

This is Water and Religious Self-Deception

Kevin Timpe

OF WATER AND ESKIMOS

In the spring of 2005, David Foster Wallace offered the commencement speech at Kenyon College, which was soon widely reproduced across the internet.¹ It contains a forceful warning against intellectual arrogance and about the need to “exercise control over *how* and *what* you think” (53, emphasis original). Wallace began his speech with the following parable:

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, “What the hell is water?”

This is a standard requirement of US commencement speeches, the deployment of didactic little parable-ish stories. The story thing turns out to be one of the better, less bullshit conventions of the genre[,] ... but if you’re worried that I plan to present myself here as the wise, older fish explaining what water is to you younger fish, please don’t be. I am not the wise old fish. The point

¹ After his death in 2008, this speech was published as *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2009). All subsequent references to “*This is Water*” will be made parenthetically and will refer to this printing.

of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. (3-8)

While he's aware that this last sentence expresses "a banal platitude" (9), he also thinks that platitudes such as this can still carry significant importance. While I don't want to suggest that this theme—that "the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about"—is the only, or even the most, important part of Wallace's address,² in the following pages I will take this theme as my focus. More specifically, I will apply this theme to the issue of self-deception and argue that self-deception is often one of the most important issues we face, even if it's among the hardest to see. Furthermore, while I think these lessons apply to all kinds of beliefs, I want to look in particular at religious self-deception. I'm well aware that Wallace didn't write much explicitly on religion and that it comes up only peripherally in his commencement address.³ Nevertheless, I think that Wallace's plea for intellectual humility has important lessons that many religious believers (among others) could benefit from.

² For example, I think that Wallace makes a number of important points regarding the value of a liberal arts education, particular when the larger culture continues to see a university education as increasingly about job prospects.

³ Despite the fact that religion isn't a central theme in the address, Wallace does give a passing remark that shows, rightly in my view, that religion isn't a far from his central theme as one might think: "This, I submit, is the freedom of a real education, of learning how to be well-adjusted: you get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn't. You get to decide what to worship.... Because here's something else that's true. In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship" (95-101, emphasis original).

As Wallace explains the work he wants the fish parable to do, he's interested in the value of learning how to think. By this, he doesn't mean learning what to think (that is, learning to think x , y , and z) so much as "the choice of what to think about" (14). He follows up the fish parable with a related story of two men talking in a bar in the Alaskan wilderness:

One of the guys is religious, the other is an atheist, and they're arguing about the existence of God with that special intensity that comes after about the fourth beer. And the atheist says: "Look, it's not like I don't have actual reasons for not believing in God. It's not like I haven't ever experimented with the whole God-and-prayer thing. Just last month I got caught away from the camp in that terrible blizzard, and I was totally lost and I couldn't see a thing, and it was fifty below, and so I did, I tried it: I fell to my knees in the snow and cried out 'God, if there is a God, I'm lost in this blizzard, and I'm gonna die if you don't help me.'"

And now, in the bar, the religious guy looks at the atheist all puzzled: "Well then, you must believe now," he says. "After all, here you are, alive."

The atheist just rolls his eyes like the religious guy is a total simp: "No, man, all that happened was that a couple Eskimos happened to come wandering by, and they showed me the way back to camp." (18-23)

Wallace challenges his audience to perform a "standard liberal arts analysis" to this this story. As he describes it, the result of this analysis is that "the exact same experience can mean two completely different things to two different people, given those people's two different belief

Compare Remy Marathe's statement in *Infinite Jest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 107: "Our attachments are our temple, what we worship, no? What we give ourselves to, what we invest with faith."

templates and two different ways of constructing meaning from experience” (24). There is a lot in Wallace’s speech at this point about how we construct meaning for our lives. But Wallace also notes a second important lesson to take from this story, and this one has to do not with how we come to form our beliefs, but how we hold on to them. We err, Wallace thinks, when we hold too tightly and dogmatically to the beliefs that we do have and refuse to question them and consider that what we take for granted may, in fact, be mistaken:

