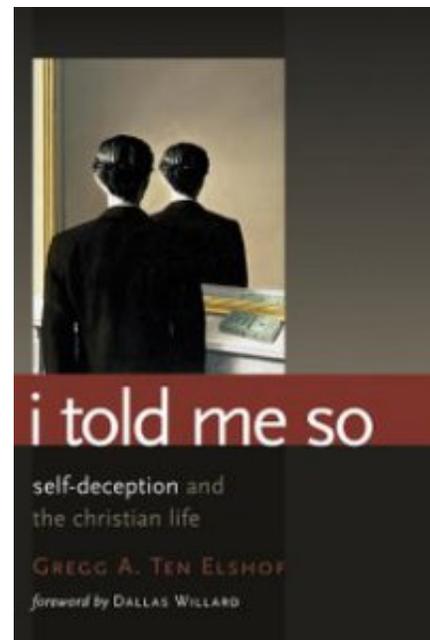


A Summary Review of I Told Me So

[*I Told Me So: Self-deception and the Christian Life*](#) is a book about me. With words like “self” and “I” in the title, I might expect such. But it’s also a book about you and about everyone you know. In fact, it’s a book about human nature and the ability to utilize some clever mechanisms for constructing a layer of deception in our lives. Ironically, [Gregg A. Ten Elshof](#) shows these same mechanisms to deceive ourselves can also be used for healthy psychological growth and spiritual maturity. **It’s perhaps one of the most insightful and helpful books I’ve read in a very long time. It moves to the top of my recommended resources for discipleship and Christian spirituality** (on which see also my collection of studies [The Spiritual Disciplines](#)). To every believer and every pastor I say “*Tolle lege!*” (take up and read) this important contribution into the human psyche. The wisdom gained will serve both leader and lay with practical insights that are biblically solid.



Negatively Speaking

Chapters 1 and 2 lay out the framework in which self-deception operates. The author offers reasons why we value deception stating “a fair bit of our felt well-being is dependent on our beliefs.” And, since “the beliefs I have about myself and others do not need to be *true* to bring me satisfaction...I only need to *believe* them” (pp. 3-4), it follows that it’s far easier concocting and committing to false notions or partial truths about myself than actually doing the work of self-improvement. Moreover, Ten Elshof shows there is an interesting correlation between vice and deception. For instance, when certain vices are promoted within a society, then it becomes more difficult admitting that I actually have a problem with the vice. For example, today racism is viewed as far worse than telling a “white lie” (before the civil rights movement of the 60s, racism was not viewed so severely by some). Thus, by promoting racism as a serious vice in the taxonomy of vices, “the temptation to be self-deceived about the fact that one exhibits that vice increases” (p. 11).

The notion of deception is not as transparent as some might imagine. In fact, “overt lying is not essential for deception.” Instead, “if I believe that I’m leading you to the truth with

what I'm saying, I'm not deceiving you—even if I am causing you to have a false belief. In acts of deception, the deceiver typically acts for the sake of leading the deceived away from what he, the deceiver takes to be the truth" (p. 23). In self-deception, I become both the deceiver and the deceived by "managing my beliefs with no regard for the truth. I'm trying to manage my beliefs, but I'm not trying to move myself along toward *true* belief" (p. 25). And, the more passion I attach to a belief, the more likely I am to be self-deceived about that belief, since rational standards are not top on the list for adherence. In other words, for self-deception to operate efficiently, the truth of my beliefs is not necessary; only my intense emotional attachment to the belief is what matters most.

In chapters 3 and 4 Ten Elshof highlights 5 tools we have perfected in deceiving ourselves. They are 1) Attention Management, 2) Procrastination, 3) Perspective Switching, 4) Rationalization, and 5) Ressentiment. What surprised me is that I was *not* surprised to learn that I employ all of these tools to ground behaviors I know are not psychologically healthy or biblically faithful, but engage in anyway (I'll spare readers the details; I'm sure you have your own!). The value I found in this book is that it brought these things to surface, giving me a vivid look into weaknesses that no longer can be ignored if I am to grow up in my faith.

