Twenty-One Levels of Self-Deception

THIRD EDITION

by
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Preface to the Third Edition

In this third edition of the book I have tried to simplify the text somewhat and removed complications where possible. I've also added some paragraphs about how the ideas of the book might play out in our everyday lives.

Also, I have removed most references to the terms, 'image', 'sign' and 'symbol'. I have to confess to having been somewhat enamoured by the magic of these words in the past, but now recognise that this personal fetish doesn't serve readers too well! Sometimes these words can be useful. But unfortunately they often get used in different ways by different authors. Some will say — it's only a sign, not a proper symbol. Whilst others might say — we need a proper symbol, not simply an image — and so on! In each case, we'd have to know precisely what such authors mean in their use of these words before we can decide whether we agree with them or not.

I've also removed the division of the book into two parts and most references to Eros and Agapé.

Finally, I have added references to what I describe as the 'Aristotelian soul' — a term I've started to adopt as a more relevant view of 'soul' than the purely religious conception.

Other than what I've described above, the spirit of the book is hopefully intact, and I hope that you'll enjoy reading this new edition.

1. Introduction

'The world being illusive, one must be deluded in some way if one is to triumph in it.'

W.B. Yeats

Each chapter of this work is presented as a delusion. As Chapter 2 indicates, the fundamental delusion is to think that anything at all can be said about the nature of reality. Realty is an experience beyond words or logical analysis. The chances of getting anywhere near truth are therefore negligible! Reading however is an interruption to the flow of life and sometimes a word or phrase can resonate with an individual and provide some small help. That is the hope and intention here. There are also 'mustard seed moments', when the mind is open to new truth and some small word or thought arrives just at that time.

If truth is unknowable or inexpressible, then at least there is truth within a particular context — so far as this can be realised. I draw back from describing this as relative truth. The way I describe it is to recognise that when a particular matter is discussed then this is done within a context or boundary, whether this is recognised or not. Some boundaries are constructions that

we make for ourselves. Some boundaries are forced upon us. Some boundaries are present but are not acknowledged or are misunderstood or denied. Only in the broadest context of Chapter 2, All is One, is there no boundary by definition. All other discussions are made therefore in opposition (but not in conflict) to this stance. As such, and as a matter of practical common-sense as much as anything else, it is worthwhile to define a boundary when there is a claim to be making a definite statement about the world. That way, there can be a provisional truth, such as science, morality or law, and so on, but always there is an acknowledgement that there is a wider world where our truth claims may be a lot less reliable. Parochial truth and know-how is more than sufficient for everyday lives. So too is that reticence about claiming universal relevance or transcendence for our beliefs.

In like manner, some chapters speak of 'economies' and I use this word to define a bounded set of transactions, such as the 'economy of grace'. Where such terms are employed it is again to try to sharpen our understanding of what is at stake when we use language and make assumptions unconsciously. Looking at the world in terms of distinct economies often serves as a useful tool to highlight points of contention or agreement that otherwise may be overlooked.

Ascendancy and descendancy are terms that will be considered in some detail within the work. The 'ascendant' aspects of life, I contend, have very much taken precedence over the descendant aspects, and this I consider to be an

unfortunate situation. I have identified this ascendancy primarily with 'spirit'. I do not use the word to imply any pre-existing entity who inhabits us, or some aspect of ourselves that might survive bodily death. Rather it is to try to emphasise the rarefied, aspirational aspect that is so much part of Western religion, science and culture. Likewise, I use the word 'soul' to designate all that is 'descendant' in human nature and not in any sense to suggest that the soul can have a separate existence. 'Descendant' is used by way of contrast to 'ascendant'. However, the notion of going 'down' and embracing the Earth and other people is perhaps somewhat difficult. In a way we are already 'down' — or more properly we are in the midst, surrounded, enfolded, embraced and cherished by nature. However, as the hierarchical role of ascendancy is often assumed, then some going down is needed just to bring us back to where we really are. We need to acknowledge our true relation with nature and culture.

Where to begin then, in trying to explain what the aim of this book is about? Well, two things:

I want to celebrate life — my body, my relationship with other people, my place in nature and my place within the wider universe. This is the erotic nature of life seeking expression. But various things seem to prevent me from fully realising this goal. How can this be resolved? Added to this, I see the suffering of others. I want to help meet their needs. Again though, this desire is frustrated. My own search for happiness and the suffering of others are difficult problems to relieve. What can be

done to remedy this?

