

We all have defence mechanisms. Defence mechanisms are forms of self-deception insofar as they prevent us from paying attention to the reality of a situation that we find difficult to deal with.

Among the variety of defence mechanisms that we would do well to notice is one called

intellectualisation.

Intellectualisation takes place when we engage in excessive abstract thinking to avoid reality or experiencing some very disturbing feelings about ourselves.

In intellectualisation, “the uncomfortable feelings associated with a problem are kept out of conscious awareness by thinking about the problem in cold, abstract, and esoteric terms.”¹

¹ cf. Neel Burton, *Hide & Seek – the Psychology of Self-Deception* (Plymouth Acheron Press, 2012), 35.

Consider the following examples of this form of self-deception. Instead of coming to terms with a problem, a person may: split hairs over definitions; question reasonable assumptions, facts, and arguments; preoccupy himself with complex and fine detail; or raise irrelevant or trivial counter-arguments.

Such arguments may be made on the basis of an inaccurate example or appeal to an exceptional case when you are dealing with a less complex one.

By failing to perceive the bigger picture, he also fails to reach the appropriate conclusion. Although he appears to be engaging with a certain problem and is exciting by it, he never really gets to the bottom of it.²

An example of such avoidance can be found in the woman at the well. When Jesus acknowledges her

² cf. *Ibid*, 37.

irregular marriage, she quickly changed the topic to a theological discussion: “**I see you are a prophet, sir,**” she said, “**Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, while you say that Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship**” (Jn. 4:20-21).

At this point, the woman at the well was only living life from the neck up. Living life from the neck up is a kind of avoidance that can also take place in our prayer.

Such avoidance takes place when prayer is reduced to rational reflection. Consequently, we do not pay attention to the interior movements of the Holy Spirit, such as a sting of conscience, or even profound experiences of consolation in which we feel deeply loved if we feel afraid of what God may be asking of us.

Intellectualisation is different to another defence mechanism called *isolation*. Intellectualisation involves repressing the emotion but not the thought; whereas, isolation involves repressing the thought but not the emotion.

The person who isolates his thought feels a strong emotion, often breaking down in tears, but is entirely unable to point to its cause. If, after regaining his composure, he does not seek therapy, but continues to repress his emotion, the emotion may return with a vengeance several years later.³

Whether we are intellectualising the truth or isolating the truth, what is common with both of these forms of self-deception is that they hinder our freedom to comprehend the truth,

³ cf. *Ibid*, 37-38.

be moved affectively by beauty towards God, and choose what is truly good.

In contrast, when we **“learn the truth,”** as Jesus said (rather than become defensively fixated on it or isolate it), **“the truth shall make you free”** (Jn. 8:32).

Jesus also taught that in addition to having eyes to see and ears to hear, we also have a heart which understands God’s ways (cf. Mt. 13:15) because God’s law is written within it.⁴ If we only pay attention to our thoughts and not our emotions, we would do well to heed the words, **“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding”** (Prov. 3:5).

This counsel does not mean we throw reason to the wind.

⁴ cf. Ps. 37:4,31; 40:8; 51:10; 119:7; Prov. 4:23; 22:17; Isa. 51:7; Jer. 29:13; 31:33; Ezek. 36:26; Mt. 5:8; Rom. 2:15; 5:5; Heb. 8:10; 10:16.

Nevertheless, head and heart need to go together, as seen in the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Rather than ponder the words and actions of her Son only in her mind, Mary **“treasured up all these things and pondered them in heart”** (Lk. 2:19).

St Thomas Aquinas taught that **“to believe is an act of the intellect inasmuch as the will moves it to assent ... Consequently, if the act of faith is to be perfect, there needs to be a habit in the will as well as in the intellect.”**⁵ Accordingly, Jesus said that we, like Mary, are blessed if we **“hear the word of God, and keep it”** (Lk. 11:28). If all we ever do is think about our faith, but do not put it into practice, then we are indeed intellectualising.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II, II, q. 4, 2.

