

Solidarity in the Fall: An Essay on Self-Deception

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the notion and the dynamics of self-deception as a part of what we understand as the noetic effects of sin. Firstly, we start with a theological analysis of the consciousness because of the supratemporal nature of the human heart. Secondly, through this analysis, we can see the roots of self-deception in the presupposition that the ego is transparent to itself. Thirdly, one element of the dynamic of self-deception is the cognitive parallax that shows the distance between theory and reality. Fourthly, self-deception can be formalized in theoretical systems and create a legitimizing discourse to support given positions. Finally, we try to redeem self-deception through the revelation that enlightens the human mind.

Keywords

Self-deception, noetic effects of sin, Augustine, Herman Dooyeweerd, epistemology, the self, modern philosophy, sensus divinitatis, consciousness, revelation

Introduction

Humanity is a united whole, and the poison taken in by Adam spreads through the whole body. We may deplore this state of things, but human beings exist in solidarity with one another and not just as juxtaposed individuals.¹

Meanwhile, we can sum up the initial progress that the spirit of rebellion provokes in a mind originally imbued with the absurdity and apparent sterility of the world. In absurdist experience, suffering is individual. However, when a movement of rebellion begins, the experience of individual suffering comes to be seen as a collective experience. Therefore, the first step for a mind impressed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling is shared by others. Human reality, in its entirety, suffers from the distance that separates it from the rest of the universe. The disease experienced by a single person becomes a mass plague. In our daily trials, rebellion plays the same role as the “cogito” in the realm of thought: it is the first piece of evidence. However, this evidence lures the individual from their solitude. It finds its first value on the whole human race. I rebel—therefore we exist.²

Estrangement exists between the human being and reality. God created reality to reveal himself to man; however, sin obscures the way that man experiences reality. As a revelation of God, reality is blurred by a sinful perception that deceives and relativizes its meaning. A structural element in the fallen constitution of humanity can be identified—self-deception. Theologically, it is a part of the noetic effects of sin. However, self-deception touches human thinking in all its aspects through a myriad of misunderstandings. Consequently, it is one of the greatest unavoidable problems that drive people to rebellion.

This article analyzes self-deception and aims to understand its development, acknowledging the supratemporality of the human heart. Furthermore, we will see how the human heart deceives itself and creates theoretical systems biased by self-deceptive conceptions. Finally, we will provide some guidelines for thinking of ways to evade the self-deceptive process. Our aim is to understand self-deception as a common element in the molding of worldview, a kind of illusory power that mesmerizes us all. Thus, we can see solidarity in the fall.

¹ Pierre Courthial, *La Confession de foi de La Rochelle: Commentaire* (Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma, 1979), 53.

² Albert Camus, *L'homme révolté*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 3, 79.

I. *Knowing God and the Soul*

The attempt to comprehend the human self has been the *raison d'être* of philosophy since the beginning. Knowing oneself is a justifiable effort for a better life. However, every human attempt has monumentally failed due to the lack of recognition of the supratemporality of the human self.³

The supratemporality of the self is the structure that is above all aspects of created reality. For that reason, the various aspects of created reality do not exhaust it. The attempt to conceptualize the self through the aspects of reality demands an antithetical relation between the logical function of the intellect and an aspect of reality. Then, a synthetical relation should be established to form theoretical concepts through the contrast of the logical function of the mind and the nonlogical aspects of reality. Following this reasoning, the human self would be described by a composition of meanings; it would lose its self-consciousness in reality through not being able to find an Archimedean point to anchor theoretical thinking, and consequently the capacity to know itself would be limited. The human self would never be capable of accomplishing its calling in created reality. As an ectype of the divine archetype the human self cannot be enclosed in time.⁴

Inevitably, an analysis of the self through the logical function of the intellect presupposes the primacy of the human “ego” as responsible for the theoretical conceptualization. The intellect thus is absolute and becomes the anchor point of scientific-philosophical elaboration.⁵ Firstly, it assumes a kind of transparency to analyze itself clearly and perfectly. Secondly, it assumes that it would never be confused in its analysis. However, we can also see the deceitful potential of the self to deceive and lose itself in many unproductive reasonings.