Plus, there’s the matter of arrogance. The nonreligious guy is so totally, obnoxiously certain in his dismissal of the possibility that the Eskimos had anything to do with his prayer for help. True, there are plenty of religious people who seem arrogantly certain of their own interpretations, too. They’re probably even more repulsive than atheists, at least to most of us, but the fact is that religious dogmatists’ problem is exactly the same as the story’s atheist’s—arrogance, blind certainty, a closed-mindedness that’s like an imprisonment so complete that the prisoner doesn’t even know he’s locked up. (29-32)

It is here that we begin to see the role that self-deception can play in making us unaware of some of, to use Wallace’s phrase, “the most . . . important realities” (8). To perhaps stretch Wallace’s earlier parable a bit, one reason we don’t see the water that is around us is that we’ve convinced ourselves that it’s not there. As we’ll see, there is a strong human disposition to believe what we want to believe. And when we believe something because we want to believe it, and not because we have good reason to believe it, we’re engaged in self-deception.

SELF-DECEPTION

In one particularly noteworthy study of one million American high school seniors in 1976-77, over 70% of these students evaluated themselves as above average in leadership ability, while only 2% indicated they were below average in this regard. With respect to the ability to get along with others, all of the participants indicated they were above average; 60% self-reported in being in the top 10%, while a quarter of subjects indicated they were in the top 1%.⁴ And so you don't think that only students engage in this kind of problematic self-deception, psychologist Thomas Gilovich also recounts that "a survey of university professors found that 94% thought they were better at their jobs than their average colleague."⁵

Before examining the mechanisms by which we come to be self-deceived, it will be helpful to first say some words about self-deception in general. One reason for doing so is that the nature—and even possibility—of self-deception is philosophically contentious. Alfred Mele's *Self-Deception Unmasked* is perhaps the best recent philosophical work on the subject.⁶ Mele rejects the view that self-deception characterizes a single class of phenomenon with a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that always characterize it. In fact, Mele's task in the book is not conceptual analysis of what self-deception is, but rather to develop an explanatory

⁴ Thomas Gilovich, *How we know what isn't so: The Fallibility of Human Reason in Everyday Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), p. 77.

⁵ Gilovich, *How we know what isn't so*, p. 77.

⁶ Alfred Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). For worthwhile responses to Mele's text, see Neal Levy, "Self-Deception Without Thought Experiments" and Martin Davies, "Delusion and Motivationally Biased Belief: Self-Deception in the Two-Factor Framework," both in Tim Bayne and Jordi Fernández, eds., *Delusion and Self-Deception* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2009).

framework that can account for self-deception. But he nevertheless differentiates two kinds of self-deception, which he calls “garden-variety straight self-deception” and “twisted self-deception.”⁷ Garden-variety straight self-deception (which he also sometimes calls merely “straight self-deception”) involves an agent’s being self-deceived about some proposition *p*’s being true (or false) when she is motivationally biased in coming to believe that *p* is true (or false).⁸ That is, the self-deceived person wants to believe the proposition that she is self-deceived about. Oftentimes, it is our desire that something be the case that causally contributes to our acquiring and retaining unwarranted beliefs that what we want to be the case *really is* the case.

As philosopher Gregg Ten Elshof notes, “the beliefs I have about myself and others need not be *true* to bring me satisfaction. I only need to *believe* them.”⁹ And so, in straight self-deception we tend to believe those things that we want to be true precisely because of the satisfaction that such beliefs bring. I feel better about the big game when I believe that the Buckeyes’ offense matches up well against the Wolverine’s defense. I’m inclined to hold my own political beliefs to a lower evidential standard than my opponent’s so that it’s ‘obvious’ that

⁷ Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, p. 25 and 94.

⁸ Peter Ditto refers to this phenomenon as “motivated cognition” in “Passion, Reason, and Necessity: A Quantity-of-Processing View of Motivated Reasoning,” in Tim Bayne and Jordi Fernández, eds., *Delusion and Self-Deception* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2009), p. 24. In their introduction to the same volume, Bayne and Fernández describe self-deception as occurring when “the subject’s motivational and affective states have led him or her to flout certain norms of belief formation” (*Delusion and Self-Deception*, p. 2).

