

# **Cheating at Solitaire: The Danger of Self-Deception in Pastoral and Counselling Ministry**

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## **Abstract**

‘Cheating at Solitaire’ deals with self-deception and attempts to answer questions such as, what is self-deception, how does moral reasoning go wrong, what is the relationship between self-deception and delusion, and how can self-deception be prevented? The intent is to make pastors and counsellors aware of the danger of self-deception and its potential negative influence on ministry and mental wellbeing. In contrast to Buddhist-based mindfulness, honest Spirit-guided self-awareness is suggested as an antidote, and five steps in taking inventory of who we are in God’s eyes are outlined. It is concluded that although most pastors and counsellors are upright and ethical professionals, who strive to live with authenticity and integrity, it would be beneficial to admit and be more aware of one’s propensity for self-deceit.

## **Introduction**

I borrowed the phrase ‘cheating at solitaire’ from an article about self-deception, written from a business perspective exploring relationship between the themes of executive mental health and organisational performance (Litz 2003). Thus, the question I would like to pose is this: will pastors and Christian counsellors ‘cheat at solitaire’? Self-

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

deception is so undeniable a fact of human life that if anyone tried to deny its existence, the proper response would be to accuse this person of it (Wood 2009). Unfortunately, pastors and counsellors are not immune to this, and self-deception remains an ever present danger in pastoral and counselling ministry.

In his article, Litz (2003) points out that the occurrence of self-deception, and its negative impact on organisational performance, has surprisingly had very little written about it in management literature. Likewise, and in spite of the incidence of high-profile pastors' and counsellors' involvement, self-deception has not been given much attention in pastoral ministry. Botha (2005), reflecting theologically on self-deception, points out that one would expect, given our ability to live in false realities of 'fantastical fictions', that the problem of self-deception would be studied by theologians and biblical scholars, but finds surprising that it appears to be avoided by these disciplines.

The intent of this article is to make pastors and counsellors aware of the danger of self-deception, by providing a better understanding of it, and, in particular, to realise its potential negative influence on pastoral and counselling ministry and mental wellbeing. Thus, the following questions require discourse: what is self-deception? How does moral reasoning go wrong? What is the relationship between self-deception and delusion, and how can self-deception be prevented or its effects be minimised?

## **1. What is Self-Deception?**

A precise definition of self-deception is difficult. Some would say it is probably a vain endeavour. Botha (2005), for example, points out that self-deception includes a wide variety of behaviours and mental experiences which, in themselves, are related to one another. He lists

honest mistakes, phony feelings, irrationality, wishful thinking, delusions, difficulties with memory and language, avoidance, ignorance, hypocrisy, maintenance of self-esteem, false belief, blind faith, and even hypnosis. However, self-deception is more than just the individual components. It is more than just rationalization or denial. Self-deception is similar to, but distinct from, psychological phenomena like wishful thinking, and more than just self-serving bias (Litz 2003). In wishful thinking, one wants something to be true, but remains aware that it is not. Self-deception, in addition, requires that one commits one's consciousness to believe, and that, on the basis of the wish, one's belief is behaviourally manifested.

It is generally an accepted fact that to deceive is to make someone believe what is untrue. This logically implies that self-deception is the deceiving of oneself as to one's true feelings, motives, circumstances, and actions—believing what is untrue. Clearly, belief is intrinsically involved in self-deception. It is only when one's belief-system is challenged and evidence is brought forth that contradicts this belief that the dynamic aspects of self-deceiving faith are clearly seen. Noordhof (2009) explains that there are two apparent paradoxes that lie at the heart of discussions of self-deception, namely, one focusing on belief, the other on intention. The *belief paradox* concerns how the self-deceived person can combine both 'the belief that p' and 'the belief that not-p'. The *intention paradox* concerns how the self-deceived can intend to believe 'that p', and manage it, without knowing what they are up to (believing 'not-p'), and be able to make it in some way legally acceptable. Writing in the fourth century BC, the Greek scholar Demosthenes noted the ease with which self-delusion occurs, noting that 'nothing is so easy than to deceive one's self, for that which we wish, we readily believe.'

Scripture describes deceived people as looking at themselves in a mirror, and immediately forgetting what they looked like (Jas 1:19–27). The danger of self-deception in pastoral and counselling ministry is not that one just 'forgets what one looks like', but that one is able to hold two contradicting 'pictures' of oneself, at the same time. Self-deception, in this sense, is consequently about finding a way not to admit to ourselves something we recognize as true but do not wish to believe. The Arbinger Institute (2002) defines self-deception as the state of not knowing and resisting the possibility that there is a problem, while one may actually be the problem oneself. Researchers seem to suggest that four criteria must be satisfied simultaneously for the state of self-deception to exist (Litz 2003):

1. A person must hold two contradictory beliefs.
2. These beliefs must be held simultaneously.
3. Only one of these beliefs must be subject to awareness.
4. The state of non-awareness, that is, the choice of what the individual chooses not to think about, is intentional.

