

The Art of Self Deception
If, By Chance, You Care to Know
By
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I sometimes speak about *how to think*. Not *what* to think, but how to think well by using logic and reason and sound evidence to substantiate our beliefs and the decisions they lead us to. But more often I talk about how *we* think, psychologically speaking, so that self-deception plays less a role in our thinking, and we can better maintain a life of intellectual and ideological integrity—so that we can, that is, be more honest with ourselves and face the reality before us.

Last November, for example, I gave a sermon entitled, “Don’t Lie to Yourself,” about what happens when we confuse our public persona with who we really are, and that the most common signs of self-deception are the feelings of fear and certainty. My March 1st sermon, “A Kinder, Gentler Nation—Really?,” was about how kin selection—the tendency to favor those we are most related to, including those we are ideologically related to—often leads us to feel little, if not animosity, toward those we don’t feel related to. A week later I spoke on knowing the difference between “Pathway or Pathology” when it comes to our own thinking; and two months later I gave a sermon entitled, “Who Cares What You Think?,” about how thinking is meaningless if it isn’t substantiated with sound reasons explaining *why* we think what we think.

Clearly, I think and speak a lot about thinking. *Why*? Because I believe that if we can change our minds, we can change our lives.

Sometimes any new idea can be transformative. But I’ve found the most transformative ideas in my life have been those that have revealed something about the errors in *how* I’ve been thinking. They are ideas that have taught me how to stop deceiving myself. That’s why, although a student of philosophy, I have spent much of my reading and thinking over the years philosophizing about psychology—about *how* the human mind, including my own, works. This course of study has helped me understand that we are neurologically, sociologically, and psychologically wired to deceive ourselves by remaining in states of fear and falsehood. This is why changing *how* we think can change our lives, by making us more courageous and curious.

I’ve read and studied a lot in my life, including a lot of philosophy and psychology. So it surprises even me that the most transformative book I’ve ever read is about technology; *Abundance: The Future is Better than You Think*, the 2012 bestseller by Peter Diamandis and Steven Kotler. It’s a book that’s extremely optimistic about the future for many good reasons, including its central thesis about positive technological advances. But I’ve been speaking positively about technology and the future since 2004. As exciting as that part of the book is, the most transformative part for me was its discussion about why so many of us are inherently pessimistic and fearful of the future.

In brief, *Abundance* explains, fear is a heuristic. “Heuristics are cognitive shortcuts: time-saving, energy-saving rules of thumb that allow us to simplify the decision-making process.”¹ Such “shortcuts,” or, “thinking fast,” as psychologist Daniel Kahneman calls it, can be beneficial, but *Abundance* also points out, “there are certain situations when our reliance on heuristics leads to what he calls, ‘severe and systemic errors.’”² These errors result in cognitive biases that prejudice our thinking regardless of the facts and reality. One of those is the *negativity bias*, “the tendency to give more weight to negative information and experiences than positive ones.”³ We are now seeing the impacts of such bias, for example, regarding changing and fearful attitudes toward vaccinations. The good news and evidence far outweighs the negative and false information about this world-changing medical technology, but an increasing number of us, some at the highest levels of government, can only buy into the negative fear-based falsehoods they’re hearing. This has led to resurgences in diseases that had once been wiped out, like measles, mumps, whooping cough, and polio.

This isn’t to say there aren’t plenty of truly negative things happening in the world, but this particular bias prevents us from recognizing the many positive things that are also happening. Like the mainstream news media, which focuses almost entirely on bad news, our minds have evolved to tune into one channel, the negativity channel where, if it bleeds, it leads. Its programming is all about what’s going wrong, causing us to completely miss, or mistrust, what’s going right, even when it’s happening right in front of us—like the eradication of serious childhood diseases.

This negativity bias isn’t purely attitudinal. It’s physical. “The amygdala,” *Abundance* explains, “is an almond-shaped sliver of the temporal lobe responsible for primal emotions like rage, hate, and fear. It’s our early warning system, an organ always on high alert, whose job is to find anything in our environment that could threaten survival. Anxious under normal conditions, once stimulated, the amygdala becomes hypervigilant.”⁴ “Quite simply,” Diamandis and Kotler go on to say, “Good news doesn’t catch our attention. Bad news sales because the amygdala is always looking for something to fear.”⁵ The implication here shouldn’t be missed; Fear isn’t like other emotions. It has a special place in our brains and, like many mammals, is a driving force in our lives, outlook, and decisions.