Attention management involves controlling what comes into my mind that involves belief formation. If I can turn my attention away from those things that do not support my beliefs, then I can succeed in retaining those beliefs I hold dear and avoid any change to my beliefs. For example, in forming beliefs about the truth of Christianity, I can

conduct my inquiry in such a way as to systematically attend to evidence likely to support Christian belief and assiduously avoid evidence in the other direction. Over time, if I'm only or even primarily exposed to the evidence as presented by those with Christian sympathies, I may well find myself believing that Christianity is true, or I may find it easier to retain my belief if I'm already a Christian. One strategy, then, for acquiring and retaining beliefs that contribute to your own felt well-being is to attend exclusively or primarily to the evidence as presented by those sympathetic with the desired belief.

This could explain the sad findings of Gina Welch, an atheist who went undercover into a major evangelical church, [saying](#) evangelicals can offer arguments for Christianity but not for God.

Procrastination, of course, is putting off acting on our beliefs. The dangers are more than apparent, with Ten Elshof observing "often our strongest moral beliefs (beliefs to the

effect that we *ought* to do this or *ought not* do that) will diminish or even disappear if we procrastinate acting on them" (p. 45). When attention management and procrastination join forces, they provide the perfect storm for believers in Christ to miss important growth opportunities.

Using David's "excursion" with Bathsheba, the dangers of **perspective switching** are highlighted. Creating the illusion (perspective) that Uriah (Bathsheba's husband) had legitimately died in battle, David now has a means of justifying his affair with Bathsheba who, after properly mourning her loss, becomes the mother of their illegitimate son. Of course, the prophet Nathan steps in offering a fictitious story to get David to see his own plight from the proper perspective.

Since "no single perspective consistently delivers the view of things that we prefer" (p. 53), perspective switching is especially accessible for facilitating self-deception. We can easily adopt the perspective of others by way of feigning empathy. **Those in public ministry are considerably vulnerable to the use and abuse of this tool by waving the flag of "transparency," but only just enough to leave out the requisite details for full accountability.** If a pastor or leader can enjoy the perspective that his parishioners have of him ("My pastor is transparent and authentic."), then he can avoid his own perspective which includes the sordid details he wishes to avoid and thus continue in self-deception. "We typically adopt the perspective that best accommodates a positive self-view."

Rationalization is the mental exercise of morally or psychologically justifying our behavior. This tool is usually employed post hoc or as an afterthought in order to ground the convictions we already hold in our "gut." But sometimes our "gut" can hold true beliefs without all the reasons. As Pascal said "The heart has its reasons of which Reason knows nothing." Consider this illustration. If you were asked to guess (not solve) the right answer when factoring the equation $x^2 - 3x - 10$ and you replied " $(x - 5)(x + 2)$," you would be correct, even though you may not know how to solve it by the mathematical process. The truth of your answer remains, though you may not know how to derive that answer.

Yet, we are told that unless our beliefs have sound arguments behind them, they are irrational. So we seek to gain reasons for (rationalize) our beliefs as if they cannot be true without all the arguments behind them. Yet beliefs don't require evidence and arguments for them to be true. I can hold a true belief without knowing why that belief is true. This is not to say that solid arguments are of no value. Nevertheless, we buy into the myth that rationalization is necessary and so deceive ourselves into believing that I must know the arguments to support my beliefs before I can know they are true.

Ressentiment is a “re-ordering of the sentiments. We adjust our affections, sentiments, and value judgments in order to avoid severe disappointment of self-censure” (p. 66). Ressentiment takes on a subtle form when we share with another person our “concern” about someone who has angered us, but are merely cloaking our true feelings in a facade of care. It is also a way of downplaying the accomplishments or successes of others when we’ve been removed from the limelight. [Sadly, I see this alot in academic circles!]. By devaluing others’ achievements we minimize our own perceived misfortune. Contrary to the tool of rationalization, resentment, says Ten Elshof, is particularly manifest in the anti-intellectualism of the church, where faith is given priority over reason. Matters of the “heart” are esteemed more than matters of the “head.” It’s a form of “super-valuing” the one over the other, when both should be equally esteemed. Instead, we adjust the value of one over the other.

