

## Self-Deception in Current Philosophical Discussions and Its Importance in Theology

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### Abstract

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Self-deception has been considered a universal human phenomenon throughout centuries by philosophers. Self-deception is basically lying to self which often involves unconscious mental processes, has both cognitive and volitional elements, and has the intention of keeping oneself from conscious acknowledgment of uncomfortable truths. Self-deceivers are culpable since they are responsible for how they choose to interpret the evidence and hide the truth from themselves. Collective self-deception can have far greater consequences than individual self-deception. To avoid self-deception, a commitment to seek and love the truth courageously even at personal costs is necessary. Self-deception is also an important theological concept closely related to sin, and it is especially dangerous when it involves our assurance of salvation and when we refuse to suffer for our faith. God often uses suffering in life to draw us out of our self-deception by revealing what is in our heart, leading us to repentance and righteousness, which in turn allows us to know God and thereby ourselves better.

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**Keywords:** self-deception, lying, self-awareness, truth, sin, disordered love

### 1. Introduction

Self-deception is one of the most distinguishing marks of humanity. As Gregg Ten Elshof (2009) states: Philosophers, social scientists, and psychologists have long been aware of the pervasive reality of self-deception. For centuries, it has been called upon to explain various forms of irrationality and dysfunction. Interestingly, it has also been called upon to explain survival and success in a variety of contexts. Historically, few masters of Christian spirituality have failed to notice the significance of self-deception. Christian thinkers through the ages have had a special interest in the bearing of self-deception on the Christian life and the pursuit of—or flight from—God, and it has long served as a key element in the explanation of sin, moral failure, and the avoidance of God.

Self-deception is related to a wide variety of phenomena such as irrationality, wishful thinking, delusions, imperfect memory, ignorance, avoidance, hypocrisy, maintenance of self-respect, and false belief (Botha, 2005). We commonly encounter self-deception in our lives. One example would be drug and alcohol addiction. Addicts typically deceive themselves into thinking that they are in control (Levy, 2002). They refuse to face the truth about themselves. So existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre viewed self-deception as the primary means to avoid self-awareness (Botha, 2005). Sartre used the expression “bad faith” to describe self-deception because it is a false belief about oneself.

Benjamin Franklin once quipped, “who has deceived thee so often as thyself?” (Bahnsen, 1995). It is a fundamental experience and the starting point of philosophy since Socrates (Hällén, 2011). As Bahnsen (1995) points out, “From what was said about it by Plato, Rousseau, Goethe, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, one would learn how dubious a view it is that men really want the truth when the truth happens to be uncomfortable for them.”

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Crites (1979) even argues that the human propensity for self-deception is rooted, not merely in the way we choose to interpret our experience, but in the very formation of experience. In this paper I will review the current understanding of self-deception in philosophical discussions addressing some of the key questions raised by philosophers, and then attempt to present self-deception as an important theological concept which we ignore at our peril.

## **2. Current Understanding of Self-Deception in Philosophical Discussions**

### **2.1 What is Self-Deception?**

We use various expressions to describe self-deception: "He kept telling himself the same old lie," "She obstinately rejected the truth, even though it was clear she recognized it," "He was a victim of self-inflicted ignorance," "She intentionally misled herself," "He didn't know because he didn't want to know," "She deliberately closed her eyes to the evidence," "He has blocked out all knowledge of what really happened," etc. (Alton, 1985). Psychologists consider self-deception as a ubiquitous phenomenon and view virtually all humans as constantly hiding the truth from themselves (Botha, 2005). Because of the universal phenomenon of self-deception in human experience, we usually do not accept at face value what people say about themselves, not because we think they are insincere, but because we know intuitively that most of us suffer from sincere confusion and delusion when it comes to our self-understanding (Crites, 1979).