This was the small bit of information in *Abundance* that physically flipped a switch in my head. Upon realizing there was something inside my brain preventing me from seeing the whole of my reality while simultaneously causing me to experience the world through negative bias, and not wishing to go on deceiving myself, I was able to overcome the fear instinct and begin seeing the positive things that are also happening. And now that I’m looking for them, I’ve discovered there is much to see and feel good about.

I read *Abundance* in 2012, a year after I became the minister here in Spokane, which means my ministry was also altered by this cognitive transformation. Instead of playing the hero by seeking the next demon to exorcise or dragon to slay or windmill to topple—at the expense of real people

—I began looking for all the good things we ought to uplift, and that can uplift others and ourselves.

2012, for example, was the same year voters in Washington passed Referendum 74, making ours the first state in the nation to legalize gay marriage by popular vote. A few months prior to that historic election, Rick Santorum, a staunch social conservative, former U.S. Republican Senator, and the leading voice of the extreme Right Wing at the time, decided to come to Spokane to shore up opposition to the referendum. Normally, my disagreements with him would have resulted in feelings of animosity, anger, and moral superiority, and I would have been eager to take to the streets to publicly make those feelings clear.

But I was soon invited to join a team of local clergy to determine a proper response. The group's first instinct, like mine had been, was to protest Santorum's visit. "You are welcome to do what you feel is right," I said. "But my religion is rooted in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. For me, to protest the presence of another person is to protest their existence, their life. What I am willing to do instead is to demonstrate my values during his visit, but I cannot protest another person's life." Everyone agreed that demonstrating, rather than protesting, was the right frame, which is how our "People of Faith Support Freedom to Marry" campaign was born, which included public demonstrations and three billboards showing seventeen local faith leaders standing together under that statement, "People of Faith Support Freedom to Marry. Vote 'Yes' on Referendum 74." The campaign wasn't about who we are against, but about what we are for. It came from a positive, hopeful place; not a pessimistic and already defeated place.

I've been a demonstrator rather than a protestor ever since. As I have frequently said over the years since; my days of dragon slaying are over. I have no need to be anybody's hero. I'm not into marching and chanting in unison anymore, or engaging in those performative acts some believe is what it means to *do* social justice. I'm not into feeling good about myself by demonizing, dehumanizing, disinviting, or discounting others. I'd rather concentrate on the good I can do, and the good we can do together.

The transformation in my thinking resulting from reading *Abundance* is only one example of how studying *how* the mind works has changed my life, although most such transformation has occurred less suddenly. I could spend way too much time talking about different psychological and philosophical schools of thought and how they have slowly shaped and reshaped my worldview. But I think it would be more beneficial to summarize the pattern of self-deception my years of studying and pondering have led me to recognize and articulate.

This art of self-deception, if, by chance, you care to know, occurs in just three, easy to remember, phases, which I'm sure I've mentioned in previous sermons. Does anyone remember them? I'll give you the first phase. Subjectify. Anyone? It's okay, I'll repeat all of them now, but I hope you will memorize them now so you can begin recognizing the pattern yourself, not only in the thinking of

others, but, more importantly, in your own thinking. Learning to recognize negative patterns of thinking, or positive ones for that matter, is what eventually changes our lives. So, here's the formula for self-deception:

Subjectify > Objectify > Moralize

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Imagine, for example, that you've just finished watching the latest blockbuster with a friend. Afterward, your friend confidently pronounces, "That was a great movie!" Clearly your friend's emotional reaction to the film is a matter of subjective opinion and says nothing that can be considered objectively true about it. Yet, your friend doesn't say, "I really enjoyed it," or "I was moved by it," which are more accurate statements about this kind of subjective experience. Instead, they say, "It was great," which is an objective statement about the film itself, one, it so happens, that you disagree with.

"Are you nuts?" you say. "It's a terrible film!" Now you've made an objective statement about your subjective experience. Rather than saying, "I did not enjoy it," you have also claimed that there is something intrinsically wrong with the film that makes it objectively terrible, as anybody in their right mind should recognize.

Before long, your friend stops talking to you because your different experiences of the movie has led them to believe there must be something fundamentally wrong with you. Or maybe it's the other way around; it's you who has come to believe there's something wrong with them. Or the breakup could represent your mutual disdain for one another.

That's an example of the process, having a subjective experience, then projecting it outward as an objective truth, then moralizing your opinion to the point you consider those who disagree with your position to be bad people. A movie may seem like an unlikely scenario, but I've witnessed such arguments over films and matters just as mundane. Although, fortunately, most people make up before they break up over such unimportant differences.

