

Self-Deception and the Apologetic of Despair in Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Bahnsen

THEODORE G. (TED) VAN RAALTE

Abstract

One of the helpful approaches of a Christian apologist in the present anti-Christian climate is an apologetic that presses the unbeliever to admit that their views lack hope and lead to despair. Though many unbelievers deny the despair and prefer to deceive themselves, one influential author views self-deception as fundamental to the human condition and non-culpable. However, Christians must expose self-deception as evil—a product and species of sin—seek to root it out of themselves, and lead others to the hope of dealing with life truthfully. This essay helps Christian apologists by utilizing the analysis of self-deception by Greg Bahnsen and shows that the older accounts of Blaise Pascal and Søren Kierkegaard accord well with Bahnsen’s approach.

Keywords

Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, Greg Bahnsen, self-deception, apologetic of despair, presuppositional apologetic, sin, history of apologetic, apologetic method

Introduction

Engraved at the Temple of Delphi were the words “Know thyself,” and in line with this pithy saying, Socrates asserted that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” It should come as no surprise that most people think they know themselves and would prefer to deny that they are self-deceived. But it should likewise be no surprise that most people think they know someone else who is self-deceived. This dichotomous popular sentiment may well confirm the existence of self-deception. One philosopher states that self-deception is common and quotes another who says “self-deception is so undeniably a fact of human life that if anyone tried to deny its existence, the proper response would be to accuse him of it.”¹

If self-deception is universal, are humans really guided by reason? According to the best-selling author and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, to say that we are guided by reason is the “rationalist delusion.” Rather, he argues, David Hume was correct that we are governed by passions and intuitions; our reasonings are fundamentally *post hoc* justifications for “gut” choices we have already made apart from reasoning.² Haidt’s observations may well be correct as a description of the present fallen sin-world, including when he titles one section in his book “We lie, cheat, and justify so well that we honestly believe we are honest.”³ Unfortunately, he cannot account for the fact that humans almost universally sense that *something is wrong* with lying, cheating, and deceiving ourselves. From his thoroughly evolutionary starting point, Haidt has no God, no good creation, no image of God in humans, and no fall into sin as key to the explanation of the present human condition.⁴ This also means that he does not so much despair when faced with self-deception as he does simply accept it as part of evolutionary development and suggest that recognizing the prevalence of this problem may help opponents sympathize

¹ Brian P. McLaughlin, “On the Very Possibility of Self-Deception,” in *Self and Deception: A Cross-Cultural Inquiry*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Wimal Dissanayake (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 31. McLaughlin cites Allen Wood.

² Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 29–108. On the phrase “rationalist delusion,” see page 34.

³ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴ Haidt believes that most of moral psychology can be understood as a “form of enlightened self-interest ... easily explained by Darwinian natural selection working at the level of the individual ... our righteous minds were shaped by kin selection plus reciprocal altruism augmented by gossip and reputation management. That’s the message of nearly every book on the evolutionary origins of morality.” *Ibid.*, 220, cf. xviii.

with each other.⁵ Popular songwriters and singers reflect the despair of Western culture more readily than Haidt.⁶

Whereas Haidt regards self-deception to be normal, the Scriptures treat it as a result of the fall into sin and teach us that God tests human hearts to expose their self-deceit and self-deception. The truth must shine forth; Jesus himself is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:16).

It is in the context of despair that the teacher in Ecclesiastes states that God tests man. I would translate 3:18 as, “This happens *for the sake of* the sons of men, so that God may test them and they may see for themselves that they are like animals” (partly based on the CSB). God tests. God has a purpose in putting this world under a curse (Rom 8:20–21). He wants to drive people to a sense of futility. “What is the point?” they have to ask. The teacher continues:

For the fate of the children of Adam and the fate of animals is the same. As one dies, so dies the other; they all have the same breath. People have no advantage over animals since everything is futile. All are going to the same place; all come from dust, and all return to dust. Who knows if the spirits of the children of Adam rise upward and the spirits of animals goes downward to the earth? (Eccl 3:19–21 CSB)

There is a very valuable lesson here for our defense of the faith. It has to do with the claims of other religions and ideas. Evolution makes it plain: there is no afterlife. Other religions claim there is, but they cannot ground their claim in any real hope.⁷

Gently but firmly, we have to press home this point with others. What is your hope? How do you know? Do you have a god who can carry you across the threshold of death? Has he ever done that for anyone? Can you prove it? We call this an apologetic of despair, or a negative apologetic (in contrast to a positive apologetic, which would offer positive reasons for faith).