#### **2.1.1 Does It Believe and Disbelieve the Same Proposition?**

Raphael Demos' article "Lying to Oneself" in 1960 started a critical scrutiny of the notion of self-deception among the philosophers of the twentieth century. As the discussion progressed, several key issues were raised. One of the crucial issues about self-deception is whether self-deceivers must believe and disbelieve the same proposition (Audi, 1988; Demos, 1960). Because it sounds contradictory and paradoxical, there have been various attempts to develop a non-contradictory model of self-deception. However, our experience tells us that contradiction does sometimes exist between what we believe and what we know (though not acknowledged) (Gurrey, 1989). What we "know" is what we truly believe deep in our heart, and what we "believe" is what we are deceiving ourselves into believing. For example, a cancer patient knows in her heart that she is dying but believes that she is on her way to recovery to keep her hope alive. So self-deception is a special kind of lying to ourselves to protect a particular interest (Alton, 1985; Demos, 1960), and it does involve believing and disbelieving the same proposition in a qualified way.

#### **2.1.2 Is It Conscious or Unconscious?**

Is this lying to self done consciously or unconsciously? Audi (1988) argues that there is a tension in self-deception between the sense of evidence which threatens to lift the veil concealing from consciousness one's knowledge of the truth, and the desires or needs unconsciously pulling against one's grasp of the evidence and blocking one's perception of the truth. Thus one common way of explaining self-deception is to distinguish between conscious beliefs and unconscious beliefs: in self-deception I consciously believe that  $p$ , but unconsciously I disbelieve  $p$ . Some philosophers such as Sartre reject the whole concept of unconscious mental processes and account for self-deception as an entirely conscious process (A. W. Wood, 1988). However, it would be difficult to maintain that there is no unconscious mental process involved in self-deception when much of our thought processes are carried out without conscious awareness (Fingarette, 1969). So the majority opinion of philosophers is that self-deception often involves unconscious mental processes.

#### **2.1.3 Is It Volitional or Cognitive?**

Another issue raised by philosophers is whether self-deception is more volitional (a matter of one's actions such as focusing one's attention and selecting one's sources of evidence) or cognitive (a matter of belief and knowledge) (Audi, 1988). Audi comes down on the side of cognitive self-deception when he states that "self-deception is primarily a state in which a kind of psychological dissociation gives rise to a disparity between what the self-deceiver knows, albeit unconsciously, and what he avows or is disposed to avow."

Baron (1988) also takes this cognitive approach when he states that self-deception corrupts our belief-forming processes when we “allow our wishes that thing be a certain way to play an increasingly dominant role in shaping how we see the world.” Botha (2005) points out that self-deception involves belief and reasoning as self-deceivers are concerned about rationality though we might call it quasi-rationality.

Herbert Fingarette is the main proponent of the volitional view of self-deception. Fingarette (1969) argues that self-deception is a matter of action, a disavowal, or refusal to spell out (make explicit) one’s undesirable “life engagements.” He proposes that consciousness be viewed not as a mental mirror but as the exercise of spelling out of our engagement in the world. The rationale for this is that people are in general not explicitly conscious of their engagement in the world, and only when they spell out some engagement, they become explicitly conscious of that engagement (Fingarette, 1969). Self-deception occurs when we intentionally and persistently avoid becoming explicitly conscious of some feature of our engagement in the world (Fingarette, 1969). In other words, for Fingarette (1969), “the self-deceiver is one who is in some way engaged in the world but who disavows the engagement, who will not acknowledge it even to himself as his. That is, self-deception turns upon the personal identity one accepts rather than the belief one has.”

Bahnsen (1995) criticizes Fingarette’s approach by pointing out that his volitional view is heavily laden with cognitive notions such as belief, knowledge, and perception. However, Bahnsen’s cognitive view also contains volitional concepts—especially the notion of “attitude” is prominent in his discussion of belief (1995). Therefore, it seems best to view that both cognitive and volitional elements are involved in self-deception.