⁹ Gregg Ten Elshof, *I Told Me So: Self-Deception and the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 4.

my own party's platform is superior. In contrast, twisted self-deception doesn't involve the agent being motivated to believe the proposition in question. Here, Mele gives the following example: "[Twisted self-deception] might be exemplified by an insecure, jealous husband who believes that his wife is having an affair despite his possessing only relatively flimsy evidence for that proposition and despite his wanting it to be false that she is so engaged (and not also wanting it to be true)."¹⁰ Though twisted self-deception warrants attention, given the scope of this essay in what follows I'm going to focus on garden-variety straight self-deception.¹¹

Mele doesn't think that cases of garden-variety straight self-deception must involve intentionally bringing it about that you believe a proposition that you didn't used to believe. But this isn't to say that the behaviors or processes involved are unintentional. As Mele puts it, "sometimes we do things that *are* means to certain ends without doing them *as* means to those ends."¹² The same point holds if we restrict ourselves to cases of intentional action. I can intentionally do something that does, as a matter of fact, lead me to engage in self-deception without intentionally doing the action in question as a means to causing myself to be deceived. My desire for *p* to be true can motivate me to do something intentionally that will lead me to

¹⁰ Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, p. 94.

¹¹ It's probably worth mentioning at this point that just because a belief is formed via a self-deceptive process doesn't mean that belief is false. Sometimes, we're deceived into believing the truth. My interest in this essay is primarily the epistemic quality of a belief in terms of its justification, not in terms of its truth. All else being equal, a belief form via self-deception is worse than a belief that isn't formed in this way. But truth is one way that all else isn't always equal.

¹² Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, p. 44.

believe that p is true without it being the case that my desire for p to be true motivates me to intentionally engage in self-deception.

Mele differentiates four ways in which the desire for p to be true can contribute to an instance of self-deception:

- (1) *negative misinterpretation*, where the desire for p leads us to not properly count some data against p ;
- (2) *positive misinterpretation*, where the desire for p leads us to count some data for p more than we would if we did not have the desire for p ;
- (3) *selective focusing/attending*, where our desire for p leads us to ignore evidence that counts against p and focus instead on evidence that supports p ; and
- (4) *selective evidence-gathering*, where our desire for p leads us to overlook evidence that counts against p and to find instead evidence supporting p which is less accessible.¹³

These practices based on the desire for p to be true are not individually sufficient for self-deception; that is, it's not the case that whenever a person engages in one of these four activities that she's self-deceived. But if she, through one of these four means, were to "acquire relevant false, unwarranted beliefs in the ways described, these are garden-variety instances of self-deception."¹⁴ Note that in these cases it's not that the agent first believes $\sim p$ and then causes herself to believe p instead. Self-deception doesn't have to be explicitly intentional in this way. But Mele thinks, and I agree, that insofar as the behaviors involved in these activities are themselves intentional (e.g., that the agent intentionally seeks for evidence for p or intentionally

¹³ Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, pp. 26f.

¹⁴ Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, p. 27.

focuses on evidence in favor of p rather than undercutting p), there still a sense in which the self-deception comes about as the result of intentional behavior. Gilovich helps unpack this indirect nature of self-deception:

Our desire to believe comforting things about ourselves and about the world does not mean that we believe willy-nilly what we want to believe.... Rather, our motivations have their effects more subtly through the ways in which we cognitively process information relevant to a given belief. What evidence do we consider? How much of it do we consider? What criteria do we use as sufficient evidence for a belief? Cognition and motivation collude to allow our preferences to exert influence over what we believe.... Our motivations influence our beliefs through the subtle ways we choose a comforting pattern from the fabric of evidence.¹⁵

We'll return to the various psychological processes involved in greater detail below. But even at this point, it should be clear that it's often understandable (even if not justified) for agents to engage in such self-deceptive practices. After all, thinking what you want to be the case is actually the case is more pleasant than having to confront the frustration of your desire or admit the falsity of your beliefs. People across a spectrum of behaviors, not just belief-forming behaviors, often do what is pleasant over what is painful. Furthermore, there are a wide range of documented psychological processes that make this kind of reasoning quite easy.

PROBLEMATIC PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES

¹⁵ Gilovich, *How We Know What isn't So*, 80f.