Self-deception involves the subversion of the evidence-based belief formation process (the deception) and the subversion is due to the agent's own desires (the self). Van Leeuwen (2007) further points out that self-deception seems paradoxical, noting three issues. First, it seems that self-deception involves a conceptual contradiction—in order to deceive one must believe the contrary of the deception one is perpetrating, but if one believes the contrary, it seems impossible for that very self to believe the deception. This represents a spiritual or belief component in self-deception. Second, a view of the mind (the psychological component) that seats rationality as an important function, and exhaustive mental ability, has become widely accepted. The idea of attributing irrational beliefs to people does not make sense, for we find it difficult to understand someone's beliefs, unless they are

rational. But the mind can be deceived and self-deception is highly irrational. Third, from a bio-genetic perspective of cognitive mechanisms of the brain, we know that we are well-equipped to provide reliable information about ourselves and our environment. Self-deception, however, undermines the knowledge we have of ourselves and the world. Dyck and Padilla (2009) refer to the phenomenal advances in the neurosciences and the discoveries about our nature as moral beings. Neuropsychology has modified how we view our brain capacity for sensible (and non-sensible) experiences. It not only helps us understand how self-deception occurs, but it also creates hope through new research on brain regenerativity and plasticity, and psychopharmacology does offer new treatment options.

So, how does one make sense of the term 'self-deception'? We can draw divisions between parts of the mind so that one part can count as deceiving the other, or we can focus on the development of a belief-system that simultaneously believes 'p' and 'not p' (Moomal and Henzi 2000). Self-deception can be seen as the mind's way of protecting itself from psychological pain, but pain, physical and psychological, occurs for biological reasons. Self-deception is more than just an 'active misrepresentation of reality to the conscious mind' (Van Leeuwen 2007). To advance our understanding of our capacity for self-deception as a property of being human, it seems clear that we should understand it from an integrated bio-psycho-social-spiritual perspective.

## **2. How Moral Reasoning Goes Wrong: Self-Deception**

Botha (2005) points out that in probing the concept of self-deception, we become aware that we are facing something pervasive and ever-present: 'the human propensity for self-delusion is rooted, not merely in

the way we choose to interpret our experience, nor in occasional pathologies of experience, but in the very formation of experience.'

At its core, the concept of self-deception is an ethical issue. Whether it is the missionary that holds strong racist views, while ministering to the very same people-group he/she hates; or the pastor who secretly visits prostitutes, while fervently condemning immoral behaviour from the pulpit, or the prominent politician who abuses his/her powers to have sexual relationships with a staff member, while promoting strong marriage and family laws in parliament, it is clear that defective moral reasoning and self-deception are related. Self-deception is not harmless, for it undermines one's agency and it gradually erodes moral ethical values. As Van Leeuwen and Neil (2009) point out that 'self-deception does not produce choice-worthy happiness'. It also does not benefit the mental wellbeing of the person or bring glory to God within the body of believers.

We can so easily deceive ourselves as a consequence of our capacity (a dark legacy of the Fall) to wilfully disregard our intuitive perception of moral value in favour of the attractive (though self-deceptive) creations of our socially constructed imaginations (Wood 2009). In ethical and moral decision-making, our imaginative abilities give us a way to conserve an image of ourselves as morally upright and blameless, even when we are not. According to Pascal (in Wood 2009), the central threat to being morally upright is not ignorance of the moral law or moral weakness, but rather, the main threat to the moral life is self-deception. As such, moral wrongdoing is usually a product of self-deceptive moral reasoning. The heart—our special cognitive faculty—intuitively perceives moral value and produces a spontaneous moral judgment and conviction that is both cognitive and affective. The heart perceives value, but imagination bestows value. Our imagination determines the subjective moral value of objects and situations

(depending on how we understand and interpret them), but our imagination can be a deceptive and self-serving faculty. It is therefore easy to see why we are highly likely to come to believe that our self-serving, but enticing, imaginative fantasies are true. Our imaginative fantasies are therefore enticing because we ourselves voluntarily construct them as maximally attractive.