#### **2.1.4 Is It Intentional or Unintentional?**

Another frequently raised question about self-deception is whether it is intentional or unintentional. Many believe it is an intentional behavior (e.g., Alton, 1985; W. D. Wood, 2007). In this view, one way to self-deceive is self-persuasion: accepting a false interpretation of one’s situation, reinforcing it with self-talk and acting as if it were true, diverting attention from one’s knowledge and reasons for acting (W. D. Wood, 2007). Others view it as more unintentional (e.g., Hällén, 2011). This is called the deflationary model of self-deception. Hällén points out that self-deception are already at work at the level of apprehension, not a result of reasoning. In this view, biased apprehension and understanding, and deficient self-reflection play key roles in self-deception (Hällén, 2011). These are triggered by anxiety, fear or desire which produce bias in favor of false beliefs in the face of a preponderance of counter-evidence (DeWeese-Boyd, 2007). Rather than intentionally misleading oneself about what one knows, self-deception is seen as a motivated failure of self-knowledge in which one is preventing oneself from becoming aware (Hällén, 2011).

Notwithstanding some proponents for the unintentional views, there is considerable agreement that self-deception involves an intentional, but not necessarily conscious, choice to hold a belief about oneself while having a veiled awareness that the belief is false (Knapp, 2002). In summary, then, self-deception is a lying to oneself, often unconsciously, with an intention to avoid facing an uncomfortable truth about oneself.

#### **2.2 Why Self-Deception?**

We deceive ourselves because it allows us to do what we want to do and justifies what we have done (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). We are creative narrators of the stories we tell, and we believe our stories and we believe that we are objective about ourselves:

These stories are an edited version of the “real” story, devoid of all ethical implications. Through renaming actions we take and relabeling decisions we make, we turn what may be unacceptable into socially approved behaviors. . . We engage in “aggressive” accounting practices, not illegal ones. There may be some “externalities” associated with a strategy, not harmful to others or the environment. We have “collateral damage” in military campaigns, not civilian deaths (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004).

We are more easily persuaded by attractiveness than by truth, so our reasoning is often rationalization, and under the influence of desire, we often depart from rationality and believe just what we want to be true (W. D. Wood, 2007).

Are there positive benefits of self-deception? Jonathan Brown, Keith Dutton, Shelley Taylor, and other theorists have argued that mild self-deception can promote mental health (Kirsch, 2005). As DeWeese-Boyd (2008) points out, "it is common for psychologists to discuss the salutary function of self-deception, its evolutionary and adaptive place in human psychology. Our penchant for distortion, they suggest, often protects us from painful truths and enables us to flourish when a clear-eyed view of things would send us into a spiral of despair or paralyzing anxiety." In this way, self-deception does serve as a defense mechanism when truth is unbearable.

The problem is that we use self-deception even to justify evil. We are motivated by our aversion to face the painful consequences of seeing ourselves as evil. As Kirsch (2005) puts it, "Our self-deceit can bring us to view the most hideous of our actions and plans of action in an exceedingly flattering and unmerited light." We engage in self-deception because of the unacceptability of our particular engagement in the world which is incompatible with our self-identity (Fingarette, 1969). So, ironically, the movement into self-deception is rooted in a concern for integrity: "the greater the integrity of the person, and the more powerful the contrary individual inclinations, the greater is the temptation to self-deception . . ." (Fingarette, 1969). We choose to stay ignorant of some of our engagements with the world because being conscious of them threatens our self-respect and self-interest. Here is an example:

A man may think of himself as a public servant concerned with the public good. Even though he may be party to decisions which compromise the public good, he has a great deal invested in continuing to describe them as contributing to the public good. To call certain decisions he makes by their proper name would require too painful a readjustment in his primary identification of himself as a public servant. Thus our deceit can be a function of wanting to think of oneself as an honest person (Burrell & Hauerwas, 1974).

### 2.3 Are Self-Deceivers Culpable?

Questions about the relationship between self-deception and responsibility have been raised continuously among the philosophers (Nelkin, 2012). These questions are closely related to whether self-deceivers have the control over the acquisition and maintenance of their self-deceptive beliefs (Johnson & Burroughs, 2000). Some hold a non-judgmental attitude towards self-deception. For example, Fingarette (1969), following Freud, suggests a medical approach of viewing self-deceivers as victims of mental breakdown rather than as those morally responsible. Crites (1979) objects that such a view abandons the notion that self-deception is a general human phenomenon and instead approaches the self-deceivers as neurotics.

