

## Self-Deception: Religion

*“What you see and what you hear depends a great deal on where you are standing. It also depends on what sort of person you are.” – C.S. Lewis, The Magician’s Nephew*

*“All the habits of the patient, both mental and physical, are still in our favour”. – C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters, Letter 2*

Peck’s extension of his theory to group evil follows after the chapter on demonic possession and exorcism, which caused many to dismiss his book. He examines the My Lai massacre by American troops in the Vietnam War. One of the ways self-deception operates in groups is that, through specialization, the conscience of the group can become so dispersed as to be nearly non-existent.

In the Word on Fire Engage Mini-Course Evil and Suffering, episode 3, Bishop Barron discusses evil at the individual and group levels, and spiritual evil or the devil. He mentions four biblical names for the devil: i) Ho-diabalos, the scatterer; ii) Ho-satana, the accuser; iii) the father of all lies; and iv) the murderer from the beginning. I hypothesize that both the diffusion of conscience in groups and the four names for Satan can be connected to the self-deceptive mechanism of splitting.

The psychological literature on self-deception proposes various “defense mechanisms” used for keeping reality at bay. Intellectualization, for example, drains something of its emotional

content, changes the meaning of our actions, and combines with projection to relocate our faults onto others. It has been theorized that splitting may be the basic mechanism underlying all defense mechanisms (Grotstein, 1981). It is considered the most immature and most destructive defense mechanism. It is central to narcissistic and borderline personality disorders (PDs) (Kernberg, 1975).

The term has been used in a number of ways (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1977), and there are different kinds of splitting, but one relevant here involves separation of perceptions of others into all good vs. all bad images –false selves we construct of other people. Patients with borderline personality disorder, for example (which is really a type of narcissism) are known for having wild, violent swings in their feelings toward others. In theory, while their attention is focused on images of the other person as all good, they can see no flaws in the other person and talk about how much they “love” this person. Then, when the other person disappoints them, their attention is focused on all bad images of the other person. The real person, of course, is a fallible human being with both good and bad traits (which is how we see ourselves and others when we really love them). Might Ho-diabolos try to encourage this kind of splitting?

Ho-diabolos is also Ho-satana, the accuser. The distorted image of the other person or group, encouraged by Ho-diabolos, that false self, not the real person, is now easy to accuse and an easy target for scapegoating – which, you may recall is a major characteristic of M. Scott Peck’s proposed evil subtype of narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). Having now set up a distortion of what the other person really is, you can easily feel yourself morally superior to them, and justify any evil you want to do to them. Look how bad so-and-so is, let us destroy them and

make everything right again! No need to will the good of this other! And as Dostoevsky puts into the mouth of Father Zossima in the *Brothers Karamazov*, it can feel very good to get angry – you feel superior to the one you are angry at (Dostoevsky, 1990).

Enter the Father of All Lies: the image you have in your mind of the other person or group, which is dominated by negative elements and exists only in your imagination, just as Narcissus' false self exists only in his imagination, is the real person as a whole, and is easy to attack. Now the murderer from the beginning whispers. As Peck says, all of us suffer narcissistic injury. We have all had cherished beliefs about ourselves or our family of views which, it turns out were alas not completely true. We have all done things that, we later realize, should not have done. Maybe we thought we were really good at something we really want to be good at, and it turns out that we are not really that good after all. The healthy person, when confronted with this evidence, willingly suffers the pain of honest self-evaluation and, if need be, is changed. When confronted with narcissistic injury, the person with Peck's proposed evil subtype of NPD will characteristically try to exterminate the evidence. Too bad if that evidence happens to be another human being. You may start by imagining the destruction of this person, but this can be made just the first step toward destroying the person, or group. This may be at least one of the ways the devil and his minions attack us.

We have discussed evolutionary theories of self-deception. In *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis offers a "Socratic myth" of evolution (Lewis, 1940). By "Socratic myth" he means an account of what may really have been a historical fact, not a "symbolic representation of non-historical truth" (p.71 ff). For a long time – and remember that the Christian God is outside of time – God

perfected animal form, first to have opposable thumbs, jaws, teeth and throat capable of speech, and a brain capable of rational thought. This kind of creature could have existed a long time without being human, even if modern archaeologists might mistake it for human. It was only an animal because it was directed to purely material ends. Lewis proposes that, at some point, God infused into this creature's physiology and psychology a "new consciousness" which:

- could say "I" and "me";
- could look upon itself as an object;
- knew God;
- could make judgments of truth, beauty and goodness;
- was – not *outside* of time, as God is – but far enough "above" time that it could perceive time flowing past.