How can one both know and not know the 'truth' simultaneously? At the beginning of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud (whose theories led to the separation of mind, brain, and spirit) proposed that we all constantly hide the truth from ourselves, often with disastrous results. To Freud, self-deception follows from defence mechanisms that people activate as protection against recognising the actual, but unacceptable motivations of behaviour. More recently, scholars have analysed the possible causes, effects, tactics, and moral value implications of self-deception from an integrated perspective (overcoming the mind-brain-spirit split). It seems self-evident that self-deception serves to camouflage one's errors, weaknesses, or wrongdoings (sinful behaviour from a biblical perspective). Whether it is to reinforce self-esteem or to protect self-image, a self-deceived person persistently avoids acknowledging the truth, even when it would normally be appropriate to do so (Botha 2005). Truth is a function of our morality and it matters. Our ability to know 'truth' and to live authentically is dependent on our capacity to avoid the pitfall of self-deception. So, the challenge in avoiding self-deception becomes confession of failure, acknowledgement of sinful behaviour, acceptance of loss and ineptitude, experiencing grace, committing to virtuous living, and pursuing a moral character with integrity.

### 3. Self-Deception, Dissociation, and Delusion: the 'Swaggart Blind-Spot'

The Hartford Institute for Religion Research (1999) found that 23 per cent of ministers had some sort of sexual indiscretion that caused a rupture between pastor and congregation. There is no statistically significant difference between the occurrence of sexual misconduct between pastors, pastoral counsellors, Christian counsellors, secular counsellors, therapists, and psychologists. Therapists (95 per cent male and 76 per cent female), acknowledge having been sexually attracted to their patients on occasion, and at least 20 per cent of clients report that they had sexual encounters with their therapist (Remley 2010). How is it possible that in spite of the most stringent ethical guidelines and codes so strongly supported by therapists, they do the opposite of what is required? Only through self-deception!

Self-deception usually emerges in the context of our self-conscious and reflective efforts to solve an unsettling question and the related cognitive dissonance. When confronted with two opposing views (cognitive dissonance), one either tries to resolve it, or find a way of reducing the dissonance. In this way, says Scott-Kakures (2009), self-deception is a problem and a failing that springs from distinctive human capacities and abilities, capacities and abilities that are required for and engaged in our self-conscious efforts to settle questions. However, settling questions is an unsettling business. It is my submission that if dissonance reduction fails, and the questions are not settled (current cognitive perspective can rule out neither p nor not-p), the self-deception process proceeds with dissociation and delusions—developing what I refer to as the 'Swaggart Blind Spot'.<sup>2</sup> While

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<sup>2</sup> In February 1988, Swaggart, a very well-known Pentecostal American pastor, teacher, musician, television host, and televangelist, stirred controversy after a private



adhering to and promoting the one belief (that *p*), the self-deceived person seems to be dissociated from the other belief (not *p*), and *vice versa*. While engaging with the one, the other seems to be hidden away in the 'blind spot'. So, in such a case, two opposing cognitions that in themselves could well not stand in a consonant relationship can, nonetheless, be brought into a dissonant and inharmonious relationship by virtue of the presence of the dissociative blind spot. Dyck and Padilla (2009) state that people can indeed be so blinded that they engage in evil actions, seeking happiness for themselves through their passions and appetites in pursuit of overindulgence and excess.

In some way, the dissociation leads to a full-blown delusion, in which the subjects lose their grip on reality with regard to certain subject matter, with the result that they have little chance of being able to make appropriate cognitive adjustments to the way the world is (Noordhof 2009). The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (2000) defines delusions as 'a false belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly sustained despite what almost everybody else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof to the contrary.' This identified mental instability is an essential feature in self-deception. Noordhof (2009) observed that 'the delusory belief persists even if subjects recognise that they would not believe it if it were somebody else's belief.'

Once dissociation takes place and delusions appear, intervention, care-giving, therapy, and so on, seem to have very little preventative power.

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investigation found he had solicited a prostitute for sex. Initially, Swaggart denied the accusations; but, as a media investigation proceeded, he acknowledged that some allegations were true. He later apologised for the acts in a televised broadcast and his contriving confession is well-remembered.

Pastors and Christian counsellors should be made aware to get help at the earliest development of, or indication of, self-deception happening.

#### **4. Preventing Self-Deception: Honest Self-Awareness**

Taking inventory of who we are in God's eyes, Morgan (2011) reminds us of the eminent Swiss psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, who said that all of us have a shadow self. Jung compared our shadow of self to a long bag filled with all the 'dark parts of the self' that we would prefer to keep hidden and secret. From time to time, we look inside the bag as we drag it along, but it contains the dark parts of ourselves that we like to deny. It contains all the evil 'junk' that divides our hearts, the negative 'paraphernalia' that hurts our relationships, the toxic stuff that is undeniably part of all of us. Most prefer not to face it or take responsibility for these shadows in the heart. The difficulty is that, eventually, the shadow of the self escapes. Instead of accepting it and working with it, we tend to blame others (even demonise others), we inflict pain on others, and in self-deception, we also inflict pain on ourselves. Mental health practitioners (and pastors) should not assume that they are invulnerable to impairment (Ford 2006).