In his recent book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, psychologist and Noble Prize winner Daniel Kahneman explores the biases of human intuitions and judgments. Early in the text, he writes:

When you are asked what you are thinking about, you can normally answer. You believe you know what goes on in your mind, which often consists of one conscious thought leading in an orderly way to another. But that is not the only way the mind works, nor indeed is that the typical way. Most impressions and thoughts arise in your conscious experience without your knowing how they got there.¹⁶

Kahneman's book explores the ways in which psychological processes like the endowment effect, loss aversion, anchoring effect, availability bias, and various heuristics affect how we come to form our beliefs. And it's not the only such book. David McRaney's *You Are Not So Smart*, for instance, presents a wealth of social-psychological research on cognitive biases, heuristics, and logical fallacies. He writes that "there is a growing body of work coming out of psychology and cognitive science that says you have no clue why you act the way you do, choose the things you choose, or think the things you think."¹⁷ Simply reading the table of contents—"Confabulation," "Hindsight Bias," "The Availability Heuristic," "Subjective Validation," "Self-Serving Bias"—gives you an idea of just how many ways we can go wrong in forming our beliefs, and most of these ways could contribute to self-deception.

In fact, research into these biases and heuristics has fundamentally changed how social scientists understand human belief formation. Kahneman reports that "social scientists in the

¹⁶ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), p. 4.

¹⁷ David McRaney, *You are Not So Smart* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), p. xi.

1970s broadly accepted two ideas about human nature. First, people are generally rational, and their thinking is normally sound. Second, emotions such as fear, affection, and hatred explain most of the occasions on which people depart from rationality.”¹⁸ But as the research on confirmation bias, hindsight bias, cognitive dissonance, and a host of other processes makes clear, these two assumptions are probably false.¹⁹ Consider, for example, confirmation bias, which Gilovich describes this way:

when examining evidence relevant to a given belief, people are inclined to see what they expect to see, and conclude what they expect to conclude. Information that is consistent with our pre-existing beliefs is often accepted at face value, whereas evidence that contradicts them is critically scrutinized and discounted.

Our beliefs may thus be less responsive than they should be to the implications of new information.²⁰

¹⁸ Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, p. 8.

¹⁹ However, as Gilovich notes, even though these kinds of heuristics often lead us to error, “these strategies are generally effective, but the benefit of simplification is paid for at the cost of *systematic* error” (Gilovich, *How We Know What isn't So*, p. 49 emphasis original).

²⁰ Gilovich, *How We Know What isn't So*, p. 50. See also page 81. For an influential psychological study of this effect, see C. G. Lord, L. Ross, and M. R. Lepper, “Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: The effects of prior theories on subsequent considered evidence,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37 (1979), 2098-2109; another influential study illustrating confirmation bias is reported in Gilovich, *How We Know What isn't So*, p. 36.

Confirmation bias might involve any of the processes of *positive misinterpretation*, *selective focusing/attending*, or *selective evidence-gathering* mentioned above; it might also involve more than one. Other research has shown how processing information that confirms one's preexisting views is processed differently by the brain than is information opposing it:

In a study of people who were being monitored by magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) while they were trying to process dissonant or consonant information about George Bush or John Kerry, Drew Westen and his colleagues found that the reasoning areas of the brain virtually shut down when participants were confronted with dissonant information, and the emotion circuits of the brain lit up happily when consonance was restored.²¹

Even further studies also show that one's preferences affect the amount of evidence that one examines. First, "people exhibit a parallel tendency to focus on positive or confirming instances when they *gather*, rather than simply evaluate, information relevant to a given belief or hypothesis."²² This can then lead to what Gilovich calls "the problem of hidden or absent data."²³ Furthermore, individuals tend to seek further evidence less when the initial evidence confirms their own perspective, thus making them less likely to encounter sufficient counter-evidence to change their minds.²⁴ Insofar as we are less likely to have evidence that disconfirms our beliefs

²¹ Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me)* (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 2007), p. 19. See also Robert Burton, *On Being Certain: Believing You are Right Even When You're Not* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), pp. 158f.

²² Gilovich, *How We Know What isn't So*, p. 33.

²³ Gilovich, *How We Know What isn't So*, p. 37.

²⁴ See, for example, Gilovich, *How We Know What isn't So*, p. 82.

because we are less likely to seek such data (and we're less likely to take this data seriously even if we do have it), we are often even more resolute in our beliefs than is otherwise justified.

Furthermore, the evidence we gather that aligns with our pre-existing desires and beliefs also tends to be more memorable than contradictory information, and thus more likely to be recalled later, further exacerbating the problem.

