

Twenty-One
Levels
of
Self-
Deception

REVISED EDITION

by
Tom Wallace

TWENTY-ONE LEVELS OF SELF-DECEPTION

Other books by Tom Wallace:

Conatus

Three Miles of Rice Pudding

Utopia Governance and the Commons

A Little Book About Climate Change

TWENTY-ONE LEVELS OF SELF-DECEPTION

Vocatus atque, non vocatus deus arderit.

(‘Summoned or not, a god will be present.’
Written on the lintel of the house of Carl Jung)

TWENTY-ONE LEVELS OF SELF-DECEPTION

Table of Contents

PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION	7
INTRODUCTION	9
PART 1 – EROS	13
1. ALL IS ONE	13
2. SOMETHING AND NOTHING	25
3. PHENOMENA AND THE NOUMENON	35
4. MIND IS SPLIT	41
5. ASCENDANCY AND DESCENDANCY	47
6. ASCENDANCY IS SPIRIT	51
7. DESCENDANCY IS SOUL	57
8. ASCENDANCY DOMINATES	65
PART 2 - AGAPÉ	73
9. THE WORLD IS DISENCHANTED	73
11. DESIRE IS ALWAYS AMBIGUOUS	85
12. MEANING WILL ALWAYS ALLUDE US	91
13. THE SOUL SEEKS BEAUTY FIRST	99
14. START WITH AWE	109
15. CELEBRATE LIFE	113
16. ALLOW FOR DARKNESS, CHAOS AND RANDOMNESS	121
17. BEWARE IDEALS	127
18. INTRINSIC VALUE	131
19. DERIVE ETHICS FROM RELATIONSHIPS	135

TWENTY-ONE LEVELS OF SELF-DECEPTI
ON

20. COMPASSION AND DESIRE MEET IN EMBODIED PERSONS	141
21. BE THE MEANS OF GRACE	149
CONCLUSION	159

Preface to the Revised Edition

This revised edition contains only minor edits from the original. Kindle editions have been reformatted to be the same page size as the paperback edition.

I regard this book as a 'commons' and am happy for it to be shared, in any format, on any platform, provided that an acknowledgement is given to the author and links provided back to where I have posted the manuscript.

TWENTY-ONE LEVELS OF SELF-DECEPTION

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 1 indicates, the fundamental delusion is to think that we can say anything at all about the nature of reality. Reality 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 we are able to realise this. I draw back from describing this as relative truth. The way I describe it is to recognise that when we are discussing a particular matter we do this 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 1, All is

TWENTY-ONE LEVELS OF SELF-DECEPTION

One, is there no boundary by definition. All other discussions are made therefore in opposition (but not in conflict) to this stance.

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.

I make the distinction between Eros and Agapé but it is a difficult one. Eros should be spoken of mainly in positive terms, but the 'ascendant' aspect of Eros — always seeking higher and further goals — has to a large extent eclipsed the 'descendant' aspect. (Ascendancy and descendancy are terms we will be looking at in some detail within the work.) 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

TWENTY-ONE LEVELS OF SELF-DECEPTION

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 we so often assume the hierarchical role of ascendancy, then we need some going down just to bring us back to where we really are. We need to acknowledge our true relation with nature and culture. In contrast to Eros, Agapé is probably closer to the descendant aspect of life.

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.

Psychoanalysis literally means 'letting the butterfly go free.' And Freud spoke of the 'will to pleasure'. Meanwhile the frustration of this

TWENTY-ONE LEVELS OF SELF-DECEPTION

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 first quest of this work.

As for the second issue — satisfying the needs of others — we have to face the fact 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' we discuss are not to be abandoned wholesale. Of particular note is how we might 'bring home' each subject 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!

Part 1 – Eros



1. 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.

Ourselves and others, theism and atheism, future and past, transcendence and immanence — all of these are further splits embedded in our culture. So too is the manner in which words

TWENTY-ONE LEVELS OF SELF-DECEPTION

are regarded either as simple signifiers or set within a context. Transcendence and imminence is a further polarity that has a particular bearing on the development of the argument within this work. We will consider each of these dualities below. Two really big splits take a bit more investigation: the difference between something and nothing and what we might call 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 2, whilst the noumenon phenomenon division of reality is the subject of Chapter 3. I have of course introduced deliberately two other major splits — that between Eros and Agapé and 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, we have been forced into these kinds of dualisms simply in order to survive in the world. We make a distinction 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

TWENTY-ONE LEVELS OF SELF-DECEPTION

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 with Descartes.

The subject object split, as was said, leads us into 'objectifying' others — treating them to an extent as commodities rather than as individual persons. We will be examining this in more detail throughout the work. Also, there has been an assumption that considering ourselves as subjects is just a simple notion. Psychoanalysis has shown however that becoming a subject is actually a very fraught process, involving by definition, the suppression of desire. (The denial of Eros — hence very pertinent to our discussion.) It is also a process that as currently described, is deeply related to death and is heavily misogynistic, both in its conception and in its consequences. Again, this will be considered more in later chapters.

In the theism-atheism duality, the question: 'Is there a God?' is too simplistic. The kind of separate, fully transcendent being that is normally implied by the question can be seen as just another way in which we choose to split

TWENTY-ONE LEVELS OF SELF-DECEPTION

reality. The distinction then between 'God' and 'not God' and so between 'believer' and 'unbeliever' is arbitrary. In fact, the way this polarity is contested simply reinforces the underlying assumptions on which both theism and atheism are built. The God who is rejected by atheists is the same God who is embraced (or feared) by believers. The understanding of what or who 'God' might be is never really contested. We may contrast this with the kind of Pantheism advocated by Spinoza, in which there is only one substance, which is God, and mind and matter are seen as twin attributes of this single underlying reality. Alternative ways of viewing all dualities are clearly possible, and the theism atheism duality illustrates this particularly well because the two 'sides' of the duality are so fiercely contested.

Past, present and future are likewise just convenient ways of carving up reality. In a sense, time does not exist. We divide ourselves up by thinking about what we would like to be in the future, or things that we would like to achieve. Again, whilst this is helpful in terms of making plans, it is actually a false split. There is no future me, or past me. We are all that we ever will be just in this moment! So, regretting the past or worrying over the future are pointless abstractions. Planning for the future in a reasonable manner however is to make proper use of this artificial split in the world.

There is also a split in the world with any kind of description — in fact any word causes such a split. As soon as we use a word to describe something, we automatically assign all other

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

