



#83 The Psychology of Self-Deception

“With all that which a person allows to appear, one may ask: what is it meant to hide? What should it divert the eyes from? . . .How far does he deceive himself in this action?” (Friedrich Nietzsche, The Dawn)

Humans are adept at deception. Throughout our lives we deceive others as to our intentions, our beliefs, and our actions. But more impactful may be the ways in which we deceive ourselves. In this video we will examine the phenomenon of self-deception, looking at why we do it, the dangers that arise from it, and whether we can rid ourselves of harmful deceptions and in the process improve our lives.

Humans are imperfect beings, each one of us is flawed in a diverse number of ways. We make countless mistakes, are unsuccessful in many of our endeavours and are victims of numerous bad habits. Yet despite all this we have a basic need to think well of ourselves. We want to believe that we are good people and that the path in life we have chosen is a noble one. The easiest way to reconcile our need for a positive self-image with the existence of our many flaws and shortcomings is through hiding our defects, from both ourselves, as well as others.

In this pursuit, we are often far more successful in deceiving ourselves than we are at hiding our shortcomings from those close to us. This has been expressed by many thoughtful observers of the human condition, across cultures, and throughout human history. A famous passage from The New Testament reads: “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” While an ancient Japanese proverb conveys a similar message: “Though you see the seven defects of others, we do not see our own ten defects.”

Deceiving ourselves as to our flawed character is sometimes referred to as internal masking. But self-deception takes another form called external masking whereby we deny aspects, or events, of the outer world which pose a threat to our self-image. For example, someone who believes they are a well-liked person may remain oblivious to social cues pointing to the fact that others dislike them.



The use of internal and external masking creates what can be called our “noble lie”. This is the fictitious story we tell ourselves to maintain a positive self-image in the face of our many flaws. While having a positive self-image is beneficial, problems arise when it is too reliant on the use of internal and external masking. For if our self-deceptions become too flaunting of reality we become akin to an individual walking over a deep chasm on a poorly constructed bridge. “The chasm was life itself”, wrote Leo Tolstoy in his book *Anna Karenina*, “the bridge that artificial life” While the bridge of our self-deceptions may hold for many years, we always face the risk that the bridge will break and we will be forced to confront the chasm of life – which after years of lying to ourselves, and denying, rather than dealing with our weaknesses, we will be ill-equipped to cope with.

There are many instances in every life where one’s self-deceptions begin to falter, presenting an opportunity to break down the false self – a process which while difficult, is extremely beneficial in the long run. However, at such times, faced with the terrifying prospect that one’s character was in many ways built on a lie, it is far more likely that people will flee further in the opposite direction, piling deception on deception. To do this we run to the comfort of our daily routines, busy ourselves with social concerns, accumulate more material things, and turn to the security of conformity:

“There are insects that protect themselves against attackers by raising a cloud of dust. Likewise man instinctively protects himself against the truth...by raising a cloud of numbers.” (Soren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*)

While conformity and the playing out of social roles can help shore-up our bridges of self-deception, this may in the end turn out to be more of a curse, than a blessing. For given the brevity of life it is far better to become aware of our deceptions while we still have time to change. But sadly, it is often only when one is at death’s doorstep that they come to recognize the vanity and falseness of their existence up to that point.

This idea is illustrated in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, one of Leo Tolstoy’s masterpieces. The main character in this work is a Russian magistrate who attains great success in rising to the top of Russian society. However, while enjoying the fruits of his labours, he becomes afflicted by a terminal illness and



reflecting deeply on the meaning of life is haunted by a nagging feeling that his life was wasted:

“It is as if I had been going downhill while I imagined I was going up. And that is really what it was. I was going up in public opinion, but to the same extent life was ebbing away from me. And now it is all done and there is only death.” (Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*)

This passage by Tolstoy strikes at the root of the danger of living at the mercy of our self-deceptions. Maintaining our illusions requires a massive amount of time and energy and often diverts our attention to vain pursuits. Therefore, our ability to engage in projects and strive after goals which would lead to a more fulfilling life is greatly restricted. To ensure that we don't face a similar fate as Ivan Ilyich, it is crucial that we take a more honest look at ourselves and the life path that our deceptions have led us down. While most of us have spent years, if not decades, relying on our many self-deceptions, it is still within our ability to break down our false self. Self-deceptions are rooted in beliefs which at some point in the past we seriously entertained, as it was awareness of our faults and the pain that accompanied them that produced the deceptions in the first place. Thus, deep-down it can be said that we all know the manner in which we deceive ourselves.

Nietzsche suggests that one way we can make our faults more palatable is by viewing the development of our character as analogous to the creation of a work of art. In its initial stages, a work of art contains numerous flaws, however, an artist who deceives himself regarding these flaws never creates anything of worth. Instead, a true artist must learn to observe the flaws and make the necessary corrections. Some flaws may be beyond the artists' ability to correct, but instead of pretending they do not exist the artist can strive to find a purpose for them that contributes to the work as a whole. In a similar vein, with an awareness of our own flaws, like an artist we can attempt to overcome them, or when this is not possible accept them and see them as an expression of our uniqueness.

“To “give style” to one's character – a great and rare art. It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye.” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*)



To succeed in this approach, according to Nietzsche, we should sculpt our character under “the constraint of a single taste” – selecting a life project to act as a guide for our creation. Without this constraint, we run the risk of losing ourselves in possibility, that is, of becoming overwhelmed by the myriad of choices regarding what to do and who to become. But before we can choose an appropriate life-project we must become aware of the weaknesses and flaws our deceptions are masking, for a clearer vision of who we are will allow us to survey what options are realistically open to us.

“So the seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully, and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation. All other selves thereupon become unreal.” (William James, *The Principles of Psychology*)

In bringing to fruition this new self of our creation Nietzsche suggested that the use of deception may still be required. However, the deception in this case would not be rooted in the need to mask our weaknesses, as this only leads to stagnation. Rather in becoming what Nietzsche called “the true poets and continuous creators of life” he advocated the use of a subtle form of deception as a tool to initiate our transformation into the self we are striving to become. Nietzsche understood that very often it is our actions which precede a change in our emotions and belief structures. Thus, if one is striving to remake themselves, initially they will need to act in a somewhat fraudulent manner. Or in other words, they will need to act as the person they have not yet become, but wish to be. Or as Nietzsche advised in *Human, All Too Human*:

“When someone fervently wants for a very long time to seem something, it will eventually be difficult for that person to be anything else. The profession of almost everyone, even of the artist, begins with hypocrisy, with an imitating from outside and a mimicking of what works effectively. One who always wears the mask of friendly expressions must eventually gain power over benevolent moods, without which the expression of friendliness cannot be effected – and finally these moods gain power over him, and he is benevolent.” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*)

There is no doubt that taking this route, and trying to remake oneself is risky. It requires enduring great pain in the un-masking of our self-deceptions, and opens



us up to the potential for ridicule. However, the alternative of remaining on the shaky bridge of our self-deceptions may in the end entail far more suffering. For like Ivan Ilych, in Tolstoy's novel, we risk wasting our life and only coming to the realization that we were in fact "going downhill" as Tolstoy put it "rather than up" when it is too late. Thus, while we still have time to change we would be wise to heed the advice of the great Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky:

"Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others." (Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*)