

The Psychology of Self-Deception



“Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself.” (Wittgenstein)

“All other swindlers upon earth are nothing to the self-swindlers, and with such pretences did I cheat myself. Surely a curious thing. That I should innocently take a bad half-crown of somebody else's manufacture, is reasonable enough; but that I should knowingly reckon the spurious coin of my own make, as good money!” (Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*)

“Self deception is the refusal to commit myself to a belief because of the pain of that commitment, where had that pain not been present the commitment would have been made as a natural expression of the tendency to believe well supported ideas.” (John Mullen, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy: Self-Deception and Cowardice in the Present Age*)

“We may deceive ourselves either by masking aspects of the external world that we are unwilling to acknowledge [putting a good face on things], or else by internal masking, whereby we conceal from ourselves parts of ourselves we would rather not face. At the same time, we seldom present ourselves to the outer world fully, but mostly through the medium of masks that conceal some part or parts of our person. Again, this kind of masking is not necessarily deceptive for the sake of self-interest, as the example of “putting up a good front” shows. Its external effect may in turn affect what lies within, in so far as the choice of a particular mask signifies a part of the person and may eventually bring out a side of the personality that would otherwise remain hidden.” (Graham Parkes, *Composing the Soul: Reaches of Nietzsche's Psychology*)

“The roles played by the masks in the process of deception are complex and multifarious. Just as the literal mask may function to disguise or else protect the wearer's face, so a person may engage in metaphorical masking for the purpose of self protection or deception. The use of a mask as

disguise does not necessarily intend to deceive, even though it conceals the face; and indeed the beauty of masks as disguise lies in their duplex function of presenting and withholding, revealing and concealing, at the same time. The opaque surface may in this sense serve as a sign for what lies behind it.” (Graham Parkes, *Composing the Soul: Reaches of Nietzsche's Psychology*)

“I have done it, says my memory. I cannot have done it, says my pride and remains inexorable. Finally, the memory gives way.” (Nietzsche)

“In self-deception I am maneuvering to escape the truth about myself. I am a self divided against itself. This is the meaning of Kierkegaard's term “double-mindedness”. The opposite of self-deception, of willing obscurity about oneself, is to be transparent to oneself. It is to will one thing. To be transparent to oneself requires insight and courage. Not to will transparency is to be a fool and a coward.” (John Mullen, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy: Self-Deception and Cowardice in the Present Age*)

“It seems generally believed that, as the eye cannot see itself, the mind has no faculties by which it can contemplate its own state, and that therefore we have not means of becoming acquainted with our real characters. . . We are secretly conscious of defects and vices which we hope to conceal from the public eye, and please ourselves with innumerable impostures, by which, in reality, no body is deceived.” (Samuel Johnson)

“It is the nature of grown-up life that we are forced to put on masks and play out little games in order to measure up to the demands of the world. But in gaining the world, we lose our souls. We become empty shells, drifting into the monotony and grayness of the commonplace, going

through the motions, getting dispersed in the busyness of life. In short, we are falling.” (Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic*)

“Most people are subjective toward themselves and objective toward all others, frightfully objective sometimes – but the task is precisely to be objective toward oneself and subjective toward all others.” (Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*)

“Lying to ourselves is more deeply ingrained than lying to others.” (Fyodor Dostoevsky)

“. . .the great majority of mankind are satisfied with appearances, as though they were realities, and are often more influenced by the things that seem than by those that are.” (Machiavelli)

“Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? . . . You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.” (Matthew 7:3-5)

“The conflict between the need to be accurate and the desire to feel good about ourselves is one of the major battlegrounds of the self, and how this battle is waged and how it is won are central determinants of who we are and how we feel about ourselves. The best way to “win” this battle, in terms of being a healthy, well-adjusted person, is not always obvious. We must, of course, keep in touch with reality and know our own abilities well enough to engage in self-improvement. But it turns out that a dose of self-deception can be helpful as well, enabling us to maintain a positive view of ourselves and an optimistic view of the future.” (Timothy Wilson, *Stranger to Ourselves*)

“Since man lies to himself even more than to others, the psychologist should draw conclusions from what people really mean, rather than from what they say or do. . . what man believes to be his own true feelings and convictions are often but the remainders of convictions, or simply assertions, of his parents and ancestors. We thus live from the folly as well as the wisdom of our ancestors. Nietzsche is inexhaustible in his attempts to show how every possible kind of feeling, opinion, attitude, conduct, and virtue, is rooted in self-deception or an unconscious lie.” (Henri Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*)