

## Cognitive Dissonance and the Human Fall

Gordon L. Anderson  
July 18, 2016



I find it increasingly difficult to talk about the human fall in a secular culture by using scriptural justifications. The *Divine Principle* is a book written in the language and culture of Judeo-Christian thought, but the language of our current culture is more shaped by universities than by churches. I have found audiences show greater understanding of concepts like the Fall when using terms from social psychology.

### Reaction and integrity

My basic position is that *reaction* is a characteristic of the growth stage and *integrity* is characteristic of the perfection stage or maturity. Adam and Eve were given a commandment “not to eat of the fruit” when they were children because they did not live in a state of integrity, and were subject to impulsive reactions. Adam and Eve fell at the top of the growth stage through such a reaction and disobeyed the commandment. If they had reached integrity they would understand the consequence of their actions and would not have acted blindly. Obeying the commandment would have kept them on course so they could each grow to maturity and be in a position to raise children from integrity

before consummating their marriage.

### Cognitive dissonance

The concept of “cognitive dissonance” can help us understand the motivation for the human Fall. Cognitive dissonance is when we expect one thing based on our beliefs and understandings, but experience something else. Cognitive dissonance causes frustration and is uncomfortable.

One example is when a child expects to find a cookie in the cookie jar, but the jar is empty. This can cause frustration, and the child might react by crying or throwing the cookie jar.



Gordon L. Anderson

A second example is the story of Adam and Eve. God told Adam and Eve it would be bad to eat of the fruit, but Lucifer told them it would be good. Adam and Eve chose to believe Lucifer because they were naïve and wanted to believe his false promise, which did lead to evil.

Another example of cognitive dissonance was the German Holocaust. Jews had been taught by tradition that, if they were faithful, God would bless them. But many Jews who believed they were faithful were exterminated. One reaction to this dissonance was to stop believing in God.

Cognitive dissonance is inevitable because: (1) individuals aren’t born with perfect knowledge, but need to learn, and, (2) because the world is always in a state of change, and yesterday’s knowledge may not be adequate for today’s or tomorrow’s challenges. The important thing is whether one reacts to it or responds with integrity.

### Human brain development

Among animals and plants, human beings are uniquely designed to adapt to change by having most of their brain development occur after birth. Children begin learning by observing and repeating the behavior of those around them. These behavioral patterns could be called our native patterns, or those which we received from the people who raised us. To a large extent we are expected to value the things they value, speak the way they speak, dress the way they dress, and eat the things they eat. These behavioral patterns are transmitted intuitively to the brain. The social surroundings of a child for its first 10-12 years are an extension of the womb for brain development.

Because the world is always changing and providing challenges, an individual needs to learn to transcend and go beyond the start he or she was given by society, to serve as a bridge to the future by adapting and transforming the received culture into one appropriate for his or her own life.

This stage of growth involves individuation, or moving beyond the patterns we have inherited and forging a path for ourselves that goes beyond what the previous generation provided us. It begins by comparing and analyzing the world around us that we see and the world that we inherited. When we observe something unexpected, or incompatible with our ideals, that is not explained by what we already have learned, we experience *cognitive dissonance*.

### Two forms of reaction: flight or fight

Because cognitive dissonance is frustrating and emotionally uncomfortable, people seek to reduce it. There are three ways to reduce cognitive dissonance: two immature ways and a mature way. The two immature ways are reactions.

This first type of reaction is to retreat to the safety of our parents or our received tradition. Religious fundamentalists are in this camp when they refuse to recognize something inconsistent with their beliefs – such as when they reject the scientific evidence human beings have been on earth more than 6,000 years because that is what the Bible says.