Chapter 5 is all about “getting help when it’s not working” (the chapter’s title) or the phenomenon of “groupthink” and how it aides self-deception. The rules are simple:

Rule A: Don’t.

Rule A.1: Rule A doesn’t exist.

Rule A.2: Do not discuss the existence or nonexistence of Rules A, A.1, or A.2.

Nowhere is this tool more easily identified than many of the affluent churches in America. Despite homelessness and poverty in the major cities of our country, churchgoers drive their BMWs and live in their spacious houses enjoying their backyard BBQ steaks with their fine wine never hearing a charge from the pulpit to take up their cross and truly sacrifice for the sake of others. Instead “we surround ourselves with those willing to ignore the questions with respect to our particular standard of living.”

Sadly, groupthink is deployed in many facets of Christianity where homosexuality, war, liberal democrats, women in ministry, etc. are topics never broached or opponents are never engaged resulting in one group vilifying or even demonizing the other. We can always depend upon the group for “getting help when [deception is] not working.”

Positively Speaking

Having laid out the framework that show the dangers of self-deception, chapters 6-8 provide wise counsel for helping us avoid the pitfalls of deception by adopting a balanced perspective toward the mechanisms that accommodate self-deception. In fact, Ten Elshof shows that these mechanisms we employ for deception are actually God-given and are a means to help us grow. For example, in chapter 6, he claims that though the truth will set us free ([John 8:31-32](#)), it may also kill us ([Exodus 33:18](#)). “Knowing the truth is, in general,

extremely important...it is not *all*-important" (p. 97), since "God has graciously arranged for us to be kept in the dark with respect to truths that would harm or destroy us" (p. 99). This, of course, does not make God a deceiver, but it does serve to show that not all that can be known is valuable to always know. Ten Elshof opines "there's nothing at all wrong with encouraging the cancer patient's belief that she'll be healed." Even though the evidence may send us in the other direction, "God created us in such a way that we are not slaves to rational standards for considering evidence" (p. 99).

Moreover, the ability to switch perspectives makes forgiveness possible leading us to empathize with an offender. With keen pastoral wisdom, Ten Elshof writes:

If I can see the world from your point of view, however distorted it may be, I may see that your behavior toward me is motivated by deep fear or hurt that has nothing to do with me at all. If I were incapable of adopting any perspective but the true one, I would be incapable of seeing me from your (distorted) point of view. And it is precisely the ability to see myself from your point of view that creates space in my heart to forgive you for your behavior towards me (p. 101).

Attention management gives me the ability to focus on those items that I deem crucial for the most basic tasks of life. Procrastination, along with keeping me from impulsive behaviors, allows me the opportunity to prioritize tasks, making first things first. A wise and balanced appropriation of the tools we use for deception actually helps us ease into life and to mature emotionally and spiritually.

Finally, the author sets forth 3 "good ideas" for moving forward and 3 warnings about remaining immature. Good idea number 1) Sin must die, 2) groups are helpful but groupthink is harmful, and 3) true fellowship with God's Spirit is key to all growth. Three things to avoid are 1) hyper-authenticity, 2) undue suspicion of self-deception in others, and 3) undue self-doubt. He unpacks each of these with sensitivity and a sharp acuity that penetrates us all. I found my name on every page.

Meditation

As I read through this fine book, [Psalm 139:23-24](#) kept coming to mind. I could not shake David's meditative entreaty after reflecting on the majesty of God's character compared to the fragility and dependency of the human soul. He pleads:

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.

This was my meditation throughout [*I Told Me So: Self-deception and the Christian Life*](#). I pray it will also be yours.

Additional Resources

For an interview with the author see [Part 1 here](#) and [Part 2 here](#).