

Denial and Delusion

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“Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others.

And having no respect he ceases to love.”

— Fyodor Dostoevsky, [The Brothers Karamazov \(1879\)](#)

Humans are extremely good at denial and self deception, so good in fact that these behaviors must have provided a selective advantage to early humans to be so deeply ingrained in our psyches. Denial is a form of massive self delusion, akin to mass movements (Hoffer 1951) that have invaded our politics and spread misinformation. For example, many Americans do not “believe” in evolution and are convinced that climate change is a hoax. An even better example is our inability to confront overpopulation which has actually become politically incorrect. Evolution, climate change and overpopulation are nevertheless quite real. Denial is a “human construct” because we have a word for it, but the concept could be applied to other animals.

Malthus couldn't cut the strings to denial of human overpopulation, William Vogt couldn't do it in 1948, Paul Ehrlich tried again in 1968 but failed, and humans probably will never confront it. As hard-core university ecologists, we 1) understand the problem, 2) recognize that it has gotten steadily worse (our population now stands at 7.7 billion people), and 3) for those who say “we should start having a serious discussion of the issue”—That is exactly what ecologists have been saying for at least the past 50+ years, and 4). We can say we tried—what will our politicians say when people can't get enough food (impending famines are a real threat.), energy grids and the internet go down (cell phones will stop working), or availability of drinkable fresh water

becomes a huge industry so that people can't afford water? Earth's estimated carrying capacity is about half of our current population (Vitousek *et al.* 1986; Wackernagel *et al.* 2002; Haberl *et al.* 2004). When should this discussion finally begin—will it be when our population reaches 15 billion, 100 billion — of course, that won't happen, because as all ecologists know and all of the existing data show, we are heading for a massive population crash. We should take drastic proactive but educated measures now to reduce future impacts, but the public is simply not educated on this topic and the political imperative to do something is not there. Hopefully, the education process that should have taken place in the late 1700s will slowly begin to occur.

Varki and Brower (2013) considered denial to be unique to humans. They argue that our ability to avoid reality provides humans with many valuable attributes, such as optimism, confidence, courage, and willful ignorance of our own inevitable deaths in the face of long odds. However, dangers are inherent in our remarkable ability to ignore reality: our ability to go into denial could be considered an asset in the short term, but it will ultimately lead to our downfall if we continue to ignore overpopulation and climate change.

Catton (1994) suggested that denial is a way of “coping with an insufferable contradiction between past convictions and present circumstances, as a defense against intolerable anomalous information” Denial could be a mechanism humans use to avoid paralyzing anxiety (if, for example, you share a big cave system with cave lions and cave bears).

Self deception and denial are opposite sides of the same coin. Self deception involves believing something that is demonstrably false is real (i.e. an “alternate reality”). In contrast, denial is not believing something that is in fact real. Believing that chem trails are poisons being dropped on us by Monsanto is self deception and easily falsified, which doesn't seem to matter to

conspiracy theorists because they are so firmly entrenched in a delusion of an alternate reality. Climate change, evolution, and overpopulation are real natural phenomena that operate independently from humans. Claiming that one does not “believe” in climate change, evolution, or overpopulation constitutes denial. All three have occurred in the past, are occurring now, and will continue to occur as long as life exists on Earth. Self deception and denial are closely linked. Delusion is often exploited to reinforce denial. For example, the delusional belief that climate change is a “hoax” facilitates denial of its reality.

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