Ecclesiastes says the unbeliever cannot offer hope to himself or others. On evolutionary principles, all these passages are absolutely true: “The wise man ... the fool ... the same fate overtakes them both” (Eccl 2:14); “Do not all go to the same place?” (6:6); “Who can tell ... what will happen under the sun after he is gone?” (6:12). Finally, Ecclesiastes 4:2–3 argues that one

⁵ Haidt even entertains the charge that his book amounts to little more than his own *post hoc* rationalizations. *Ibid.*, 59–60.

⁶ Note the song of Taylor Swift and Zayn, “I Don’t Want to Live Forever” (2016), the Bleachers’ song, “I Wanna Get Better” (2014), and the song “Demons” of Imagine Dragons (2013). All of these are explicit about the present hopelessness of life.

⁷ For an example of an apologetic of despair in action, see Ravi Zacharias, *The End of Reason: A Response to the New Atheists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 9, 17, 27, 39–45, 74–82.

not yet born is better than anyone alive because all who are alive know they will die.

Thankfully, God’s good creation precedes, and his good re-creation follows, the present troubled condition that humans brought upon this world. As related by John Fesko, the Leiden Synopsis of the early seventeenth century made clear that before the fall into sin the primary principles—such as the true, the good, and the beautiful—“functioned in perfect harmony” with secondary principles derived from these, as well as with Adam’s mind, will, and affections. Nevertheless, after the fall, though these primary principles continue to shine forth in creation and conscience, sinful humans deviate widely from them when they derive principles. With sin in the mind, heart, and affections, sinners distort the truth, suppress it, deny it, and then rationalize their errors as if they are doing something good.⁸ For this reason, Christian apologists do well to study the concept of self-deception, root it out of their own hearts first of all, and then expose its presence in the hearts of unbelievers. We turn, then, to the definition of self-deception.

I. Definition of Self-Deception

Gregory Lyle Bahnsen (1948–1995) was a Reformed epistemologist who wrote, lectured, and built upon the presuppositional apologetics of Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987). Many Van Til experts today consider Bahnsen to have been the ablest expounder of Van Til’s apologetic.⁹ Bahnsen certainly made much of the transcendental argument for the existence of God, believing that atheists, in particular, were suppressing the knowledge of God available in their consciences and from the creation. Bahnsen’s doctoral research on self-deception helped him describe how humans suppress the truth they know.¹⁰

In this study, I will use Bahnsen’s definition and analysis of self-deception as somewhat of a template and compare the accounts we find in Blaise

⁸ John V. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith* (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2019), 38. Fesko observes the same reasoning in Calvin (59). Even sinners normally defend their acts based on seeking some good principle or goal. Thus, the current LGBTQ movement acts on the perceived good of inclusion, non-discrimination, and equality for minorities (morphing a question of sexual morality into a question of human rights). They regard their efforts to be akin to those who sought the end of the slave trade and slavery in the early nineteenth century.

⁹ The most systematic account of Van Til’s apologetic is a collection of readings collated by Bahnsen, with his expert analyses introducing each topic. Bahnsen completed the manuscript of readings just before his death, and it was published a few years later. Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998).

¹⁰ Gregory Lyle Bahnsen, “A Conditional Resolution of the Apparent Paradox of Self-Deception” (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1978).

Pascal (1623–1662)¹¹ and Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855).¹² Bahnsen did not study Pascal or Kierkegaard in his dissertation, but their less technical accounts match well with his study. These three accounts will reinforce the techniques of our apologetic of despair.

I will work with the following definition of self-deception, taken from a journal article by Bahnsen, and along with his dissertation:

1. S believes that p,
2. S is motivated to ignore, hide, deny (etc.) his belief that p, and
3. By misconstruing or rationalizing the evidence, S brings himself to believe falsely that “S does not believe that p.”¹³

This definition makes clear at the outset that the present essay is not concerned with ignorance, forgetfulness, or simply being mistaken. Rather, motivated self-deception, not unmotivated, is under analysis. Eventually, the discussion will narrow to religiously motivated self-deception—that self-deception which all humans engage in, to some extent, to reduce the anxiety involved in truly dealing with themselves before God. As such, this essay illustrates the crucial place of self-deception in a coherent apologetic of despair.

II. *Bahnsen on Self-Deception*

Bahnsen’s dissertation begins with a plethora of examples of self-deception from history and literature. This survey establishes that the concept is widespread and addressed by philosophers such as Georg Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Jean-Paul Sartre, ideologues such as Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, ancient Greek dramatists, Benjamin Franklin (“Who hath deceived thee so often as thyself?”), and numerous novelists.¹⁴

¹¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

¹² Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 2004). Although other works of Kierkegaard also touch on self-deception, I am limiting my analysis to *The Sickness unto Death*.