Social psychologist Leon Festinger coined the phrase “cognitive dissonance” to describe the unpleasant mental state in which individuals “find themselves doing things that don't fit with what they know, or having opinions that do not fit with other opinions they hold.”²⁵ In his research, Festinger found that the more committed a person is to a particular belief the more difficult it is for her to give up that belief, even in the face contradictory evidence. In many cases, in order to reinforce our current beliefs and avoid cognitive dissonance—that is, to not have our “water” challenged—we have reason to engage in self-deception. We might call this “motivational self-deception.”

Mele recounts a study by Kunda that illustrates this nicely. One hundred and sixty one subjects, seventy-five women and eighty-six men, read an article alleging that “women were endangered by caffeine and were strongly advised to avoid caffeine in any form”; that the major danger of caffeine consumption was fibrocystic disease “associated in its advance stages with breast cancer”; and that “caffeine induced the disease by increasing the concentration of a

²⁵ Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 17.

substance called cAMP in the breast.”²⁶ The subjects were then asked a number of questions, including “how convinced they were of the connection between caffeine and fibrocystic disease and of the connection between caffeine [consumption] and cAMP.”²⁷ Among the female subjects, those who self-identified as “heavy consumers” of caffeine were significantly less convinced of the connections detailed in the article than those female subjects who self-identified as “low consumers.” The male subjects acted as the control group since the article did not address their health. Among the male subjects, the heavy consumers were slightly more convinced of the connections than were the low consumers. And both groups of male subjects were considerably more convinced than were the female heavy consumers. Why? Given the motivation that the female heavy consumers have for wanting the claims of the article being false, they have more reason for rejecting the article’s claims than were either the female low consumers or the male subjects. Their desire to avoid having to admit that their high caffeine consumption might be damaging to their health provides them with a motivation for rejecting what the other subject groups were much more inclined to accept. But, to pick up on a thread from earlier, it’s not as if the female high consumers are aware that they are intentionally disregarding the evidence. That is, if you asked them why they put less credence in the article’s claims, the majority of them would not answer: “Because I have a personal stake in the correlations claimed in the article not being factual.” The role that their motivations and

²⁶ Ziva Kunda, “Motivated Inference: Self-Serving Generation and Evaluation of Causal Theories,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 53 (1987), p. 642, as quoted in Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, p. 12.

²⁷ Kunda, “Motivated Inference,” pp. 643f, as quoted in Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, p. 12.

intentions (if, in fact, they have such intentions) play in their self-deception are hidden from them. But they could nevertheless be quite guilty of self-serving bias.²⁸

Not only can these psychological processes contribute to our self-deception, but they can also compound such that one of them is the cause for further kinds of biased belief formation. Consider, for example, a case of confirmation bias involving one's political beliefs. A person inclined toward a certain political position is more likely to read newspapers and watch cable news channels that reinforce the political views he already holds. One study found that subjects spent 36% more time reading an essay if that essay aligned with their own opinions.²⁹ This could then contribute to the availability heuristic, where an individual is more likely to be influenced in her belief-forming processes by easily available information. A person might also evaluate data that confirms his desired belief to be more vivid than is data that opposes the desired belief. Since we tend to recall better and focus on data that is vivid, we have another way in which a cognitive process can increase the likelihood of biased beliefs via another process. This isn't, of course, to say that confirming (or available or vivid or self-serving) data is always false or lacking in evidential force; but the ease with which the formation of our beliefs can be biased in these and other ways give us reason to pause and consider whether we're being epistemically responsible in how we form and hold beliefs that we want to be true.

All of this suggests that there is a kind of "belief endowment effect."³⁰ Psychologist Richard Thaler coined the phrase "endowment effect" to refer to the undervaluing of opportunity costs: "out-of-pocket costs are viewed as losses and opportunity costs are viewed as foregone

²⁸ See McRaney, *You are Not So Smart*, chapter 28.

²⁹ As quoted in McRaney, *You are Not So Smart*, p. 30.

³⁰ See, for instance, Gilovich, *How We Know What isn't So*, p. 86.

gains, [and] the former will be more heavily weighted. Furthermore, a certain degree of inertia is introduced into the consumer choice process since goods that are included in the individual's endowment will be more highly valued than those not held in the endowment, *ceteris paribus*.”³¹ It's not hard to see how the processes with respect to our beliefs could contribute to self-deception.