Morgan (2011) encourages us to embrace and face the parts of the heart and deceptive intentions that do not take us to God. So, the first step in preventing self-deception is to be made aware that we all have the ability and propensity to prevent self-deception.

Pienaar (2009) postulates that self-awareness is the key to combating the self-deception trap. Ford (2006) says that self-awareness is in fact a key aspect of professionalism. Corey et al (2007) note that professionals, who work intimately with others, have a personal and professional responsibility and commitment to self-awareness—being aware of their own feelings, needs, problems, life issues, and

'unfinished business'. Whereas counselling training does give attention to personalisation issues and even requires student-counsellors to go for therapy, prospective pastors are seldom trained to be skilled in this area. Ethical and legal issues (e.g. dual-relationships, confidentiality, transference, and counter-transference) should be part of pastoral training (Sanders 1997). The pastor may be trained to do house visitation, but it is unlikely that anyone has told the pastor what to do in a situation in which a congregant admits to having a sexual dream about him/her. What is the pastor to do if he/she is stimulated by this revelation? Does the pastor call the elders for a board meeting? I think not. The cognitive dissonance will most likely be internalised and it could be the first step towards self-deception. Unresolved personal issues, feelings, and problems can gradually subvert professional competence and 'grease the slide into the abyss of burnout or an unethical dual relationship' (Ford 2006).

Parker and Davis (2009), using the perspectives of Winnicott, acknowledge that every person has a 'false self', ranging from the healthy to the truly split-off compliant false self, which is mistaken for the whole. On the continuum, there are people with healthy ego capacities, and conversely, at the pathological end of the false-self continuum are people with impaired ego capacities. Such individuals will almost always act out of the false self. Rather than allowing congregants, pastors, and counsellors to come to their own conclusions regarding morality, the church's commanding culture may instead necessitate the use of the false self and, therefore, could facilitate self-deception. Hands and Fehr (1993) point out that clergy often maintain a facade of professionalism, while their pain is hidden. In fear of shame and condemnation, they have no place to admit the truth. The church should be a safe-place where the 'shadow self' can be acknowledged and explored.

Instead, churches might be encouraging self-deception in their offer of authoritative foreclosed answers to questions of morality. Parker and Davis (2009) explain that the rigid moral stances of the church might implicitly demand unquestionable obedience from all, while it forbids any critical or honest self-awareness. I would suggest that all pastors should seek out adequately trained and skilled therapists to come alongside them in their quest for honest self-awareness, thus preventing the pitfalls of self-deception. All counsellors should be involved in ongoing supervision that goes beyond case-conferencing to dealing with personalisation issues.

Whenever a believer's relationship with God is experienced as unable to 'hold the person' and accommodate his or her feelings (especially negative ones), there is a great likelihood that the person will cope with the cognitive dissonance by using their false self. The pastor or counsellor may experience God (and the church) as unable to receive one's aggression, hatred, or other kinds of sinfulness. Then they may recurrently present a false self which complies with this perception of God and progressively move towards self-deception. The pastor or counsellor, who perceives God as requiring only strength and perfection, while not allowing or accepting human weakness or failure, may hide self-aspects that are thought to be unacceptable in their 'blind-spot'. Parker and Davis (2009) say that even in prayer the believer might only express an acceptable image of self.

The second step in preventing self-deception requires a paradigm shift for pastors and counsellors. In other words, pastors and counsellors must move away from believing that hyper-spirituality and perfection is required to a place where honest self-awareness is not only accepted, but is regarded as being a virtue.

The third step in preventing self-deception is to create an environment of non-judgemental acceptance and unconditional love, characterised by safety, nurturance, responsiveness, and consistency. Pastors and counsellors should develop relationships that erode the need for self-deception. Within a care-giving setting, such ministry or intervention must occur within the context of the therapeutic relationship. This requires wise self-disclosure that is 'boundaried'—not dramatic TV exposés or brave (foolish) public confessions. The 'Jerry-Springer-let-it-all-out-in-public'<sup>3</sup> style is not what is needed. What is needed is a safe care-giving holding environment. Churches might be able to compensate for their care-giving failures by at least providing good-enough holding environments that will support authentic living. The church and church leaders can create the macro environment for authentic living, but the safe environment needed for honest self-awareness must be contained. Congregants, friends, and family may be well-intentioned, but they have neither the skills nor the 'know-how' to deal with honest self-disclosure. Again, I would urge those in ministry to seek out professional help, where confidentiality and therapeutic safety are at least somewhat guaranteed.