This new kind of consciousness, says Lewis, ruled the organism and was not restricted to events in the brain. Even things like digestion and circulation were under the control of its will. This creature chose which appetites would be presented to its will. The creature was not only in full command of his entire self, but of the lower animals: "...man was made to be the priest and even, in one sense, the Christ, of the animals". God came first to these creatures, without effort.

Then, at some point, someone or something whispered in these creatures' ears that they could and should take the place of God. They could decide for themselves what was good and what was evil. If the good you want is different from the good other people want, you can split yourself off from them. Get what you want for yourself. Do you hear all those people accusing you of not being good for insisting on having what you want? Accuse them right back! Better

yet, make them and their good out to be less good and important than you and your good. You are now superior to them – doesn't that feel good? Yes, that's what you really want -to feel good about yourself. Even feel yourself to be the good! And if you feel it strongly enough, it must be true. But now you are living in unreality, in your own fantasy world. If others threaten your world, you are justified in destroying them. But this is a lie. Those pesky others are not how they are represented in your fantasies. They are made in the image of God just as much as you are. As Lewis says:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously—no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. And our charity must be real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner—no mere tolerance or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment. Next to the

Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.

Is the Socratic myth “out of bounds”? Highly respected psychologists have come up with similar theories. Compare Lewis’ Socratic myth with Jonathan Haidt’s “metaphorical history of life on earth” (Haidt, 2012). For roughly the first billion years of life on earth, only prokaryotic cells such as bacteria existed, all operating as solo operations and reproducing copies of themselves. Around 2 billion years ago, two bacteria combined in a single membrane, and benefited from cooperation and division of labor. There was no competition between organelles since they could reproduce only as part of the cell. A few hundred million years later, some of these eukaryotic cells formed multicellular organisms in which each cell had the same genes. A group of cells has become an organism able to divide labor among its cells, and these organisms spread over the earth. Haidt goes on to postulate that morality evolved by identifying the adaptive challenges of social life discussed in the evolutionary psychology literature and connecting these to virtues. Frans deWaal also believes morality evolved (de Waal, 2014).

Reducing all of reality to what can be known scientifically is an unjustified assumption, but convenient for some people. Is logic part of reality? It is not something physical that we can study physically, but if it isn’t real, how can we even think? The mind? Even atheist philosophers think that reductionist materialism is false (Nagel, 2012). Perhaps Satan also conceals his existence through influencing us to engage in splitting, keeping separate things that are supposed to go together. In *Perelandra*, the first chapter, C.S. Lewis presents a materialist starting to suspect that the material world may not really be all there is, there really might be supernatural things:

*“...I tried to dispel my growing sense of malaise by analyzing it. What, after all, was I afraid of? The moment that I had put this question I regretted it. Up till then I had tried to pretend that I was feeling only distaste, or embarrassment, or even boredom. But the mere word afraid had let the cat out of the bag. [NB words play a big role in some kinds of self-deception]. I realized that my emotion was neither more, nor less, nor other, than Fear. [NB, Peck believes that evil people are driven by fear. I think they choose to live their lives out of fear instead of love, and over time, become unable to give or receive love]. ....The truth was that all that I had heard about them served to connect two things which one’s mind tends to keep separate, [split] and that connection gave one a sort of shock”.*

He is describing a form of splitting – one way we deceive ourselves; since God is Truth (the capital is essential) and Satan is the Father of All lies, Satan wants to split apart things that are meant to go together, to keep us away from The Truth. Not all of reality can be physically seen.

### Habits, Virtues and Vices

In the course of our lives, we make choices that move us closer to the true self God wants us to be or more of the false self we invent ourselves. God wants us to mature into our true selves so that we enjoy what is truly good, not just apparently good. This requires us to be able to determine what is better or worse in our choices and actions. In my religion, healthy habits – virtues – give us the freedom to choose the true good easily and with pleasure. Vices make us less able to evaluate and interpret evidence accurately, so that we choose lesser goods, or what only appears to be good to us at the moment.