¹³ Greg L. Bahnsen, “The Crucial Concept of Self-Deception in Presuppositional Apologetics,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57.1 (Spring 1995): 29; cf. Bahnsen, “Apparent Paradox of Self-Deception,” 53. Bahnsen never mentions Pascal in his dissertation but does mention Kierkegaard twice without entering into any substantial discussion of his views. *Ibid.*, 2–3, 7–8, 55.

¹⁴ Bahnsen, “Apparent Paradox of Self-Deception,” 1–14. Most books and articles on self-deception acknowledge its pervasive presence, even if the authors are skeptical about the possibility of a valid philosophical description. For example, see Brian P. McLaughlin,

As Bahnsen turns to more recent critics of the concept, it becomes clear that many treat self-deception as an unsolvable paradox or as something unreal. Bahnsen argues that self-deception is real because “people do not merely play at self-deception; they engage in it in tragic ways” and then cites Albert Speer’s *Inside the Third Reich* (1970). Besides, it is not likely that one can reason away in philosophy what has such widespread support elsewhere. Finally, contra Sartre and approvingly quoting John Turk Saunders, Bahnsen argues, “if the notion of self-deception were really self-contradictory, there would be no such thing as self-deception: for there cannot be any instances of a self-contradictory notion.”¹⁵ Thus, Bahnsen regards his task to consist in retaining the phenomena while coherently explaining them, resolving any apparent paradox.¹⁶ He recognizes the heterogeneous nature of the beast:

Self-deception can be about many things (circumstances, thoughts, feelings, emotions, desires, character traits, personality, capabilities, talents, plans, motives, personal relations, facts, life’s meaning, etc.), pursued in various ways (perception, memory, reasoning, etc.), and engaged for various general reasons (to blind one to the painful, to help one feel good, to enable one to refuse the distressing truth, etc.).¹⁷

However, he denies that this variety precludes a broad definition or typical kind of case, and concludes that the following general description will guide his study:

Self-deception involves an indefensible belief about one’s beliefs. That is, S perpetrates a deception on himself when, because of the distressing nature of some belief held by him, he is motivated to misconstrue the relevant evidence in a matter and comes to believe that he does not hold that belief, although he does. When he holds a belief that is discomforting, the self-deceiver simultaneously brings himself to believe that he does not hold it, and toward the end of maintaining that

“Exploring the Possibility of Self-Deception in Belief,” in *Perspectives on Self-Deception*, ed. Brian P. McLaughlin and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (London: University of California Press, 1988), 29.

¹⁵ Bahnsen, “Apparent Paradox of Self-Deception,” 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29–34. On page 32, Bahnsen lists seven criteria for an adequate analysis of self-deception: “(1) It must supply the truth conditions for ‘S deceived himself into believing that p.’ (2) It must be true to the ordinarily recognized, paradigm examples . . . and be able to account for the ordinary language of ‘self-deception.’ (3) It must avoid logical contradiction and paradox. (4) It must avoid confusing self-deception with related conditions and reducing it to one or more of them. (5) It must not depend on appeal to notions which are even more puzzling or paradoxical. (6) It must account for the fact that ‘deception’ is used in cases of both interpersonal and intrapersonal deception. (7) It must be amenable with, or incorporate, the credible insights of alternative solutions without falling prey to their defects.” In pages 317–24, Bahnsen returns to these criteria to show, one by one, that his study has satisfied them.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41–42.

unwarranted second-order belief he presses into service distorted and strained reasoning regarded [*sic*] the evidence which is adverse to his desires. He not only hides from himself his disapproved belief, but when he purposely engages in self-deception he hides the hiding of that belief as well.¹⁸

Notice that in this description, “beliefs” stand central. Bahnsen admits that no philosopher has succeeded in circumscribing the multifaceted character of “belief.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, the concept is so central to his project that he cannot avoid extensive study of what a belief is. He arrives at the following characterization, which he refuses to call a definition, but does consider sufficient to “facilitate an account of self-deception.”

Belief is a propositional attitude (not excluding false propositions) of a positive, cognitive, type constituted by a continuing, intentional, action-guiding mental state (made up of ideas which give it a determinate character corresponding to the proposition believed) with a stimulus-independent causal capacity to affect one’s theoretical and/or practical behavior (such that one relies upon the propositional attitude in his reasoning and conduct), under suitable circumstances, in a wide variety of manifestations (some of which are subject to degrees of strength).²⁰

Beliefs, then, affect one’s behavior. Beliefs are mental states, not mental acts like judgments and not mere thoughts, but contributing factors in guiding actions. Indeed, one’s behaviors (including private assent) form the evidence for one’s beliefs.²¹ To say that a person believes “that p” does not entail that they assert or assent to p. Nor is rational deliberation the criterion for attributing belief. Rather, as will be explained, the question is one of “a variety of behavioral indicators.”²²

In order to be beliefs, all such beliefs must be under one’s voluntary control and yet must also, in a sense, be constrained by the evidence—that is, the beliefs are not purely arbitrary. To say that such beliefs are voluntary does not mean that one can set aside all sensory evidence (like looking out the window on a cloudy day when it is raining and forcing oneself to believe it is a sunny day). However, one can “exercise some control over the way in which he sees the evidence,” focusing on this or that, suppressing parts of it, and so on.²³ Such control of one’s attention makes beliefs “indirectly voluntary.”²⁴

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 47–48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 143–44.

