



Hide and Seek: The Psychology of Self-Deception

Neel Burton

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What we believe to be the motives of our conduct are usually but the pretexts for it. – Miguel de Unamuno.

How and why do we deceive ourselves? How does this impact on us and those around us? And what, if anything, can we do about it? This book is a stand-alone sequel and companion piece to 'The Art of Failure', which explores what it means to be successful, and how, if at all, true success can be achieved.

Hide and Seek: The Psychology of Self-Deception Details

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Sandy says

I won this book from a Goodreads giveaway. This book is well organized and Dr. Burton does an excellent job at explaining the ego defenses he explores by providing real life examples of each one. It was nice to have him distinguish the differences between some of the ego defenses that are extremely similar to one another. An interesting read.

Semeiotickled says

Concise yet comprehensive, Dr. Neel Burton provides a well-written and accessible tour d'horizon of the most common ego defences we encounter. Well worth the read, for anyone with an interest in greater self-knowledge, or in greater understanding of others.

Jeriel says

Non-fiction books have a certain notoriety for stating the obvious, but dispelling that myth, Dr. Neel Burton's *Hide & Seek: The Psychology of Self-Deception* provides information that is not only useful and enlightening but also formatted in a clear, concise manner. I received this book from Goodreads in a First Reads giveaway and can say that I am satisfied with it. Explaining the various ways deception manifests itself in our behaviors, this book offers a comprehensive list of actions that raises our awareness on this field of psychology.

What I appreciate most in Burton's book is its organization. Each topic is divided among several parts, which in turn have their own collection of chapters. While I initially believed this book would be a guide on how to resolve behaviors of self-deception, I began to realize there is no one way of handling them. However, Burton explains in great detail the traits of each idea, providing examples to prove his point. From these examples, it is apparent he is well-read, which allows us not only to gain insight on the primary topic, psychology, but on various other subjects like literature, religion, philosophy, etc. As a whole, this book is both interesting and educational, and the language is easy to understand, a characteristic I find vital in any non-fiction work.

I really feel like I walked away from this book with some useful information even if I do not intend on going into the field of psychology. For anyone interested in a quick, enlightening read, check out Neel Burton's *Hide & Seek*.

Dennis Littrell says

Profound, wise and very interesting

Writing from a Freudian perspective with insights from evolutionary psychology, Greek philosophy, the "Bhagavad Gita," Buddhism, and everyday life, psychiatrist/philosopher Neel Burton makes it clear that self-deception is and has always been the norm in human behavior.

Dr. Burton organizes ego defenses into four basic categories: "abstraction," "transformation (or distortion)," "evasion," and "projection."

Abstraction includes denial, repression, anger, intellectualization, depression, and some others. Transformation recalls reaction formation (a term I haven't heard in years), minimization, etc. Evasion is about being vague or inauthentic, or maybe regressing or daydreaming, or telling jokes. Projection is basically tagging others with your own failures or shortcomings.

This all may sound somewhat abstract but Burton's straightforward and uncluttered prose makes this book a surprisingly easy read. Some of that is due to the vivid examples from history and literature that Burton provides to support his elaborate taxonomy.

I very much liked Burton's defense of depression especially in light of the overmedication we are getting from the psychiatric profession these days. Burton writes "The time and space and solitude that the adoption of the depressive position affords prevents us from making rash decisions....," allows us "to see the bigger picture" and "to reassess our social relationships..." (p. 60). I would add that seasonal depression at least may well be adaptive in that staying put (depressed persons typically don't want to do anything or go anywhere) when the weather is not good may help to avoid danger and prolong life. Burton's near celebration of the honesty and courage of "people in the depressive position" that ends the chapter may be a bit overdone for some people. You might want read it for yourself on pages 62 and 63. For me this is an example of the intelligence and creativity that Burton brings to the subject of ego defenses.