The supratemporality of the human self makes it possible to know the consciousness of self and the external reality, but to accomplish this task an absolute anchor point is needed. It inevitably has a religious nature that points to the origin of everything. Indeed, this religious origin opens the way for theoretical thought because human conceptualization is always tied to the diversity of temporal reality. A religious origin transcends the diversity of temporal reality and prevents the absolutization of any aspect

³ Herman Dooyeweerd, *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy: Philosophy of Nature and Philosophical Anthropology*, A.7 (Grand Rapids: Paideia, 2011), 125. See also Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought: Studies in the Pretended Autonomy of Philosophical Thought*, B.16 (Grand Rapids: Paideia, 2012), 17–19.

⁴ Dooyeweerd, *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy*, 132.

⁵ Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought*, 21.

of reality and therefore underlies temporal existence and sets the conditions for the possibility of human knowledge.⁶ Although philosophy has acknowledged many different origins on which to anchor theoretical thought, only God can fulfill this condition. John Calvin has identified this relation for the possibility of knowledge when he begins the *Institutes of Christian Religion* by affirming, “Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.”⁷

Thus, man cannot know himself truly if he does not recognize the origin of his existence in God. Any philosophical attempt that seeks an autonomous anchor point will fail to understand the true signification of human beings. God alone has absolute nature of being, self-existence, as he does not depend on anything for his existence. In contrast, autonomous thinking seeks a nonabsolute origin as the anchor point for its thought in reality and thus absolutizes a relative element by attaching itself religiously to it and putting aside the real origin of the existence.⁸

Therefore, as Herman Dooyeweerd affirms, “the ultimate and central questions about human existence cannot be answered by any philosophy in an autonomous way since such questions are of a religious character.”⁹ By encountering divine origin, the self recognizes it and itself, because being otherwise empty, it needs to encounter real existence in the absoluteness of the divine being. This explains Augustine’s declaration, “I wish to know God and the soul (*Deum et animam scire cupio*).” Augustine could have employed another verb to designate the will of the soul; however, he used the verb *wish* to describe the intensity of the search for God and self that permeates human beings.¹⁰ This knowledge is mediated by divine revelation through the action of the Holy Spirit. The human self can only be known through the mediation of special divine revelation that by the action of

⁶ Dooyeweerd, *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy*, 137.

⁷ John Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrétienne* (Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma; Excelsis, 2009), 1:3 (1.1.1).

⁸ Calvin affirms, “From the power of God we are naturally led to consider his eternity since that from which all other things derive their origin must necessarily be self-existent and eternal.” Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrétienne*, 1:22 (1.5.6). Calvin clearly defines the ontic manner in which God underlies the whole of created existence, which points to him transcendently. Only God can be established as absolute by the simple fact that he has existence in himself. Man exists from the divine archetype. In this way, the human self is a creation that transcends temporality and cannot be subjected to created reality in space and time.

⁹ Dooyeweerd, *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy*, 124.

¹⁰ Bernard J. Coughlin, *The Soul of a Nation: Culture, Morality, Law, Education and Faith* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2012), 206.

the Holy Spirit enlightens the human mind and penetrates the deepest dimension of human being, making for wholeness before God, *coram Deo*.¹¹

The scientific ideal, on the other hand, tries to explain the self through the absolutization of an aspect of reality. The problem arises because any chosen aspect of reality fails to understand human wholeness because of the inevitable contradictions it promotes. Consequently, everything that does not fit its paradigm is considered as non-knowledge. This occurs in some psychological schools that try to define the human being through its biotic-psychical aspect by reducing it to a set of sensations determined by genotype or phenotype. A psychological approach to the complexity of the self can err when it equates the human psyche to consciousness and tries to describe it as a material construction. The human psyche is formed by the sensations and impulses of biotic nature perceived in time and space, while the consciousness is a deeper dimension that resides in the religious dimension of the self.

This example shows that the scientific ideal of humanist postmodernism presupposes the immediacy of the subject in analytical thinking. It hides the self through a false idea of objectivity, thus creating an idol that establishes the meaning of reality by the absolutization of one of its aspects. Emancipated from its transcendent divine origin, the self is erected as an idol and hides behind other idols formed by the absolutization of aspects of reality. The immediacy of the subject leads to self-deception.