More philosophers believe that self-deceivers are morally responsible (e.g., Alton, 1985; Bahnsen, 1995; Baron, 1988; Botha, 2005; Darwall, 1988; DeWeese-Boyd, 2007; Floyd, 2004; Tenbrunsel and Messick, 2004; W. D. Wood, 2007). For example, Floyd (2004) argues that self-deceivers are culpable because they "rationalize unethical behavior, deny their complicity in criminal acts, or minimize their responsibility for others' suffering." Baron (1988) points out that self-deception can corrode one's belief-forming processes by refusing to call into question one's stories and one's sense of responsibility by refusing to engage in self-scrutiny. Self-deceivers engage in various activities such as distraction and rationalization to keep themselves from being aware of their self-deception (Johnson & Burroughs, 2000).

Those who hold that self-deceivers are culpable do so because they view that self-deception is essentially a moral problem (e.g., Hällén, 2011; W. D. Wood, 2007). We are morally responsible to carefully scrutinize our action especially when consequences of those actions could involve grave harm to others (Linehan, 1982). Self-deception helps to disguise violations of our ethical principles by eliminating negative characterizations or distorting them into positive ones (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Moral wrongdoing is usually a product of self-deceptive moral reasoning in which we recognize something to be immoral but persuade ourselves that it is moral. According to Pascal, the greatest threat to the moral life is not ignorance of the moral law or moral weakness but self-deception (W. D. Wood, 2009). William Clifford (1877) tells a story of a ship owner, which has now become a classic example of self-deception:

A ship-owner was about to send to sea an emigrant-ship. He knew that she was old, and not over well built at the first; that she had seen many seas and climes, and often had needed repairs. Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. These doubts preyed upon his mind, and made him unhappy; he thought that perhaps he ought to have her thoroughly overhauled and refitted, even though this should put him to great expense. Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections. He said to himself that she had gone safely through so many voyages and weathered so many storms that it was idle to suppose she would not come safely home from this trip also. He would put his trust in Providence, which could hardly fail to protect all these unhappy families that were leaving their fatherland to seek for better times elsewhere. He would dismiss from his mind all ungenerous suspicions about the honesty of builders and contractors. In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy; he watched her departure with a light heart, and benevolent wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new home that was to be; and he got his insurance-money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales.

What shall we say of him? Surely this, that he was verily guilty of the death of those [people]. It is admitted that he did sincerely believe in the soundness of his ship; but the sincerity of his conviction can in no wise help him, because *he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him*. He had acquired his belief not by honestly earning it in patient investigation, but by stifling his doubts. And although in the end he may have felt so sure about it that he could not think otherwise, yet inasmuch as he had knowingly and willingly worked himself into that frame of mind, he must be held responsible for it.

Clifford's conclusion is that it is morally wrong to nourish false belief by suppressing doubts and avoiding investigation. It is wrong not least because false beliefs held in self-deception can have grave consequences for the society.

#### **2.4 What is the Social Dimension of Self-Deception?**

Philosophers also acknowledge that there is a social dimension to self-deception in which other people collude in the self-deceiver's illusory presentation of self (Darwall, 1988). As Botha (2005) points out, "Since we shape our self-conceptions by our perceptions of what other people think about us, we can to some extent present ourselves in a manner that will encourage them to perceive us as we would like to be perceived." Also, as Pascal saw it, destroying the truth in one's consciousness is inseparable from destroying it in the consciousness of others, and other people often facilitate it by telling us what we want to hear (W. D. Wood, 2007). When individuals eschew self-criticism and open-minded reflection and instead evade, ignore and reinterpret evidence, they improve the climate for collective self-deception, where members of a society deceive themselves together about a matter of common concern (Baron, 1988). Many privileged members of Nazi Germany, for example, would have been involved in some kind of self-deception about the evils of their societies and their complicity in them (Darwall, 1988). Sloppy truth-seeking that is ultimately self-serving is often committed both by individuals and by groups, but collective self-deception can have far-reaching consequences. For example, we hold accountable companies that practice careless aircraft maintenance because lives of hundreds of passengers are at stake (Johnson and Burroughs, 2000). DeWeese-Boyd (2008) calls attention to the danger of collective self-deception: "While self-deception at an individual level may be serious enough, collectively it takes on monstrous proportions—e.g., the catastrophic ecological effects and deeply exploitive social relations our current consumptive patterns underwrite. Not only can such collective self-deception have calamitous consequences, it also proves much more difficult to escape."