RELIGIOUS SELF-DECEPTION

The above discussion should make it evident that self-deception is a threat in all aspects of our cognitive lives. Ten Elshof writes in a book subtitled *Self-Deception in the Christian Life* that “the possibility of self-deception rears its head whenever there is a kind of felt pressure associated with believing something.... Arguably, devotion to a cause, even a very good cause, has the potential to blind us to what would otherwise be obvious facts.”³² Insofar as this is correct, I'm not claiming that all self-deception is religious in nature; nor am I claiming that there is more self-deception involved in religious beliefs than, say, political or atheistic beliefs. That would be an empirical question, and one I'm not prepared to address here. But for many people, their religious beliefs are among the most important beliefs they hold. Such beliefs are also often central for an individual's self-identity, both as an individual and as a member of a certain group of like-believing individuals. So it shouldn't be surprising that religious beliefs are

³¹ Richard Thaler, “Toward A Positive Theory of Consumer Choice,” *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 1 (1980), p. 44. For more on the endowment effect, see Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, chapter 27.

³² Ten Elshof, *I Told Me So*, pp. 22 and 91.

among those beliefs that we're most likely to "protect" by engaging in the various psychological processes described above. As Tavis and Aronson note,

Obviously, certain categories of *us* are more crucial to our identities than the kind of car we drive or the number of dots we can guess on a slide—gender, sexuality, religion, politics, ethnicity, and nationality, for starters. Without feeling attached to groups that give our lives meaning, identity, and purpose, we could suffer the intolerable sensation that we were loose marbles floating in a random universe.

Therefore, we will do what it takes to preserve these attachments.³³

A good example of such religious belief's irrationality can be found in Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter's *When Prophecy Fails*, which chronicles social psychologists' infiltration and observation of a religious cult who predicted the end of the world and how the cult's members dealt with the cognitive dissonance that followed from their predictions being shown to be false, even to the point of becoming even more convinced of the truth of their religious views afterwards.³⁴

Cognitive dissonance is not the only psychological belief-forming process that can generate self-deception with regards to religious beliefs. Insofar as most religious believers are more inclined to study theology that agrees with their own views, confirmation bias can also feed into an availability heuristic involving religious belief. Given the experiential nature of many religions, individuals who self-identify with a religion are more likely to *feel* that their religious beliefs are correct (e.g., Christians might experience the presence of God in a church service,

³³ Tavis and Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made*, p. 59 emphasis original.

³⁴ Festinger, Leon, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (New York: Martino Fine Books, 1956).

Muslims might feel closer to Allah while feasting during Ramadan). But psychology has shown us that such feelings are a bad way to evaluate our beliefs. And religious believers may also project their own religious views onto others, a process psychologists refer to as “false consensus effect.”³⁵ So we not only fail to see our own water, but we often project that same water onto others (e.g., we’re more likely to think that others in our neighborhood share our religious beliefs, we suspect that others with our religious beliefs will also be inclined toward our political beliefs, etc.). Finally, opportunity costs also matter. In adhering to a particular religion, members of that religion not only commit themselves to things (e.g., extended periods of catechism, religious pilgrimages, regular tithing, etc.) but also commit themselves against things (e.g., dietary and behavioral restrictions, separation from wider culture, etc.). As research has shown, people engage in self-deception to justify their participation in groups that have high entrance or opportunity costs.³⁶ Psychologists Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson write that “the more costly a decision, in terms of time, money, effort, or inconvenience, and the more irrevocable its consequences, the greater the dissonance and the greater the need to reduce it by overemphasizing the good things about the choice made.”³⁷ Again, it’s not surprising if we experience these consequences with respect to our religious beliefs.

Nevertheless, looking at one’s religious views in such a way that would minimize self-deception is precarious precisely because what one finds when one engages in such a process may well be that one’s religious beliefs are importantly and profoundly mistaken. According to Ten Elshof,

³⁵ Gilovich, *How We Know What isn't So*, pp. 113ff.

³⁶ See, for instance, Tavris and Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made*, pp. 15f.