Self-deception originated at the fall; Eve looked at the fruit and reasoned that the tree was good for food, pleasant to the eyes, and desirable to make one wise. She took of the fruit, ate it, and gave it to her husband and he ate it (Gen 3:6). Self-deception started when the first couple conceived reality according to their own interest, affection, and will. Man established himself as the criterion of truth, motivated by self-satisfaction.

The phenomenon of self-deception relates to the postlapsarian human self, because it guides the actions of man in a corrupted worldview. Because of sin, all share in this condition. There is solidarity in the fall.

II. *Through the Eyes of Narcissus*

It follows from the supratemporality of the self and the impossibility of immediate self-knowledge that self-deception is present throughout all human space-time experience.

¹¹ Dooyeweerd, *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy*, 141.

The phenomenon of self-deception has its roots in a conception of the human self that is presupposed in every philosophy in modern times. Every tradition since René Descartes—through Nicolas Malebranche and Baruch Spinoza, following on with Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Georg Hegel, ending with Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger—establishes the human ego as an autonomous source of truth that can be neither verified nor deduced.¹² The self presupposes uncritically that it is the source of the meaning of the created reality and that it is transparent in its relation to that reality (the subject-object relation). It sets itself up as the source of rationality and as the criterion of all critical thought.¹³

However, due to its supratemporality, the human ego cannot be analyzed by itself. An apostate system of thought will not recognize this supratemporality because every attempt at investigation is placed in the spatio-temporal dimension of reality. The result of such thinking is the same as that of Kant's when he identifies the mysterious human ego as the transcendental logical unit of apperception.¹⁴ The Kantian definition of the human ego is completely impersonal and responsible only for perceiving the psychical-physical ego manifested in experience.

In his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (*Méditations métaphysiques*), Descartes proposes the hypothesis that self-deception is to be attributed to a malicious demon when the self is searching for the truth. In the end, he arrived at the famous conclusion that if while being deceived he continues thinking, then he is a thinking being—*Cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am)—that is, the act of thinking is true even though he might be being deceived. Descartes claims that the ego is the foundation of every reflection. If the first truth is the thinking ego—*res cogitans* (thinking thing or mind)—the whole of reality is to be analyzed by this new criterion. In the Cartesian system God is a logical necessity and responsible for assuring the meaning of reality. If it were not so, he would be the malicious demon that deceives the thinking ego, which would contradict his perfect nature.¹⁵

So the human ego establishes itself as the foundation of truth by self-deception on the supposition of its transparency to itself and its incapacity

¹² Paul Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations* (Paris: Seuil, 2013), 237.

¹³ Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 21.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1956), 140 (B132); 155 (A107).

¹⁵ René Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 49–141. The Cartesian arguments for this thesis can be found in the second and third meditations. Kant criticizes this theory of divine assurance as circular reasoning. See also, Luc Ferry, *Kant: Une lecture des trois "Critiques"* (Paris: Grasset, 2006). Although Kant criticizes Descartes's theory, he holds the primacy of the ego in his idealist philosophy.

to be confused in its reasoning. The irony of the Cartesian system is that it resorts to the idea of God for the self-establishment of the ego. However, Descartes deceives himself when he recognizes that the human ego has autonomy in self-attestation. The “attestation is fundamentally attestation of the self” as Paul Ricœur says.¹⁶ The inevitable conclusion of this kind of reasoning is that the human ego becomes narcissistic. It falls in love with itself and makes itself an object of devotion.

If the anchor point of reasoning is found in the human ego, the consequence is that its ethical standard lies in the individual autonomy emancipated from its divine origin. Following Kantian morality, Ricœur argues that individual autonomy is linked to concern for and justice to others. Thus, morality is formed by the interiority of consciousness in an autonomous way, promoting the self-justification of its acts. A self-deceived ego searches for self-justification and when confronted resorts to resentment or disproportionate rejection through victimizing and blaming.

This occurs because the human ego tends to search for self-satisfaction. Even those actions considered as beneficial to society as a whole are motivated by the self-preservation efforts of the ego as the idol. Hence, the ego is guided by its own desires (Rom 1:18–32), apostatizing from God and reversing the Augustinian dictum, “I wish to know God and the soul.” This can be observed when scientific-philosophical theories eliminate the existence of God while at the same time trying to explain the existence of human beings as evolved from animals.