²² *Ibid.*, 145.

²³ *Ibid.*, 138–40.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

A “belief” can also vary in degree, being described as either conviction, opinion, surmise, suspicion, or other terms, but the agent must have been voluntarily involved in the inducement of the belief.²⁵ This voluntary control continues throughout the duration of the belief so that the agent is also responsible for the level of attention given to the belief and to the evidence for maintaining it.²⁶

In self-deception, two beliefs come into conflict. This is not a case of knowledge versus belief but two beliefs. The first-order belief is suppressed by a second-order belief when the subject exercises control over his attention to generate the belief that he does not believe the first-order belief. Thus, a belief about one’s beliefs results.²⁷ Both beliefs are genuinely held; the first-order belief is not eradicated or replaced, but *suppressed*.²⁸

Three further chapters of Bahnsen’s dissertation defend the views that self-deception has a motivational explanation: the self-deceiver manipulates, suppresses, and rationalizes the evidence for the first-order belief in such a way as to support the second-order belief, and is motivated to do so by the pain that would result from admitting the first-order belief.²⁹ It is absolutely critical that the subject be aware of the first-order belief being true; otherwise, there would be no reason for the second-order belief to arise.³⁰

But what happens to that first-order belief? After the second-order belief is generated, the subject no longer assents to *p* (the first-order belief) inwardly or publicly. Nevertheless, it is not a case of mere ignorance, for behaviors betray the first-order belief: “the self-deceiver shows the slips and mistakes of ‘bad-acting,’ obviously rationalizes, speaks in a strained voice or is less than calm under cross-examination, etc., that is, the self-deceiver has the affective signs of trying to cover up something.”³¹ Behavior is the measure of what beliefs are held. However, the self-deceived person does not consciously realize why these slips occur. “The fact that the self-deceiver is not aware that he believes *p* (i.e., does not believe that he believes *p*) allows for him to assent sincerely to something incompatible with that belief, thereby

²⁵ According to Bahnsen, the belief is unwarranted (unjustified) without voluntary involvement. This must be because it needs to be a propositional *attitude* of a *positive* type. *Ibid.*, 144–45.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 147–49.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 151–57. “Therefore, we find no reason to look upon the belief that is operative or avowed in self-deception as somewhat less than full, ordinary, genuine belief. The self-deceiver really believes what we attribute to him on the basis of his behaviour and avowals” (157).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 198–249.

³⁰ Various proposals are critiqued in 250–57, but they all come down to the defect that the agent “does not explicitly notice or have detailed consciousness of the truth of *p*.” *Ibid.*, 257.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 260.

satisfying the necessary condition for being deceived (i.e., for having a false belief).”³² S also knows that to hold such a pair of beliefs would be irrational, but is not aware that he himself holds both. “Logic prevents both beliefs from being true, but not from being held.”³³

At the limits of self-deception, Bahnsen concludes that it is even possible to deceive oneself on purpose.³⁴ The interconnectedness of all the events in self-deception to the original belief can be explained:

Self-deception may be viewed as one unified phenomenon: the belief which is the *object* of self-deception (S’s awareness of p’s truth) is also the *cause* of S’s attempt to deceive himself, and the intention to deceive himself about his *belief* includes the deceiving himself about the *intention* itself.³⁵

All of this leads Bahnsen to conclude that he has set forth the necessary and sufficient conditions to prove that the notion of self-deception is neither paradoxical nor contradictory. S brings himself to believe that he does not believe p, even though he is in a mental state of believing it; his observed behaviors give him away, showing that p is indeed part of his theoretical or practical inferences. “Self-deception involves deception *by* the self, *of* the self, *for* the sake of the self, *about* the self. The paradox of self-deception is thus only apparent and can be given a coherent resolution.”³⁶ “The phenomenon seems paradoxical because we tend to think of men’s beliefs as rational. But what ought to be, often is not.” Thus, Bahnsen finishes on the disturbing note of humanity’s “capacity for irrationality and duplicity” and challenges the reader who might think himself to be a very rational and nonduplicitous person that we must “either adjust our self-conception or willingly engage in further acts of self-deception itself!”³⁷

It should not escape the reader that like Haidt, Bahnsen has asserted self-deception to be a large and inescapable part of human reality. As such, and apart from offering an answer to the problem, Bahnsen has supplied the ingredients for despair. His argument fits well within an apologetics of despair. In his other work after his dissertation, Bahnsen applied his knowledge of self-deception to the problem described in Romans 1:18. In this passage, sinners suppress the truth in unrighteousness, not despite, but

³² Ibid., 261.