³⁷ Tavris and Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made*, p. 22.

an honest-to-goodness inquiry into the evidence for and against Christian belief is hard—not to mention risky and scary—work. If it turned out that Christianity were irrational, I'd be faced with a tough choice: either settle into a commitment to an irrational religion, or suspend my belief in the truth of Christianity and suffer considerable social consequences.³⁸

But as Wallace reminds us in his address, often times “the really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort” (120), particularly if we're not simply to fail to notice that the beliefs we take for granted may be mistaken.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Let us return to Mele's work on self-deception. Mele distinguishes three kinds of cognitive activities that contribute to motivationally biased beliefs of the kind involved in garden-variety self-deception:

- (1) *unintentional* activities (e.g., unintentionally focusing on data of a certain kind),
- (2) *intentional* activities (e.g., intentionally focusing on data of a certain kind), and
- (3) intentional activities engaged in as part of an *attempt* to deceive oneself, or to cause oneself to believe something, or to make it easier for oneself to believe something (e.g., intentionally focusing on data of a certain kind as part of an attempt to deceive oneself into believing that *p*).³⁹

³⁸ Ten Elshof, *I Told Me So*, p. 35; as consequences, he mentions “loss of my job and alienation from my closest friends and family.”

³⁹ Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, p. 18.

While an individual may attempt intentionally to engage in self-deception via (3)—that is, one may intentionally try to bring oneself to think that water is air—the most common cause of self-deception will likely involve activities along the lines of (1) and (2). Given this fact, it's not as if we can avoid self-deception simply by either not choosing to engage in self-deception or by choosing to avoid it; the phenomenon is too complex for that. As philosopher and theologian Dallas Willard notes:

One of the worst mistakes we can make in coming to grips with these well-known human failures [involving self-deception] is to think of them solely in terms of will and “will power.” Of course the will is involved, but the will is not what immediately governs the “normal” life. Such a life is controlled by inertia, habit, bent of character—stuff we don't really pay much attention to, if any at all, and in some cases “stuff” we don't even recognize or admit is a part of “us.” The self that does the deceiving in self-deception is this inertial bulk of habit and bent of character, embedded in our body and its social relations, ready to go without thinking or choice.⁴⁰

That is, this is our water. And because of selective attention and confirmation bias, we often don't change our minds when presented with evidence.⁴¹ We are disposed to not notice the water, to see what we want to see, and this disposition cannot be overcome by mere volitional fiat.

⁴⁰ Willard, in Ten Elshof, *I Told Me So*, p. x.

⁴¹ For a taste of the many experimental studies in this regard see the studies mentioned in Ten Elshof, *I Told Me So*, p. 38 note 2.

We also need to recognize that the likelihood of self-deception is not simply a function of our desires. The more central a belief is to our self-understanding or the more important the belief is to our fundamental perspective on the world, the more likely we are to engage in self-deception about the belief in question. As a Buckeye fan and parent, I'm more likely—all else being equal—to engage in self-deception about how good of a parent I am than regarding how good the Ohio State University football team is this year, given that the former is more central and important for my belief set. The cognitive costs of me being wrong that I'm a good parent are higher than are the costs for me being wrong that the Buckeyes are a superior football team than, say, the Boise State Broncos. (Mele refers to the kind of cost here as “error cost.”⁴²) I'm thus more likely—again, all else being equal—to engage in self-deception regarding the former than I am the latter. Given that for many people religion isn't just about *what they do* or *what they believe* but about *who and what they are*, then they're all the more likely to engage in self-deception on such matters than on beliefs that are not so tied to one's self-identity.

In fact, the attempt simply to overcome bias by attention management can sometimes backfire. One might, for example, attempt to overcome confirmation bias and selective focusing by forcing one's self to engage evidence that disconfirms one's desired beliefs. But, this increased attention can result in one holding the disconfirming evidence to higher evidentiary standards, which then can lead one to think that one's views are less biased than they really are. Daniel Kahneman refers to this as the “illusion of validity.”⁴³ This illusion, to use Wallace's phrase, is often our water.

⁴² Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, p. 35 and *passim*.

⁴³ Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, p. 39.