In daily life we obviously find individuals acting fairly, but this is due to the residual presence of the *sensus divinitatis* in the consciousness. Divine providence protects the human being from its own destructive potential. Even in individuals with high moral standards, who are endowed with unique goodness, behavior is still skewed away from devotion to the source of all good in God himself. Thus, we can still acknowledge worthy initiatives, even though these always express an apostate attitude.

Because of the radical nature of self-deception both believers and non-believers can be self-deceived. In the Christian mind, self-deception works by relativizing Holy Scripture and changing the source of authority in life by theories or feelings. Sin acts surreptitiously, making good and evil or right and wrong interchangeable. Therefore, the Christian life must be lived in self-examination through the Holy Scriptures with the illumination of the Holy Spirit if the Christian is to form a worldview according to the principles of revelation.

¹⁶ Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, 34.

The emotions, the reason, and the will of a self-deceived person converge on emancipation from the divine origin. Self-deception may be formalized in theoretical systems, leading them to cooperate with certain positions that avoid confrontation with created reality. Thus, reality is redefined and consciousness rests in the illusion that God and judgment do not exist. This is the condition of every person in a fallen world. There is solidarity in the fall.

III. *Intermezzo—Cognitive Parallax*

Cognitive or conceptual parallax is a philosophical concept conceived by the Brazilian philosopher and journalist Olavo de Carvalho to describe a flaw in a theoretical system as the dissonance between the process of theorization and the practical experience. If the theory elaborated by the individual were applied in reality, it would contradict the theory. Descartes proposes, for instance, to describe a real psychological experiment, but at the same time, he proposes that the subject for this experiment is an abstract ego isolated from the conditions of space and time. The same applies to theories that seek to demonstrate the inexistence of God since they necessarily presuppose an organized universe with a well-established origin, an ordered reality, intelligence in its conception, beauty, harmony, and the existence of a being that has self-consciousness. Such conditions can only have a divine origin and not a purely organic origin as claimed by scientific theories, as an organic origin would inevitably result in chaos. Moreover, it is impossible that chaos originate order, senselessness intelligence, inorganic organic, or unconsciousness consciousness. A philosophical-scientific explanation of reality should necessarily presuppose the existence of God. However, this is not the case in the modern age with the dissonance between the theoretical pole of reasoning and the practical experience of the person.

When theoretical reasoning does not correspond or corresponds only in part to reality, a parallax arises in this theoretical system that brackets off reality in order to legitimize the presuppositions of the system.¹⁷ All human knowledge is made up of the assemblage of pieces of knowledge that form the conditions for the rise of new ones. This process is the element that assures scientific-philosophical development through the accumulation of knowledge, which is constantly criticized, evaluated, discarded, restructured, and renewed. Thomas Kuhn has identified this process with the formation of what he calls the paradigm for establishing scientific criteria and

¹⁷ Olavo de Carvalho, *Prestação de Contas*, Online: <http://www.olavodecarvalho.org/semana/12142002globo.htm>.

determining what can be considered rational or irrational. It is responsible for accepting certain problems to be resolved, as well as procedures and theories to be elaborated scientifically.¹⁸ The paradigm promotes a kind of cognitive parallax when theoretical formulation is abstracted from practical scientific experience. Outside of the paradigm, nothing can be verified as true. Such absolutization is frequently found in some evolutionist scientific circles. Kuhn identifies a displacement of the individual through theorization vis-à-vis his object of analysis due to the fundamental role of the paradigm. He affirms that the scientific method works in a world different from that of the paradigm. Even language can promote a displacement because, through it, thought is externalized, and if the terms are employed in a congruent manner, distance between the theorization and experience can arise.¹⁹

In politics the phenomenon of ideology may look like cognitive parallax. Hannah Arendt affirmed that ideology can have a dissimulative role in the hermeneutical process of understanding the facts of reality.²⁰ Karl Mannheim highlights the particularity of ideology to create half-conscious and unwitting dissimulation in calculated attempts to dupe others to self-deception.²¹ A theory can alienate the consciousness from a correct way of conceiving the world. Ideology becomes the criterion for analyzing reality in forming a political worldview and, consequently, alienating the person from the real meaning of reality. Everything is interpreted in order to serve the political point of view. Because of cognitive parallax, theories such as deconstruction, relativism, nihilism, and existentialism found support—in spite of their incapacity to describe reality—by presupposing a kind of neutrality and smuggling in elements taken axiomatically to legitimize their systems. In this way, cognitive parallax is an important part of self-deception that cannot be confused with it, since self-deception is more radical in the human ego and englobes other elements such as the will and feelings.

