moral convictions. And the perceived unanim-

ity of the group as to the insignificance of the question (whether or not it's okay to buy a new BMW) will cause it to fade to the edges of consciousness where it will be less disruptive.

Notice, though, the essential place of my group if I'm going to continue to think that the question is insignificant—that there's no pressing need to ask it. If you plop me down in just about any other social context in the history of the world, the kind of relative expense required to purchase a new BMW would raise questions so obvious as to be impossible to ignore. The opportunity costs of owning a new BMW (as opposed to a Honda Accord, e.g.) measured in terms of shareable basic necessities are staggering. It's only in a world of other BMW owners who've agreed not to ask the question that I could possibly ignore it. Of course, the same may be true (though to a lesser extent) of the opportunity costs of owning a new Honda Accord as opposed to an economy car or a used car.

This is why the lifestyle in the next stratum up from wherever you're situated will look to you as though it teeters on the edge of exorbitance and gross materialism. But it won't look so to those situated there. For them, exorbitance will be defined by the strata above them. We surround ourselves with folks willing to ignore the questions with respect to our particular standard of living. In so doing, we make possible a blindness not otherwise possible to the degree to which we're in the grip of materialism. The last thing a rich man wants to do is to accuse his rich neighbor of being too rich.

Here, then, are three illustrations of the pervasive presence of self-deception as it manifests itself in Christian culture. If we wish to make significant progress toward Christlikeness, we must face these tendencies of ours squarely, call them what they are, and thoughtfully consider time-tested techniques for moving progressively away from them.

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