#### **2.5 How Can We Avoid Self-Deception?**

Recognizing and correcting self-deception is difficult, but we can begin by acknowledging its pervasive and universal presence (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). The second step to take is opening ourselves to self-examination and questioning (Johnson and Burroughs, 2000). For at the core of self-deception is the self-deceivers' failure to achieve self-reflective awareness (Alton, 1985).

Socrates vigorously defended the examined life to expose self-deceptive beliefs that obscure our moral identity from us (DeWeese-Boyd, 2008). We need to question the justifications we concoct to rationalize our actions given the connection between justification and unethical behavior (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Facing truth is often painful, but in order to avoid self-deception, we must love the truth more than we love ourselves. As Gregg Ten Elshof (2009) puts it, "Self-deception occurs whenever we manage our own beliefs without an eye on making progress toward the truth. It is most likely to occur when we have strong emotional attachments to belief on some topic. When we have no attachments, the general desire to believe what's true is likely to guide our inquiry." Mele (2001) argues correctly that we have some control over allowing our emotions and motivation to influence our belief and that such control is a resource for combating self-deception.

As we saw earlier, self-deception sometimes serves a positive role of protecting us from undue anxiety and guilt. So we should not be hasty in trying to root out every kind of self-deception we detect in people. Rather, we need to caution against too much and too sudden exposure of the reality of self-deception in an individual (Johnson & Burroughs, 2000). God deals with us so very gently the vast majority of the time. He is mindful of our frame and our defenses, and he takes time to work on us; so should we when we are working with others (Johnson & Burroughs, 2000). We should provide help in a way that enables them to come to the place of courage in acknowledging their self-deception but not beyond their breaking point (Cigarette, 1969). We can gently point them in the direction of self-understanding, courage, and the availability of other life-options than those they wish (Alton, 1985).

Those who are engaged in self-deception on their part should begin taking responsibility for them. According to Fingarette (1969), to stop self-deception, the disavowed engagement must be avowed. Undeceiving ourselves means accepting responsibility. Another thing we can do is to recognize our tendency for selective attention and commit ourselves to pay attention to all the available evidence in search for the truth no matter where it leads us. When we want to believe something because it serves our self-interest, we tend to manage our attention and allow into our minds only the things that will support our desired belief (Ten Elshof, 2009). If the evidence cannot be avoided, then we direct critical attention to it not to learn from it but to creatively discount it (Ten Elshof, 2009). Therefore, in order to avoid self-deception, we must force ourselves to pay attention to unwelcome evidence with the willingness to give up our cherished beliefs if they are not true.

Another way to avoid self-deception is to stop procrastinating. When we procrastinate acting on a moral belief, that belief will diminish or eventually disappear from our minds. Therefore, to avoid self-deception, when a moral belief demands uncomfortable action, we need to decide to act upon it without procrastinating (Ten Elshof, 2009). It is not possible or even desirable to root out all self-deception all at once because not only it is so ingrained in our nature but also it functions to protect us from unbearable guilt and anxiety. However, we need to strive toward the goal of freedom from self-deception in the same way we fight against sin because both sin and self-deception are opposed to the truth and God.

### **3. Self-Deception as a Theological Concept**

Self-deception has not received as much attention by theologians in recent years as by philosophers. This needs to change because self-deception, a universal phenomenon caused by the fall, is intimately related to sin and detrimental to our spiritual life if left unchecked.