IV. Formalizing Self-Deception

Self-deception can be formalized in theoretical systems that externalize the way an individual seeking to understand a subject thinks. These

¹⁸ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 10–11, 23, 25.

¹⁹ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 125–26.

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, *La crise de la culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 176.

²¹ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Harcourt, 1985), 55–56.

philosophical-scientific systems configure a worldview that provides parameters for interpreting reality. In this way, even in theological reflection, self-deception can arise.

When cognitive parallax is present in a philosophical system, it shapes an individual's consciousness by a process of theorization in which the individual engages after sharing the philosophical system with others. If we take this procedure to the extreme, we see that it engenders, on the one hand, a dogmatic attitude and, on the other, a skeptical attitude towards everything that is not in accordance to the stated position.

Due to the illusion caused by self-deception in elevating some aspects of reality over others, the religious nature of human ego expresses itself in analytical attitudes that are religious too. The capacity for being aware of the possibility of self-deception formalized in theoretical systems lies in a consideration of the real motivations behind them. A posture critical of the criterion of critical thought is necessary. This metacritical posture creates an awareness of self-deception in our own reasonings. Through a hermeneutical consciousness of the real motivations that guide theoretical systems, the abandonment of critical thought since the Enlightenment might be overcome in a postcritical way of reasoning.

However, the presence of self-deception in a theoretical system does not necessarily render it ineffective: theoretical thought necessarily deals with an aspect or many aspects of reality that even though absolutized may still integrate reality. The problem arises when self-deception drives the reflection to absolutize an aspect of reality that deprives it of its real meaning. We can observe a kind of naivety in this way of thinking.

In a theological system, self-deception may arise when its anchor point is changed and is no longer in Scripture. Theology becomes dualist and reductionist. Thus, a hermeneutical approach to theology can be developed that unravels the real presuppositions that guide the whole system and to make us aware of the motivations intended to support theological reasoning. For instance, we can observe a change in Arminianism that arose in the theology when the ideals of freedom and autonomous reason were present. A theological-philosophical rationalism absolutizes the ideal of freedom and proposes a false metaphysical dichotomy between divine election and human freedom.²² In countries such as the Netherlands, rationalism proposed by Descartes and assimilated by Spinoza replaced the intellectual

²² Fabiano A. Oliveira, "Diagnosticando os Sintomas do Nosso Tempo: Parte 1—Um Ensaio Crítico sobre os Ídolos da Modernidade," *Fides Reformata* 16.2 (2011): 82.

primacy of Aristotle.²³ A new paradigm was created with new tendencies.

Another example is found when the Enlightenment emphasized the autonomy of reason as the criterion of evaluation of reality and characterized theology as a pseudoscience. Man sought emancipation from religion to create a new religion for himself. In this perspective, a new movement arose, theological liberalism, that tried to answer the challenges brought by the Enlightenment by updating theology with Enlightenment rationalist presuppositions and methods. It manifests the change of the anchor point in thought when it took from Kantian or Hegelian philosophy the parameters for theological thought, bringing foreign presuppositions into the Christian faith. The result of this expedient was synthesis, which redefined the concepts of Christian theology through a subjective prism (religion, for instance, became a feeling).²⁴ Moreover, the proponents of this change thought that they were bringing new light into theology and a real defense of the Christian faith. The rise of theological liberalism shows the blind idolatrous tendency toward the satisfaction of the ideal of freedom and rationality; however, it replaced the biblical anchor point with a humanistic perspective. Self-deception created a theological scientific discourse to establish itself as a plausible possibility and deceived people into thinking they were developing good theology.

After the French Revolution and the political division between “right” and “left,” theology has been used to legitimize both wings through ideological usage. Today the ideals of gender and absolute individual freedom lead to the false identification of the Bible and Judeo-Christian tradition with an oppressive, dominant patriarchal structure. This ideological interpretation has promoted a desire to be emancipated from any kind of determination in order to pursue absolute freedom, and its consequent perspective shows its contradictions when it paradoxically defends the important role of the body (feminists pleading, “My body, my rules!”) and at the same time the disembodiment of the ego (those wishing to redefine gender as beyond intrachromosomal reality).²⁵ From this perspective come theological

²³ Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience Européenne, 1680–1715* (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 126–27.