³³ Ibid., 263.

³⁴ Ibid., 309–10.

³⁵ Ibid., 310.

³⁶ Ibid., 316.

³⁷ Ibid., 324. This is the last sentence of the dissertation, the only application to the reader that Bahnsen makes.

precisely because God has made it plain to them that he exists, and they, in turn, do not want to be held accountable to his judgment.

III. *Pascal on Self-Deception*

Pascal was a child prodigy in mathematics and the physical sciences. At the age of thirty-one, he became a Jansenist, that is, a member of a Roman Catholic movement that sought to follow Augustine on points of grace and predestination and in opposition to the Jesuits. Pascal entered this debate deeply with the publication of his *Lettres provinciales* in 1656–1657. He then began work on something tentatively titled *Apologie de la religion Chrétienne*. The work was not complete when Pascal died in 1662, but the sayings recorded on scraps of paper for this work were published nonetheless for the first time in 1669 as the *Pensées* (thoughts). This work has become a classic Christian work and a classic of French literature.

Perhaps Pascal's most famous *Pensée* was, "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing." If taken in the negative sense of covering something up, this thought may well capture the essence of self-deception.³⁸ The heart, for Pascal, the organ of faith and belief, has its reasons for hiding its beliefs, reasons for which the mind in its rational aspect knows nothing. Compare this thought: "The heart has its order, the mind has its own, which uses principles and demonstrations. The heart has a different one. We do not prove that we ought to be loved by setting out in order the causes of love; that would be absurd."³⁹ Again, taken in the negative sense, this means that self-deception is so powerful that it succeeds in hiding from the rational side of the heart what the nonrational (volitional or affective) side holds as "reasons" to justify certain beliefs.

In *Pensée* 978, Pascal does write about self-delusion: "It is no doubt an evil to be full of faults, but it is a still greater evil to be full of them and unwilling to recognize them, since this entails the further evil of deliberate self-delusion."⁴⁰ We should notice the deliberateness, the unwillingness to recognize one's evils—in Pascal's view, the unwillingness constitutes self-delusion. The unwillingness is so powerful that it covers up the faults to the point that one holds a false belief about oneself.

We should not mitigate the volitional aspect just because Pascal describes this deliberate self-delusion as "ignorance" a few sentences later. It is clear

³⁸ Pascal, *Pensées*, 127 (entry 423). This *Pensée* is more likely to be used positively in faith and science discussions.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 94 (entry 298; cf. 380, 382).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 324,

that he has in mind a culpable and motivated ignorance. In this entry, Pascal also deals at length with other-deception, something Bahnsen also addressed.

As for despair over the self-deceived character of humanity, Pascal has plenty of it: “Those who have known God without knowing their own wretchedness have not glorified him but themselves.”⁴¹ Although self-deception is not mentioned in words, not knowing one’s own wretchedness is a form of self-deception that makes for pride. In connection with deception’s deep-rootedness, he writes,

Thus human life is nothing but a perpetual illusion; there is nothing but mutual deception and flattery. No one talks about us in our presence as he would in our absence. Human relationships are only based on this mutual deception; and few friendships would survive if [people said it face to face] Man is therefore nothing but disguise, falsehood, and hypocrisy, both *in himself* and with regard to others ... and all these tendencies ... are naturally rooted in his heart.⁴²

Pascal, however, also presents the solution for self-deception in Christ: “Jesus is a God whom we can approach without pride and before whom we can humble ourselves without despair.”⁴³ Because of Jesus’s person, we need neither hide our wretched state from ourselves in self-deception nor deceive others.⁴⁴ What is rooted in the heart may be dealt with honestly.

Pascal’s category of “diversion” is different from self-deception, yet the two are related. Pascal’s diversions have a decidedly volitional origin: “Being unable to cure death, wretchedness, and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things.” The next thought contains this also. It answers the question, How should a man go about getting happiness? “The best thing would be to make himself immortal, but as he cannot do that, he has decided to stop himself thinking about it.” Pascal finds the reason for the popularity of “gaming and feminine society, war and high office” to lie in the human desire for diversion from the reality of their own wretched existence. Solitude is a person’s greatest fear. To put it in Bahnsen’s terms, the pain of facing the truth about themselves causes humans to cover it up. The difference here is that Pascal

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 57 (entry 189).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 326 (entry 978), italics mine.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 69 (entry 212).