If willpower isn't enough, what then should we do to take the necessary steps to avoid self-deception? A good first step would be familiarize ourselves with the above ways that we so easily and naturally are led to self-deception. While we tend to see how others' beliefs are often guided by desire, affect, and emotion, it is harder for us to see that in ourselves. "We prefer to think of ourselves as having conscious reasons for what we believe and what we do,"⁴⁴ even if we can see otherwise in others. So we engage in rationalization and confabulation; coming up with a reason why we formed a belief after we've already formed it is not a good guide to why we actually formed that belief.⁴⁵ So we cannot simply 'read off' from our beliefs where we're engaged in self-deception and avoid it.

The causes, and ease, of self-deception will not simply cease by mental exertion and introspection. But this doesn't mean that we can't take steps to help avoid it. As Gilovich points out,

These underlying causes of erroneous beliefs will never simply disappear. They must, then, be held in check by compensatory mental habits that promote more sound reasoning. To avoid erroneous beliefs, in other words, it is necessary that we develop certain habits of mind that can shore up various deficiencies in our everyday inferential abilities.⁴⁶

Perhaps the single best habit of mind that we could develop in this respect is intellectual humility, which we can understand in the present context as the disposition to be relatively

⁴⁴ Ten Elshof, *I Told Me So*, p. 58.

⁴⁵ For an introduction to psychological research on confabulation, see, for example, the experiments in McRaney, *You are Not So Smart*, chapter 2.

⁴⁶ Gilovich, *How We Know What isn't So*, p. 186.

unconcerned about one's own ideas qua one's own in the pursuit of truth. It is also the capacity to see oneself accurately in light of the real relationships that exist in the world where the prior condition makes the later possible. The more humble we are, the less we're likely to be lead astray by our assumptions that we fail to notice. The intellectual virtue of open-mindedness will also be relevant in this context. William Hare writes that "to be open-minded is ... to be critically receptive to alternate possibilities, to be willing to think again despite having formulated a view, and to be concerned to defuse any factors that constrain one's thinking in predetermined ways."⁴⁷ And as James Spiegel argues in a recent article, "human beings are remarkably vulnerable to the formation of false beliefs due to a variety of factors.... Recognizing one's fallibility as a knower turns out to be intellectual humility, or at least one significant form that this trait takes."⁴⁸

CONCLUSION

David Foster Wallace's "This is Water" raises a number of worthwhile and important themes. One recurrent theme—and the one that the story of the two men in the bar, reproduced above, focuses on—is intellectual arrogance. A central value of a liberal-arts education, Wallace thinks, is that it should make us a little more intellectually humble. It should help us "to be just a little less arrogant, to have some 'critical awareness' about myself and my certainties ... because

⁴⁷ William Hare, "The Ideal of Open-Mindedness and its Place in Education," *Journal of Thought* 38.2 (2003), pp. 4f.

⁴⁸ James Spiegel, "Open-mindedness and Intellectual Humility," *Theory and Research in Education* 10.1 (2012), pp. 33f. For a related article on why open-mindedness is a virtue directly applicable to religious belief, see James Spiegel, "Open-mindedness and Religious Devotion," *Sophia* (2012).

a huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to be automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong and deluded” (33). This is a lesson, I’ve suggested, we should apply to help avoid self-deception. After exploring how such self-deception comes about, I’ve focused on religious self-deception in particular. There are steps we can take to minimize self-deception,⁴⁹ and I think that religious believers ought to do what they can to minimize the likelihood of self-deception with respect to their religious beliefs.⁵⁰ And while, as I’ve indicated already, I don’t think that we need to be more humble only about our religious beliefs, I think we’d all do better if we followed Wallace’s advice.⁵¹

⁴⁹ See, for instance, Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, pp. 31-42.

⁵⁰ How a religious person recognizes self-deception and what specific steps she’ll need to take to avoid it will depend on the religious context of her surrounding beliefs. This is, however, an issue deeply entrenched in larger regarding the nature of religious beliefs that I cannot get into here. For two different approaches to this issue, compare Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) and Robert Bolger, *Kneeling at the Altar of Science: The Mistaken Path of Contemporary Religious Scientism*. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012).

⁵¹ I would to thank David Armour, Robert Bolger, Craig Boyd, and Scott Korb for input on the content of this essay. I’m also grateful to Bolger and Korb for the opportunity to contribute to this volume, and David Foster Wallace for a speech which continues to inspire and encourage me after more than a dozen readings.

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