²⁴ Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 36–37. In liberal theology, the anchor point can be found in the analytical capacity of man as an autonomous being.

²⁵ Guilherme de Carvalho, *Ideologia liberal e promiscuidade sexual: Cúmplices?* Online: <http://ultimato.com.br/sites/guilhermedecarvalho/2013/10/29/ideologia-liberal-e-promiscuidade-sexual-cumplices/#more-861>. See also Dooyeweerd, *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy*, 152; Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, 46–48.

reflections and ideological discourses that seek to legitimize homosexuality, such as Queer theology.²⁶ This theology has an underlying ideological engagement that seeks the subversion of social structures through a revolutionary proposition. Individuals deceive themselves by searching for a relevant and contemporary theology, but forgets the foundation—divine revelation—by forming a new theoretical deconstructionist referential. There is no criticism at this level, only deconstruction.

This synthetical thought appears in South American theologies such as the liberation theologies that employ Marxist philosophy instead of the Holy Scriptures as a hermeneutical matrix for understanding society. The ideals of social justice, egalitarian economy, autonomous freedom, and subversion of social order lead to the development of a theology determined by the social class searching for a rearrangement of society following the dialectic of class struggle.²⁷ Thus, biblical concepts and theological tradition are redefined to fit in the ideological mold for military and political goals. The result is a reconfiguration of meanings and a new comprehension of reality. Redemption, for instance, does not mean the forgiveness for covenant-breaking, but the liberation of a person from an oppressive structure of power that enslaves in a social condition. This is the product of secular theology.

Although self-deception can be rooted in the deepest dimension of a human being, redemption can be found in Christ. If there is solidarity in the fall, there is also solidarity in redemption in Jesus Christ.

V. *Through Jesus's Eyes*

Human ego deceives itself by seeking its own satisfaction; it redefines reality in order to prevent being confronted by it.

The redemption of self-deception starts with the acknowledgment of divine revelation that enlightens human mind and transforms the self by a new identity because it is dependent on its ontic source. This ontic source is recognized by the *sensus divinitatis*. The Creator is the ultimate reality of the self and, due to its timelessness, this reality cannot be apprehended by created aspects of reality. Here lies the need for special revelation to redirect the human ego positively: “Scripture is the positive form of God’s Word Revelation through which the norms of faith, innate in man, receive a

²⁶ Gerard Loughlin, ed., *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

²⁷ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teologia da Libertação* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1979), 34, 38.

concrete divine content.”²⁸ The confirmation of faith in the human heart by the Holy Scriptures assures the renewal of emancipated apostate faith in a new direction of obedience. Renewal is through the power of the Holy Spirit in new birth (*palingenesis*), and it enables the formation of a new matrix of interpretation for the self and reality by revealed criteria. To use C. S. Lewis’s expression, the *endarkenment* of self-deception is confronted by the enlightenment of God’s revelation.

In modern times the *maîtres du soupçon* (masters of suspicion), as Ricœur called them, have had to acknowledge that the human ego is self-deceived. Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, and Darwin put forward suspicion as an interpretative key to the understanding of man and reality in a critical way; however, this way of thinking showed itself to be an excursion in the wilderness of uncertainty, where man walks without direction. Christian thinking invites one to put suspicion aside and promote a search for the identity of human beings through the Holy Scriptures. People must understand that they are not the center of everything and, at the same time, that only God can establish meaning in reality. People need to learn the way of humility.

In this context, some insights may be helpful in breaking self-deception. First, as identified by Ricœur in his phenomenological reflection, the human ego is not immediate, as Descartes thought. It is not a starting point, but something that demands an effort of the understanding. It cannot be simply presupposed; it is understood through the possibility of nonreductionist knowledge. Self-comprehension cannot be reduced to one aspect of reality. The self is deceived by the presupposition that it is transparent and incapable of mistakes.