⁴⁴ Compare: “Knowing God without knowing our own wretchedness makes for pride. Knowing our own wretchedness without knowing God makes for despair. Knowing Jesus Christ strikes the balance because he shows us both God and our own wretchedness.” *Ibid.*, 57 (entry 192). Cf. “If you knew your sins, you would lose heart ... [but] the fact that I tell you is a sign that I want to heal you.” *Ibid.*, 291 (entry 919).

is not speaking about a second-order belief but a range of activities that occupy the person. Thus, diversions are not the same as self-deception, though they arise for similar reasons.⁴⁵

Finally, we ought to note Pascal's overt predestinarian thinking. This position leads him to assert the divine action of blinding the eyes of the stubborn. Here, blindness is a kind of self-deception, because the eyes are closed by the agent even though God adds to the blindness. "There is enough light to enlighten the elect and enough obscurity to humiliate them. There is enough obscurity to blind the reprobate and enough light to condemn them and deprive them of excuse."⁴⁶ Leaving the reprobate without excuse because they are blind precisely while the light is present to them can only mean that they have shut their eyes in an effort to hide from their own wretchedness. They are self-deceived.

The pithy *Pensées* of Pascal assert that humans are in self-delusion about their wretched condition. Humans are wretched (condemned) in not acknowledging their wretchedness and likewise wretched (despairing) in knowing it without Christ. Pascal's reflections should lead the reader to Christ. Pascal's remarks are not technical like Bahnsen's, yet they do vouch for the basic paradigm that Bahnsen advances.

IV. Kierkegaard on Despair and Self-Deception

Although Kierkegaard does address self-deception elsewhere, his *The Sickness unto Death* represents his most sustained effort. Compared to Pascal and Bahnsen, Kierkegaard, the precursor to existentialist philosophy, speaks a different language. For instance, the self is "a relation which relates to itself." To will to be a self without recognizing the third relation, that to the power which established it (God), is to be in despair. Within this basic structure, self-deception is to speak of this utter despair as something less, something like misfortune:

Where then does despair come from? ... From the fact that God, who made man this relation, as it were lets go of it And in the fact that the relation is spirit, is the self, lies the accountability under which all despair is, every moment, what it is, however much and however ingeniously the despairer, *deceiving both himself and others*, speaks of his despair as a misfortune.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid., 37–43 (entries 132–39).

⁴⁶ Ibid., 73 (entry 236; cf. 232, 893). Note that the metaphor of blindness also links to the theme of the hiddenness of God (entries 242, 394, 427, 438, 444, 446, 449, 781).

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 46 (italics mine). Technically, the author of the work is Anti-Climacus, a pseudonym used because Kierkegaard did not consider himself to meet the

Each person's wish is nearly always to want to be different from what they are; one aims to "be rid of oneself." At this point, even greater despair sets in, because it is impossible: "The torment of despair is precisely the inability to die."⁴⁸ Despair cannot consume itself. For this reason, most people deceive themselves into thinking they are different from what they really are. Specifically, they live in denial of the fact that God constituted them as a self, which is God's greatest gift to them (their existence).⁴⁹ This despair is universal.⁵⁰

Kierkegaard recognizes that many would take his account to be gloomy, but he responds, "It is not gloomy; on the contrary it tries to shed light on what one generally *banishes to a certain obscurity*."⁵¹ He continues addressing the concept of self-deception as follows: "The common view ... assumes that every man knows best himself whether or not he is in despair," and every person's self-diagnosis is accepted by others. Not by Kierkegaard! In his view, "not to be in despair may mean precisely to be in despair."⁵² Kierkegaard seeks to be the physician who presents the true diagnosis through the proper understanding of despair.

People who do recognize their despair to some extent still try to ignore it. While it is true that "actual life is too complex to turn up contrasts as abstract as that between a despair that is completely ignorant of being despair and one that is completely conscious of being so," within the continuum between the extremes, people have "a dim idea," though they rarely deal with it. Diversions help maintain this ignorance: "Or perhaps he tries to keep his own condition in the dark by diversions and other means, for example, work and pressure of business, as ways of distracting attention, though again in such a way that he is not altogether clear that he is doing it to keep himself in the dark."⁵³

As the treatise progresses, Kierkegaard argues that despair is sin: "Sin is: *before God or with the conception of God, in despair not wanting to be oneself, or*

ideals set forth in *The Sickness unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*. Therefore, he had to come under the power of the message, as a fellow with his readers. Nevertheless, I shall keep matters simple and speak of *Kierkegaard's* views in what follows.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 48–49.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁰ "There is not a single human being who does not despair at least a little And besides, there is no one and has never been anyone outside of Christendom who isn't in despair; and no one in Christendom who is not a true Christian [i.e., only true Christians can get beyond the despair to hope]; and so far as he is not wholly that, then he is still to some extent in despair." *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 52 (italics mine).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 78–79.

wanting in despair to be oneself.”⁵⁴ Not wanting to be oneself refers to not striving to be the true healthy self in relation to God, while wanting in despair to be oneself is holding onto the old sick self of independence from God. The relation to God is key: sin’s opposite is not virtue (moralism), but faith, for both sin and faith are about the self’s relation to God.