St James the Apostle is aware of the consequences of limiting our faith to our head: **“Be doers of the word, and not hearers only. Otherwise, you are deceiving yourselves”** (Jam. 1:22). Indeed, **“theology is faith seeking understanding,”** as St Anselm taught; still, St Paul is aware that we are to grow in such understanding **“so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”** (2 Tim. 3:17), that is, **“faith expressing itself through love”** (Gal. 5:6). Quoting the Prophet Isaiah (Isa. 29:13), Jesus said to some Pharisees and teachers of the law who were intellectualising God’s ways: **“These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me”** (Mt 15:8).

Conversely, St James the Apostle said: **“the man who looks steadily at the perfect law of freedom and makes that his habit – not listening and then forgetting, but actively putting it into practice – will**

be happy in all that he does” (Jam. 1:25). Indeed, truth is best known not when it is a cold abstraction on one hand, or obscured by mindless emotion on the other, but when it is revered prayerfully in our heart. **“Bow down thine ear,”** Scripture says, **“and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart unto my knowledge”** (Prov. 22:17). Similarly, St Benedict urges in the Prologue of his *Rule* to **“listen carefully ... and incline the ear of your heart.”**

Another defence mechanism exhibited in the Woman at the Well is *denial*. Denial is a primary defence mechanism of the ego which wards off the truth and bars it out in an attempt to avoid stressful thoughts, feelings, and memories. Denial of the truth can result in clinging to inordinate desires, remaining the recipient of subverted emotional needs, or defending an irrational position or decision.

Denial is erroneously seen as righteous in the manner depicted in the Book of Proverbs: **“There is a kind who is pure in his own eyes, yet is not washed from his filthiness”** (Prov. 30:12).

Much emotional energy is spent to maintain the state of denial. Denial can be unconscious in which case the person in denial may be as mystified by the behaviour of people around him as those people are by the behaviour of the person in denial.

Or, denial can have a significant conscious element, where the person in denial is turning a blind eye to an uncomfortable situation or more seriously denying accountability due to pride.

Confronting a person in denial usually evokes more denial, or at least a vague response, as the denying person feels threatened. “It is not so much that he wishes to hide these matters from other people,

but more that he does not wish to bring them into the limelight of his conscious attention where they will be at their most glaring and painful.”⁶

With this understanding, when we try to correct our near and dear when they are in denial, the better the advice we offer, the more likely our advice will hit a nerve and be ignored, resisted, or opposed.

Jesus demonstrates a better approach.

Did you notice that Jesus engaged in conversation with the woman at the well in an open, non-judgemental, and empathetic style of questioning?⁷

This approach is consistent with that of St Ignatius who held **“every good Christian is more ready to put a good interpretation on another’s statement than to condemn it as false.”**⁸ This approach involves three aims: firstly, determining a person’s readiness for change; secondly, encouraging him to recognise the

full significance of his problem; and thirdly, guiding his reasoning so that he appears to come to a solution all by himself.⁹

These three aims, together with St Ignatius’ observation, are well illustrated in Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well. With warmth and tenderness, Jesus inferred that she was validly married to the man with whom she was living: **“Go and call your husband,”** Jesus said to her, **“and come back here”** (Jn. 4:31). Jesus wanted to determine her readiness for conversion; yet, for such transformation to happen, He knew she needed to feel secure lest shame entrench her more deeply in denial.

Accordingly, Jesus put a good interpretation on her lifestyle by saying, **“although you have had five, the one you have now is not your husband.**

⁸ *Spiritual Exercises*, [22].

⁹ cf. Burton, *op. cit.*, 11.

You spoke the truth there” (Jn. 4:19). Then, after helping her to recognise what is wanting in her irregular relationship, Jesus appears to have enabled the woman herself to come closer to seeing the solution, as she said, **“I know that Messiah – that is, Christ – is coming and when he comes he will tell us everything”** (Jn. 4:25).

Then, upon going back to the town to tell the people all about Jesus, she said, **“I wonder if he is the Christ?”**

⁶ Burton, *op. cit.*, 113.

⁷ cf. Burton, *op. cit.*, 11.