#### **3.1 Self-Deception and Sin**

In the traditional analytic philosophy, philosophers appeal to self-deception to explain ordinary, counter-evidential believing, and they tend to reduce self-deception into biased, false belief (W. D. Wood, 2007). However, theologically, self-deception is considered morally sinful. The unbeliever will not believe the truth because he is a sinner and his judgment is fatally infected by his sin, and he is comfortable with his sin and does not want to accept an unflattering account of his life (Crites, 1979). Modern echoes of this description of self-deception are found in various fields:

You refuse the revolution because you suffer from bourgeois false consciousness. You refuse psychoanalytic insight that would cure you because your "resistance" belongs to the repertoire of defense mechanisms that symptomize your neurosis. You refuse the Heideggerian call of Being because you are inauthentic. You will not accept the radical Sartrean implications of your freedom because you are in bad faith (Crites, 1979).

In Christian tradition, as early as Augustine, self-deception has been viewed as a division of the will: Our desire to maintain a separate, egotistic will from God's will is what alienates ourselves from reality and God (Alton, 1985). As a result of the fall, we have lost the ability to perceive and respond appropriately to the true value of moral goods, and we have become highly apt to deceive ourselves when we make moral judgments and pursue our selfish will (W. D. Wood, 2009).

Fallen human will distorts how we see things and how we handle evidence. Things are true or false according to how we judge them, and when the will likes something, it deflects the mind from considering an evidence against it (Jones, 1998). We can also spin the evidence and convince ourselves that we believe something we do not really believe (McCartney, 2011). Furthermore, we are naturally inclined to deceive ourselves through self-serving attribution by which we credit ourselves for good outcomes and refuse responsibility for bad ones (Floyd, 2004). Thus, Augustinian tradition holds that pride is the archetypal sin, and the prideful sinner loves himself with an immoderate love that ought to be directed to God (W. D. Wood, 2013). Pride and inordinate love for self are results of the fall and the root cause of self-deception. As the turn away from God constitutes sin, the turn away from truth constitutes self-deception, and both are motivated by our fallen, disordered love (W. D. Wood, 2013). As Wood (2007) points out, "when we love some private good more than we love the truth, we have a motive for self-deception." God is the ultimate good and the ultimate truth, but sinners lie to themselves about what is good and true. Why do we do so? We do so because we want to maintain that we love truth and goodness even though we repeatedly turn away from them: We care about the truth just enough to pretend to love it (W. D. Wood, 2007).

### 3.2 Self-Deception in Assurance of Salvation

Self-deception is especially dangerous and has eternal consequences when it involves one's assurance of salvation. A case in point is Jonathan Edwards's "hypocrites." Jonathan Edwards used the term "hypocrites" to refer to those who claim to be born-again believers but in reality are not. They are sincere in their professions, and they represent themselves to the world in the way they believe to be accurate (Chamberlain, 1994). But they are self-deceived, and Edwards' *Religious Affections* is an attempt to protect against self-deception of the hypocrites (Edwards, 1959). Edwards suggests meditation, introspection, prayer, obedience as means to prevent self-deception in one's assurance of salvation (Chamberlain, 1994). Hypocrites have false assurance because they rely on religious experience in the past as their conversion moment and they stop seeking God (Edwards, 1959). Experience such as spending much time in religion, praising and glorifying God, feeling confident that what they experienced came from God may be "nothing more than the common influence of the Spirit of God, joined with the delusions of Satan, and the wicked and deceitful heart" (Edwards, 1959). Hypocrites are quick to hold on to the false assurance of salvation because they want to believe that they are justified, and it is easy for them to believe that they have become righteous. As Calvin (1536) observed, "all of us are inclined by nature to hypocrisy, a kind of empty image of righteousness in place of righteousness itself abundantly satisfies us." Tragically, self-deception about one's righteousness and salvation will keep the hypocrites from coming to the true, saving knowledge of God.