In order to highlight sin’s willfulness, Kierkegaard draws a contrast with the Socratic approach, which defines sin as ignorance. Kierkegaard does not reject Socrates’s view entirely, but states that its defect lies in its ambiguity as to whether the ignorance is original or acquired. Then follows an astute observation in connection with self-deception’s willfulness:

If [the ignorance is acquired], then sin must really consist in something other than ignorance; it must consist in the activity whereby a person *has worked at obscuring his knowledge*. But even assuming this, the intractable and very tenacious defect returns, in that the question now becomes whether at the moment he began to obscure his knowledge the person is clearly conscious of doing so.

We may observe how Kierkegaard endorses the idea of ignorance but qualifies it as willfully acquired ignorance. He does this under the rubric of *obscuring*, and even introduces the question of the consciousness of the obscuring act, an essential question in analyzing self-deception. Similarly, Bahnsen had observed that in order for the second-order belief to be willed (to arise), there had to be consciousness of the first-order belief, at least initially.

Kierkegaard does clearly posit an initial knowledge of what Bahnsen would call the first-order belief. He writes of “a large number of people” who “contrive gradually to obscure” the knowledge that would lead them to the truth.⁵⁵ His view that humans do not want to understand what is right indeed implies that they do know what right is, for, as Bahnsen pointed out, it is impossible to react against something you are not aware of (even if only initially aware).

While all of the account thus far of Kierkegaard’s view of self-deception draws on themes of continuity between Kierkegaard’s and Bahnsen’s views, it may seem there is also an item of major discontinuity, namely, the role of paradox. Bahnsen’s thesis is that the paradox is only apparent. Kierkegaard, however, insists on maintaining paradox. We need to ask what the paradox is, and I would posit that in this case, Kierkegaard’s paradox is original sin, not self-deception.⁵⁶ He quite transparently describes self-deception as a

⁵⁴ Ibid., 109.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 127.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 125. The paradox may lie in the “dialectical specification” between knowing and doing (which is: willing). However, if read carefully, the paragraph in question first posits the

progressive interaction of the mind, will, and lower affections:

In the life of the spirit there is no standing still [*Stilstand*] (really there is no state of affairs [*Tilstand*] either, everything is actualization): if a person does not do what is right the very second he knows it is the right thing to do—then, for a start, the knowledge comes off the boil. Next comes the question of what the will thinks of the knowledge. The will is dialectical and has underneath it the whole of man's lower nature. If it doesn't like the knowledge, it doesn't immediately follow that the will goes and does the opposite ... but then the will lets some time pass During all this the knowing becomes more and more obscured and the lower nature more and more victorious. For alas! the good must be done immediately, directly it is known ... but the lower nature has its strength in dragging things out. Gradually the will ceases to object to this happening: it practically winks at it. And when the knowing has become duly obscured, the will and the knowing can better understand one another. Eventually they are in entire agreement, since knowing has now deserted to the side of the will and allows it to be known that what the will wants is quite right. And this is perhaps how a large number of people live: they contrive gradually to obscure the ethical and ethico-religious knowledge.⁵⁷

The will is dialectical, moving between knowledge and the lower nature (affections). What thus begins with the will delaying continues with the affections wearing down the will to go their way and the passage of time obscuring the knowledge. The repetition of the root "obscure" is critical. Something was known but became hidden by a dialectical mental process. Kierkegaard here provides a very psychologically detailed account of self-deception. It fits hand-in-glove with Bahnsen's characterization in terms of first- and second-order beliefs.