Burton classifies some defense mechanisms as "mature" and others as "immature," (or what we might call adaptive and productive versus unadaptive and destructive). He contends that one of the purposes of daydreaming is "to relax and recuperate; and perhaps even to find creative inspiration." (p. 138) In writing about regression (perhaps as a means of relating to children) Burton explains how ego defenses can in general be positive. "If regression, or indeed any other process that is used for ego defence, is consciously employed--whether for ego defence or any other purpose such as empathy, enjoyment, play, humour, inspiration, creativity, and even survival--then it stops being our unthinking master and turns into our good and faithful servant." (p. 143)

In the chapter on asceticism Burton reminds us of these words from Krishna in the "Bhagavad Gita": "There has never been a time when you and I have not existed, nor will there be a time when we will cease to exist..." (p. 164). On the next page Burton quotes Wittgenstein in what amounts to an interpretation of Krishna's words: "If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present." This idea is further explored in my book, "Yoga: Sacred and Profane (Beyond Hatha Yoga)."

While Burton includes "altruism" as an ego defense, he notes "There can be no such thing as an 'altruistic' act that does not involve some element of self-interest, no such thing, for example, as an altruistic act that does not lead to some degree, no matter how small, of pride or self-satisfaction." (p. 179)

I think Burton is correct in this and indeed in his overall assessment of the meaning and purpose of self-deceptions. Where I would differ slightly is by saying that ego defenses (or self-deceptions) are in general either adaptive or maladaptive in the Darwinian sense and should be seen as attempts to maintain "psychological homeostasis." For more on this see my book, "The World Is Not as We Think It Is."

One of the things that makes this book much more interesting than might be expected is the way Burton recalls apt historical examples or incidents in the news to illustrate his points. Noting that the so-called "Stockholm Syndrome" may partially underlie the ego defense "reaction formation," Burton recalls the famous Patty Hearst case from the 1970s after pointing to the syndrome's christening by psychiatrist Nils Bejerot after a robbery and hostage situation at a Stockholm bank in 1973. (See pages 85-87.)

In Chapter 17 Burton sees "inauthenticity" (basically what I would call "faking it") as a means to "minimize or put off the existential anxiety associated with choice and responsibility." (p. 115) In this context he recalls Freud and Erich Fromm who wrote "The Fear of Freedom" (titled "Escape from Freedom" in the US) and other works on our existential fear of real freedom. Burton quotes Freud from "Civilization and Its Discontents": "Most people do not really want freedom, because freedom involves responsibility, and most people are frightened of responsibility."

Perhaps the most profound statement in the book is this from page 108" "...one could go so far as to argue that the self is nothing but the sum total of our ego defences, and that it is therefore tantamount to one gigantic ego defence, namely, the ego itself."

I want to close this rather long review with three quotes from the book that I think illustrate Burton's deep understanding of human psychology:

In talking about what is the right thing to do (such as perhaps leaving your estate to some worthy cause) Burton writes, "...this goes to the very heart of ancient virtue, which can be defined as the perfection of our nature through the triumph of reason over passion. The truly altruistic act is the virtuous act and the virtuous act is, always, the rational act." (p. 179)

In lamenting the relative absence of Plato and Aristotle in higher education today, Burton writes, "...the best education is not that which enables a person to make a living, nor even that which enables him to make a social contribution, but that which inspires and enables him on the path of freedom and individuation, and which, in the longer term, leads to the fullest living and the greatest social contribution." (p.183)

Finally, there is this from Burton's "Final Words": "...it is not just that ego defences may or may not provide us with one or several advantages, but also that they define our human nature and thereby frame the human experience." (p. 218)

There is so much more that I could say about this deeply wise and most stimulating book. Perhaps the best thing I can do is to suggest that you get a copy and read it for yourself.

--Dennis Littrell, author of "The World Is Not as We Think It Is"

Richel says

"Know Thyself", said Socrates.

If you know yourself, you don't have to resort to self-deception.

A person who is true to himself, is not restricted in his thoughts and emotions, therefore, he develops his full potential.

The book is well-written, so it is easy to understand.

Highly recommended!

Brian Borgford says

Most of the content I have heard before, but it is nice to see it all in a concise organized fashion. Although the concepts have been around for a while, the practical examples are excellent and really help to explain the theories.

Ayla Quesada says

Really interesting insight into the types and uses of ego defense.