In essence, these two questions are the premise of the work. Personal happiness — explored best perhaps in psychoanalysis — and happiness for the many, the Marxist ideology. Desire and need.

As to the first of these, psychoanalysis literally means 'letting the butterfly go free', and Freud spoke of the 'will to pleasure'. Meanwhile the frustration of this quest is succinctly observed by R.D. Laing in *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise*. He says: 'To adapt to this world, the child abdicates its ecstasy.' Recovering ecstasy then is the primary quest of this work.

As for the second issue — satisfying the needs of others — the fact has to be faced that the political solution has not been ultimately realisable and address our concerns accordingly.

Our culture tends to see questions as either/or questions. It tries to reduce everything in the world to such black and white choices. The alternative to this dualistic, polemical approach is a 'dialectic' — a discussion that looks at both/and. I hope that what follows will be such a dialectic. Always, the 'delusions' that are discussed are not to be abandoned wholesale. Of particular note is how each subject might be 'brought home' to real life and how it might inform us of our response to ourselves, others and to the world.

Finally, of course, I am not pretending to 'solve' the delusions discussed here. They are probably

unsolvable. If you are looking for answers then stop reading now! If however, you are content with 'going nowhere in a timeless moment' then read on!

2. All is One

'Before the world was
And the sky was filled with stars…
There was a strange unfathomable Body.
This being, this Body is silent
And beyond substance and sensing.
It stretches beyond everything spanning the empyrean.
It has always been here and it always will be.
Everything comes from it, and then it is the Mother of Everything.
I do not know its name. So I call it TAO.'

In the classic Seventies book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig said that a lot can be learnt from where people choose to make the first 'split' in the world. Religion for instance might take the split to be between light and darkness, or perhaps Heaven and Earth. In philosophy and in science the most obvious split is between 'subjects' and 'objects'.

Our increasingly science-based, technology-driven, industrialised culture recognises only objects in its world view and discounts the reality of subjective experience. Hence, morals and aesthetics, both considered subjective, are given less and less prominence. There is no

'quality' recognised as real, only 'quantity'. Hence, the '*Disqualified Universe'* (Max Weber). In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* Pirsig essentially sets out a metaphysics of quality. The book is subtitled *An Enquiry into Values* — it puts quality in the place of truth as the ultimate reality. We will return to this idea in a later chapter, but for now let's look at what it means for there to be a split in the world.

David Bohm, in his book *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* looks at the sentence, 'It is raining'. What, he asks, is the 'it' that is doing the raining? Why do we not just say: 'Rain is going on'? Clearly, language has created a subject and an object, even where there is not strictly speaking the need to make such a distinction. The point is to illustrate how deeply embedded in our culture and thinking such splits in the world really are. Even language is framed to assume such divisions in the world, so we often adopt them unconsciously and simply as a part of growing up and learning our mother tongue.

As well as this subject and object split we could mention transcendence and immanence, ourselves and others, theism and atheism and future and past. These are all splits embedded in our culture. So too is the manner in which words are regarded either as simple signifiers or set within a context. Each of these dualities will be considered below. Two really big splits take a bit more investigation: the difference between something and nothing and what might be called our innate ideas about the world contrasted with our actual experience. From Kant, and other philosophers, I use the terms

noumenon and phenomenon for this split. The split between something and nothing will form the basis of Chapter 3, whilst the noumenon phenomenon division of reality is the subject of Chapter 4. I have of course deliberately introduced another major split — that between ascendancy and descendancy. The manner in which these terms are employed in this work is discussed in the Introduction. The reader is reminded that I do not regard any of these splits as real. I am employing them with the deliberate intent of drawing out an understanding of the issues raised within the text. I am also looking to challenge those splits which explicitly or implicitly are embedded in our culture and to see how this has often been a cause of harm.

To some extent, these kinds of dualisms have been forced upon us simply in order to survive in the world. A distinction is made, first of all, about ourselves as subjects, distinct from the world around us. In other words, we 'objectify' the world, including, to some extent, other people. Science merely formalises this notion of the 'detached observer', which is implicit in so much of our language and thinking — whilst philosophy describes this as 'the view from nowhere' (Thomas Nagel). It is a remarkably successful strategy for surviving in the world, but we have come to believe of course that this split is real — that consciousness and matter really are separate substances. Much of Western philosophy has been about trying to reconcile the two apparently distinct substances and has tied itself in knots in the process. This is the so-called 'mind body problem' — *res cogita, res extensa* — most usually associated

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