Conclusion

After introducing a social psychologist (Haidt) who believes that humans are the product of biological evolution and that self-deception is a rather normal human phenomenon, we have reviewed in more detail the analyses

doctrine of the will's defiance, and then the addition of the doctrine of original sin. Kierkegaard makes the connection between original sin and paradox via the metaphor of sewing. He introduces it as follows: "And then to *fasten the end* very firmly, [Christianity] adds the dogma of original sin." He continues the metaphor with speculative philosophy sewing and sewing without "fastening the end and without knotting the thread." The paragraph ends, "Christianity, on the other hand, *fastens the thread* with the help of *paradox*." My observations are confirmed by further remarks of Kierkegaard on the "Christian principle that sin is affirmative—not as something that can be comprehended, but as a paradox which has to be believed." *Ibid.*, 130.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 126–27. Kierkegaard is objecting to Greek philosophy and "modern philosophy" (Cartesianism, in his day) as rationalistic and showing that it is not true that one always does what one knows.

of three authors: a French Jansenist Roman Catholic of the seventeenth century (Pascal), a Danish philosopher-theologian of the nineteenth century (Kierkegaard), and an American philosopher-theologian of the twentieth century (Bahnsen).

Each author approached the topic in his own way. Pascal utilized the metaphor of blindness, Kierkegaard spoke of sickness, and Bahnsen employed a variety of metaphors. Their particular genres heavily influenced the shape of their accounts. Bahnsen's was a dissertation submitted to a faculty of philosophy, Pascal's a collection of pithy reflections, and Kierkegaard's a treatise designed for awakening complacent Christians. Thus, we should not press these authors for complete uniformity.

At the same time, the similarities outstrip the differences. All of these authors were Christian. All were Western. All defended a strong view of sin and were overtly monergistic. All were concerned for sinners to know themselves as sinners and find salvation in Christ. For Bahnsen, this can be clearly deduced from many of his other works, as this was his overall apologetic concern. For Kierkegaard, his follow-up work, *Practice in Christianity*, provides a positive counterpart to *The Sickness unto Death*.

Does this analysis mean that a robust account of self-deception within an apologetic of despair or a negative apologetic is the unique property of those who hold to total depravity and a monergistic view of salvation under a sovereign God? While it may be the case, such a conclusion goes beyond the evidence presented in this article. At the same time, we should note that Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Bahnsen were, respectively, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed. Thus, it suggests that a wide variety of Christian apologists could make effective use of this apologetic tool, even if it is most suited to those who hold to total depravity.

It may be worth noting that at both the academic and popular levels, the idea that many people are self-deceived is widely accepted. However, the Christian apologist presses home the point that this self-deception is particularly prevalent in the area of moral culpability and spiritual insight. Sinners are motivated to run from God's judgment and to justify in their own minds any deviation from his instructions to avoid a sense of guilt. Christians, however, should understand that God has designated the sense of moral culpability as key to seeking gospel hope.

As for self-deception's place in a negative apologetic, it may well argue the need for divine revelation. If all people are self-deceived about their true condition, who is going to show the way to honesty and truth? Kierkegaard argued in effect that it was because of our obscuring acts that the only way humans could know that their sinfulness arose from their defiance of God

was by divine revelation—the Scriptures.⁵⁸ These Scriptures reveal at their heart Jesus Christ: Son of God and man, the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:16). He has conquered death and lives forevermore (Rev 1:18). He is the Christian hope stored up in heaven, imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (1 Pet 1:3–5). No other religion proclaims such hope, and certainly not such hope rooted in the historical reality of this world.

Bahnsen and Van Til both recognized the crucial place of self-deception in their presuppositional apologetic.⁵⁹ Van Til argued that while atheists claim that they reason and live without God, their atheism presupposes theism inasmuch as their use of logic, living by moral standards, expectation of nature’s uniformity, fear of death, and assumption of freedom of thought all manifest an otherwise hidden belief in the true God of Christianity.⁶⁰ Atheists are self-deceived about their world-and-life view. A coherent account of self-deception is critical to espousing this.

The three authors reviewed in this essay provide strong support for the place of self-deception in the Christian doctrine of sin. In my view, self-deception is but one more expression of the pervasive depravity of the human mind, will, and passions. We cannot make every instance of self-deception a simple fault of either the passions or the mind or the will; rather, the effect of sin in all of these psychic faculties (i.e., total depravity) contributes to self-deception.⁶¹ Its universal presence argues for a universal culpability before God. The right response to a study of this doctrine can only be that of the psalmist: “Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults” (Ps 19:12), and “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps 139:23–24).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵⁹ “This notion *functions in such a crucial manner* in his [Van Til’s] argumentation that *without it* presuppositional apologetics could be neither intellectually cogent nor personally appropriate as a method of defending the faith.” Bahnsen, “Crucial Concept of Self-Deception,” 2.

⁶⁰ Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 450, see also 438, 443–60. “*Sinners hate the idea of a clearly identifiable authority over them. They do not want to meet God*” (213).

⁶¹ The original integrity and the subsequent fallen condition of the mind, will/heart, and affections are described in the Canons of Dort, chapter III/IV, article 1. The renewal of the mind and will are described in chapter III/IV, article 11.