The fourth step in preventing self-deception is to develop adequate self-care skills. Cottone and Tarvydas (2007) list the following: continuing education, consultation and supervision, networking, and stress-management strategies as professional self-care skills. They suggest five personal self-care skills, namely, (a) healthy personal habits, (b) attention to relationships, (c) recreational activities, (d) relaxation and centeredness, and (e) self-exploration and awareness. In similar vein Hands and Fehr (1993) direct those in ministry towards healthy

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<sup>3</sup> Jerry Springer (born February 13, 1944) is an English-born American television presenter, best known as host of the tabloid talk show *The Jerry Springer Show* since its debut in 1991.

integration, encouraging self-appreciation and intimacy with God, self, and others. One way that pastors and pastoral-care workers can nurture their true self, is to allow for the spontaneous gestures and honest authentic living of their congregants, and, by allowing themselves the same. Self-care does not come naturally; we have to overcome our inertia tendencies and actively and purposefully pursue self-care. Ultimately, say Hands and Fehr (1993), 'the attaining of self-intimacy is a spiritual quest'.

The fifth step in preventing self-deception is to develop an integrated spirituality. Crook (2007) presents a Christian method for making moral and ethical decisions. Sometimes, the choice between right and wrong seems so clear-cut that no decision appears to be necessary. However, most decision making is much more complicated, and as we have seen, once self-deception sets in, moral reasoning is compromised. Crook (2007) points us to the Bible, Christian community, and personal experience as sources of guidance. His basic stance, however, is 'that Christian morality is decision and action emanating from character that is shaped by a faith relationship with Christ'. Whereas scripture and church are objective realities that are open to discussion and interpretation that can be accepted or rejected, personal experience is subjective and therefore more difficult to deal with and, as we have seen, vulnerable to self-deception. Crook (2007) explains that ultimately, the responsibility falls on the individual to make personal judgements, using their mind, trusting the leading of the Holy Spirit, and allowing for the prompting of their conscience. Our mind can be tricked (deceived), our conscience can be unreliable, and we might misunderstand the prompting of the Spirit. An integrated spirituality seems to be required to prevent self-deception.

With the emergence of Zen Buddhist-based Mindfulness Therapy infiltrating Christian counselling, it is important to note here that

mindfulness and self-enhancement (self-promoting illusions) were positively correlated. Boatright and McIntosh (2008) found that the data indicated that the more participants reported being 'mindful', the more they reported self-aggrandising illusions. A distinction should be made between 'honest self-awareness and 'mindfulness'. Mindfulness requires non-judgmental, non-elaborative, present-awareness. To be mindful entails experiencing what arises within the presently aware mind (i.e. thoughts, aversions, attachments, desires, memories, ideas, and sensory input are all witnessed objectively, in a non-judgmental, non-attached manner). This is in stark contrast to the work of the Holy Spirit who reveals to us our sinful heart and convicts us of wrongdoing. It is not an emptying of the mind, but an infilling of the Spirit!

The notion of an integrated spirituality would therefore extend to the nurturance of holistic, integrated images of the Trinity. A practical way of promoting a more integrated spirituality is the use of scriptural passages that encourage a movement toward more authentic living and openness to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Speaking of the Holy Spirit (John 7:38–39), Jesus said: 'He who believes in Me [who cleaves to and trusts in and relies on Me] as the Scripture has said, "From his innermost being shall flow [continuously] springs and rivers of living water"' (AB). Integrated spirituality requires and emphasises the need to be 'continuously filled with the Spirit' (Eph 5:18). As Crook (2007) concludes, 'Life in the Spirit entails awareness of the presence of God, a sense of fellowship with other believers, and a common commitment to the truth that unites people under the presence of God.'

Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
Test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
Point out anything in me that offends you,  
and lead me along the path of everlasting life. (Ps 139:23–24, NLT)

## Conclusion

Most pastors and counsellors are upright and ethical professionals who strive to live with authenticity and integrity. However, all can benefit from becoming aware of and accepting the fact that we all have the ability and propensity to self-deception. We can all benefit by challenging some of the prevailing paradigms while we strive to make the church a safer and more healing environment. With an active and vibrant integrated spirituality we can learn to practise good self-care.

Hopefully, these reflections on self-deception will help pastors and Christian counsellors not to 'cheat at solitaire'.

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