### 3.3 Trials and Self-Deception

What is a scriptural means of avoiding self-deception? One of God-ordained cures for self-deception is trials. They are an integral part of the Christian life and they are the means by which self-deception is thwarted and self-knowledge gained. Trials force us to choose between the love of God and the love of self and reveal the true inclination of the will and thus serve as the test of the genuineness of the professed faith (Edwards, 1959). To minimize the possibility of self-deception, a few isolated cases of overcoming trials are not enough; rather, a consistent pattern of successful trials of faith is required to provide true assurance of salvation (Edwards, 1959).

In short, according to Edwards, a life of persevering Christian practice is the only sound foundation on which to build a hope of salvation free from self-deception (Chamberlain, 1994). Self-deception can have destructive results if persisted during the trials of faith. History has shown what can happen when Christians try to maintain their faith without the willingness to pay the necessary price for their faith: "Auschwitz stands as a symbol of one extreme to which our self-deception can lead. For the complicity of Christians with Auschwitz did not begin with their failure to object to the first slightly anti-semitic laws and actions. It rather began when Christians assumed that they could be the heirs and carriers of the symbols of the faith without sacrifice and suffering" (Burrell and Hauerwas, 1974).

### 3.4 Disordered Love as the Root Cause of Self-Deception

At the heart of it all, the entire project of self-deception is rooted in the self-deceiver's disordered love. We love ourselves improperly when we do not derive our value from its true source—God—but from some other source (W. D. Wood, 2007). The self-deceiver constructs a false self who inhabits an imaginary world, and in the process he tries to create a self out of nothing, parodying God's creative activity. In this respect, self-deception is the paradigm of sin (W. D. Wood, 2007). As sin turns away from God, self-deception turns away from truth—one deceives oneself because one knows and rejects the truth (W. D. Wood, 2007). Therefore, to be free from self-deception, one must love the truth, which means one must love God above all things, and then when our loves are properly ordered toward God, we become true selves, free from self-deception (W. D. Wood, 2007). Those with undivided love for God are less likely to be distracted by other desires, and because their minds are not clouded by sinful desires, they will be able to understand the truth about God and themselves (Floyd, 2004). On the other hand, those who have idolatrous self-love deny the truth of their sinfulness and creatureliness, and they deny the need for repentance and new life in relationship with God (Knapp, 2002). So self-deception can be considered as the handmaiden of pride: The false cover story of self-sufficiency enables one to deny one's need for God (Knapp, 2002). As Paul says, "For if those who are nothing think they are something they deceive themselves" (Gal. 6:3).

## 4. Conclusion

Self-deception has been considered a universal human phenomenon throughout centuries. When we want to avoid unwelcomed truth or pursue an engagement that conflicts with our values, we engage in self-deception (Botha, 2005). Philosophers have discussed whether self-deception is conscious or unconscious, cognitive or volitional, intentional, or unintentional activity. I have argued in this paper that self-deception often involves unconscious mental processes, has both cognitive and volitional elements, and has the intention of keeping oneself from conscious awareness of uncomfortable truth about oneself. I also argued that self-deceivers are culpable since they are responsible for how they choose to interpret the evidence and hide the truth from themselves. Self-deceivers are responsible even for their ignorance because in self-deception, ignorance is willful as they actively resist becoming more aware of themselves before God as sinners (Johnson & Burroughs, 2000). I addressed the social dimension of self-deception and pointed out the greater danger of collective self-deception than individual self-deception. To avoid self-deception, a commitment to seek and love the truth with courage and willingness to suffer is necessary.

I then discussed self-deception as an important theological concept. Self-deception is closely related to sin: We reject the truth as self-deceivers as we reject God as sinners. At the heart of self-deception is disordered love for self, or pride, which keeps one away from true knowledge of oneself. The danger of self-deception is especially keen when it involves our assurance of salvation and also when we refuse to suffer for the truth. God often uses suffering in life to draw us out of our self-deception by revealing what is in our heart, leading us to repentance and righteousness, which in turn allows us to know God and thereby ourselves better (Heb 12:10-11, 14).

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