Secondly, this should lead to the recognition of the need for revelation from outside reality. Only special revelation can unravel the depths of the human heart (Heb 4:12) and the idols present there. The religion that a person confesses is brought to light when confronted with the true religion of Christ, the true God incarnate. Then the criteria of thinking are displaced from the self to a secure vantage point that enables the removal of the self-deceptive powers of the human ego centered on itself.

Thirdly, the existential dimension of the human ego is developed through the consideration of the finite human condition vis-à-vis the transcendence of God, who reveals himself to human beings through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The incarnation shows us the integral condition of the self in contrast to the fragmentary conceptions of modern anthropology such as proposed through a Cartesian dualism of body and mind. In Christ, people

²⁸ Dooyeweerd, *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy*, 41.

are invited to reencounter themselves in an integral existence *coram Deo*, since Christ is the new type of human being. He is the starting point for considering all existence through hope, because the possibility of being free from self-deception exists.

Fourthly, through the incarnated promise of God that transcends time, the human self can be assured of a hope that promises will be fulfilled because through bodily resurrection we have the attestation of those promises. Therefore, the proclamation of the gospel (*logos prophorikos*, proclaimed word) is the mediation of the presence of Christ in human life that breaks self-deception by expressing the witness to a new way of being, a new perspective of life towards eternity.

Finally, communication by the witness of the gospel among human beings is presupposed in the hope of a new existence for eternity in the presence of Christ. Consequently, there is no redeemed ego without an intersubjective dimension in communal existence. As Ricœur states, “all of our relations in the world have an intersubjective constitution.”²⁹ This intersubjective constitution can only be promoted in the communal life of the church as the body of Christ where the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered. This is the covenantal relationship between God and human beings established by faith in our mediator—Jesus Christ. The community promotes the wellbeing of each of its members by a clear vision of the chief end of human beings—“to glorify God and to enjoy him forever” (Westminster Shorter Catechism 1). This intersubjective reality of faith in the incarnated promises of God engenders a balanced view of the individual and collective aspect of humanity through love. Only in covenantal relationship with God through Christ is love not self-love but a love that goes out to the other. Therefore, the church as the covenant community can treat self-deception. It serves to perfection each member of the body of saints sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit. The church cannot be other than a *communio sanctorum* (communion of saints). If there is solidarity in the fall, there is also solidarity in redemption.

Conclusion

Self-deception manifests itself through a false religion that ignores the divine truth and forges itself another god, the self, and establishes its own community, the pantheon of idols, hiding the greater idol. Self-deception is an illusory condition in which the individual provides a criterion of

²⁹ Paul Ricœur, *De l'interprétation: Essai sur Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1965), 406.

self-justification, excusing the conscience in a false standard of justice, the religion of the self. For this reason, postmodern religion is emptied of its content, giving birth to a concept of individual spirituality that is simply ethical responsibility. Self-deception arrives on the scene in a sordid way by usurping true religion and reversing its core values. The unregenerate, deceived through the obliteration of divine truth in their hearts, are guilty of deceiving themselves (Rom 1:18). They fall in love with themselves like Narcissus, forming a religion that engages in the search for self-satisfaction.

Alterity, a typical Christian value, is neglected by self-satisfaction, leading to a crisis in society since nothing matters but oneself. As a result, the Christian faith has been emptied of truth to become relevant, simply another consumer product. In fact, the crisis of our culture analyzed by Arendt and Husserl lies in nothing other than Christian values having become the same as the values of the culture. Modern man searches for a nontranscendent center to anchor his way of thinking and so engenders a culture that believes that “God had to die in order that man might be what he is to become, in order that man may become the unlimited creator of culture.”³⁰

The interiorization of the gospel into the Christian life becomes a parameter for reforming the awareness of self-deception. The Christian becomes aware of self through the revelation of God. At this point, Reformed theology has always emphasized the practice of self-examination, a forgotten practice today. Christians are invited to think critically about themselves through meditation on the Holy Scriptures in order to recognize that self-deception is a structural part of a universe fallen into sin until the final redemption. It will still torment us; however, God invites us to persevere in unity with Christ to fight against this evil. Although there is solidarity in the fall, the Holy Spirit tells us today to examine ourselves and so “to eat of that bread, and drink of that cup” (1 Cor 11:28).

³⁰ Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (New York: George Braziller, 1961), xvi.