Catholic Church teaching on evolution is that our bodies could have evolved, but not our souls. Humans are “hylomorphic” beings – composites of body and soul, that is, partly material and partly immaterial. Now, there are things we can do with our bodies that help turn us into a sort of person who sees and hears reality more or less clearly. We form habits, including virtues and vices, that involve neural connections in our brains. Becoming more virtuous helps us see reality more clearly, and becoming more vicious does the opposite. Therefore the study of how habits, virtues and vices are formed should be high on the research agenda if we choose to seriously study evil scientifically. In fact, I believe we can add habits to the list of things that can be explained in terms of narcissism: narcissists develop habits that are not conducive to finding the true selves that God is trying to lead them to. In Aquinas’ Treatise on Habits (Aquinas, 1948) a habitus is more than just a routine or something we get used to. It is a quality which disposes us to act in certain ways, either in regard to oneself or others. It becomes part of either the true or false self, something one craves, and helps determine how one relates to self and others. We need to align our habits with our highest nature, which, being made in the image of God, means we need to extend the reign of reason in our lives.

### Ambitions and Passions

If we are unable to accurately discern the true good, our ambitions and passions will also influence us to deceive ourselves. Laziness is a prime reason Peck thinks we drift into evil, and that includes intellectual laziness and laziness about matters of faith. As my favorite writer says in *The Great Divorce*:



*“Our opinions were not honestly come by. We simply found ourselves in contact with a certain current of ideas and plunged into it because it seemed modern and successful. At college, you know, we just started automatically writing the kind of essays that got good marks and saying the kinds of things that won applause” [and a little later] “You know that you and I were playing with loaded dice. We didn’t want the other to be true. We were afraid of...a breach with the spirit of the age, afraid of ridicule, afraid (above all) of real spiritual fears and hopes.”*

*“Having allowed oneself to drift, unresisting, unpraying, accepting every half-conscious solicitation from our desires, we reached a point where we no longer believed the Faith. Just in the same way, a jealous man, drifting and unresisting, reaches a point at which he believes lies about his best friend: a drunkard reaches a point at which (for the moment) he actually believes that another glass will do him no harm. The beliefs are sincere in the sense that they do occur as psychological events in the man’s mind. If that’s what you mean by sincerity they are sincere, and so were ours. But errors that are sincere in that sense are not innocent (Lewis, 1946).”*

One powerful passion is fear. Peck says that evil people are driven by fear. When we choose to live our lives out of fear rather than love, at the limit we become incapable of giving or receiving love. Fear and anxiety are active areas of research in psychiatry, psychology and biology, which I have had some experience in (Hettema, Aggen, Kubarych, Neale, & Kendler, 2015; Kubarych, Aggen, Hettema, Kendler, & Neale, 2008, 2010).

Part of what makes self-deception such a difficult problem is that many do not think it is possible for the same person to be both deceiver and deceived. I believe this may be due to materialist

assumptions that much work in the philosophy of mind challenges (Feser, 2005; Nagel, 2012). I realize that the notion of a particular type of non-material being, traditionally known as devils or demons (there are also good angels trying to influence us in the opposite direction), trying to deceive us will sound preposterous to some readers. I invite them to skip this section and read instead renowned atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel's arguments that a purely materialist conception of nature is "almost certainly false" (Nagel, 2012). I confess, however, that mostly I include it because I think it is true. I believe that there really are such unseen beings, and that, in the immaterial space of mind and reason, try to influence us to reason toward one practical conclusion rather than another.

A short, accessible and brilliant depiction of ways in which this happens is *The Screwtape Letters* (Lewis, 2013/1942). The real situation may not be solely the individual human trying to lie to himself, but immaterial beings making suggestions that the person chooses to listen to and cooperate with. I have long regarded *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis as a gold mine of brilliant insights into self-deception. In the preface, Lewis said his symbolism allowed him to do away with the:

*"...absurd fancy that devils are engaged in the disinterested pursuit of something called Evil (the capital is essential). Mine have no use for any such turnip ghost. Bad angels, like bad men, are entirely practical. They have two motives. The first is fear of punishment...Their second motive is a kind of hunger. I feign that devils can, in a spiritual sense, eat one another; and us. Even in human life we have seen the passion to dominate, almost to digest, one's fellow; to make his whole intellectual and emotional life merely an extension of one's own – to hate one's hatreds and resent one's grievances and indulge one's egoism through him as well as through oneself.*

*His own little store of passion must of course be suppressed to make room for ours. If he resists this suppression he is being very selfish.”*

*On earth this desire is often called “love”. In hell I feign that they recognise it as hunger. But there the hunger is more ravenous, and a fuller satisfaction is possible. There, I suggest, the stronger spirit – there are perhaps no bodies to impede the operation – can really and irrevocably suck the weaker into itself and permanently gorge its own being on the weaker’s outraged individuality. It is (I feign) for this that devils desire human souls and the souls of one another.”*

Let us now turn our attention to conscience, through which Christians believe The Truth speaks to us, and would seem to be a prime target for the Father of All Lies to corrupt.