So, let's consider a more serious example. As you may have heard, a few weeks ago Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth announced, "We're seizing this moment to discard any absurd, overreaching mandates that only weaken our warfighting capabilities. In this case, this includes the universal flu vaccine and the mandate behind it. The notion that a flu vaccine must be mandatory for every service member everywhere in every circumstance at all times, is just overly broad and not rational."⁶

Whatever his motivation, Hegseth's emotionally laden language makes him appear to have had a negative subjective reaction to the military's flu vaccine mandate. In his statement, however, he doesn't say "I have negative feelings about this mandate." Instead, he makes objective, though unsubstantiated, claims about it; it's "absurd," "overly broad," and "not rational." So, he has decided his subjective experience, which he mistakes as objective truth, is not only right but righteous, resulting in his order to end the mandate.

The consequence of objectifying then moralizing his subjective opinion, unfortunately, has resulted in a flu outbreak involving more than 200 troops at an Airforce base in Texas. How does exposing entire platoons to illness and epidemics do the very thing Hegseth says he wants to avoid, "weakening our warfighting capabilities?"

If we were to look at the reasons this mandate was put into place to begin with, we would find lots of medical and scientific justifications for it, which would prove it is not absurd, overreaching, or irrational. Yet, in this case, Hegseth's negative subjective feelings about vaccinations, which he then objectified and moralized, have led to real-world consequences for others.

These days, I'm also hearing an increasing number of people assert that everyone ought to be ethically required to disclose their use of Artificial Intelligence. One person on LinkedIn said any AI generated work ought to begin with a disclaimer saying, "This was created with AI." Here again, many people are experiencing negative subjective feelings, often fear-based, in response to the sudden, uncertain, and disruptive emergence of Artificial Intelligence. This is understandable. It's a new technology that is displacing workers and altering many industries. We don't know where it will lead and are naturally fearful of the uncertainty and instability it's creating. These are understandable feelings, subjective as they are. But subsequent claims that this technology is objectively evil, harmful, and dangerous is a projection, and not necessarily true. But the further step of expecting everyone to follow a rule based upon one's objectification of their own subjective feelings is irrational, if not narcissistic. It's like asking everyone else to make one's own inner-experiences and feelings the focus of their lives.

This is precisely what many in society today demand when they pressure others to treat what they call the "lived experience" of others as if it is just as true and valid as objective experience. Those who refuse are subject to being publicly called out and canceled by the morality police on social media. As meaningful as our subjective and emotional responses to the world are for ourselves, however, they are different from objective reality, cannot be used to validate what is objectively true, and should not be treated as moral absolutes.

Subjectify > Objectify > Moralize

That's the pattern that I witness almost every day. It's *how* we think. It's how we justify believing whatever we want. It's the Art of Self-Deception.

So how do we best respond to it? I think the answer is to end the process before it begins. By this I mean just sitting with the subjective experience, honoring it, and letting it be what it is. This is what it means to have emotional intelligence; being aware of our feelings, allowing them to happen, and controlling them well enough that we don't act them out in unhealthy or destructive ways. To return to our hypothetical example, rather than saying, "that was a great movie," then thinking anyone who disagrees must be an idiot, simply acknowledge, "I enjoyed that movie. It made me feel good." Or "I hated it! Think I'll go do something that I do enjoy."

The Art of Self Deception—subjectify, objectify, moralize—is fundamentally a rejection of our inner subjective emotional life, the very life we want everyone else to take seriously. It implies that our feelings aren't good enough; that we must make more out of them than there is; and that we must get everyone else to validate our personal experiences by treating them as objective realities that they are morally obligated to acknowledge as such.

Feelings are wonderful. They are the only way to truly experience life—our life. But, while we can relate emotionally to the experiences of others, and they with ours, our subjective experiences are uniquely our own. And the feelings that define them are fleeting, like the waves that come and go on the ocean shore and the shifting sands beneath them. We ought not make idols of our feelings then expect the whole world to worship them. Feel what you feel, then let go. Your subjective experiences, your emotions, and how you respond to them will define you, but they can never define the world or others. So, enjoy your life as best you can, and let others enjoy theirs.

¹ Diamandis, Peter, and Kotler, Steven, *Abdundance: The Future is Better than You Think*. Free Press, New York, NY, 2012, p. 29.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 30.

⁴ Ibid., p. 32.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ [Air Force base grapples with major flu outbreak after Hegseth drops vaccine requirement](#)