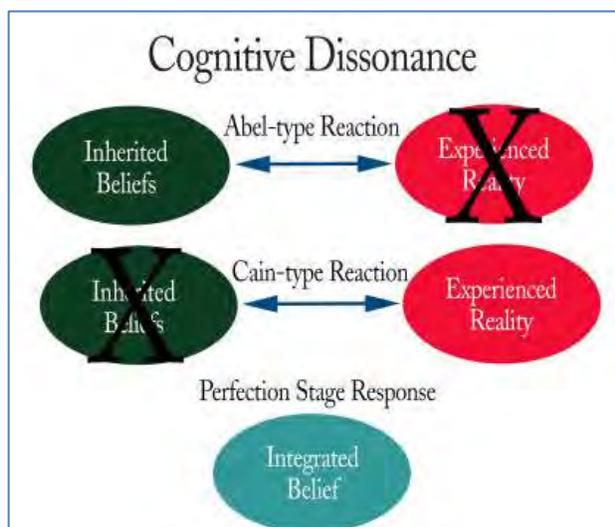
The second type of reaction is rejection of one entire inherited worldview because our sense experience proves something one was taught is not true. An example of this is the person who claims to be an atheist because the Bible is false because it says the world was created in six days. The atheist reaction might be to destroy tradition, even though he has no moral bearings or understanding of his purpose.

### Abel- and Cain-type reactions

In Unificationist terminology, these two types of reactions can be called Abel-type and Cain-type. Both are reactions, and therefore the behavior of children. Abel's position, even though not an adult position of integrity, was a position relatively closer to God because Abel chose to accept that which he could not explain, and he was still on a path of growth to perfection. Cain, on the other hand, rejected his parent's will and killed Abel, much like a frustrated child throwing a cookie jar. But that reaction led to evil, which is to cause other people death and suffering, and it knocked Cain off the path of growth to perfection.

But both Cain- and Abel-type reactions are reflections of child-level behavior rooted in fight or flight instincts. There is no ability to see shades of gray or view the world from the perspective of another person. We can only accept one view, that of our own, and we want to force our view on everyone else to reduce our own cognitive dissonance. On the group level, this is in-group/out-group thinking.

The Christian Church held this child-level view during the Middle Ages, many Islamists hold this view when they attempt to impose Sharia law by force, and communist ideologues reacted similarly when they stated that no more sociology needed to be taught because Marx had the final word. Today, those that say "climate science is settled" reflect this same attempt to dismiss cognitive dissonance. A true scientist will never believe anything is settled, but that there is always more to learn.



### Integrity or maturity

Trying to dismiss a dissonant view is rooted in a lack of the ability for self-transcendence, which involves the ability to transcend our own view to see things as they are, to feel empathy, and to put ourselves in the position of others, to overcome stereotypes that are transmitted to us through our language, culture and experience. Self-transcendence is the first step towards attaining God-consciousness.

An integral person is one who can transcend him or herself and grasp an entire picture, see all points of view, reconcile past, present and future. With respect to cognitive dissonance theory, this means

reducing the dissonance, not by reaction or rejection, but by a higher perspective informed by new knowledge or learning. A true parent is a person of integrity who can lead social evolution toward a better society by being able to encounter challenges with integrity.

### Empathy and abstraction as self-transcendence and maturity

We recognize the reality of others through empathy, by being able to put ourselves in another's place, and understand how they see the world. We can create more desirable realities with the ability to think abstractly and imagine alternate realities. Both empathy and abstraction are forms of self-transcendence, with empathy being primarily a function of the right brain, and abstraction being a function of the left. *Empathy* and *abstraction* are processes learned and developed *after* human beings are born.

A typical first introduction to empathy might be when a child reacts to a brother or sister with the animal instinct, for example by pushing them down and grabbing the toy with which they were playing. The parent will grab the child, give the toy back to the person it was stolen from, and say something like "How would you feel if someone did that to you?" This child-raising activity is an example of a socialization process that teaches empathy.

Abstraction is the form of self-transcendence that enables problem-solving and creativity. Abstraction is a function of reason and imagination. "2+2=4" is one of the most common examples of abstraction. Language is also a form of abstraction. Every word is a label and can be considered an approximate stereotype, and a stereotype never describes a thing exactly. Therefore, especially a large collection of words, like a sacred scripture that attempts to explain the truth about human life, can never be understood exactly the same by different people who understand different things when they hear the same words. This limitation is why the *Divine Principle* says the Bible is a textbook of the truth, but not the truth itself.

### **Scripture and cognitive dissonance**

The *Divine Principle* represents a mature integral approach to scripture because it contains new insights into the nature of reality that the Bible does not explain accurately enough. However, it does not reject the Bible or the ancient truths contained in it, but builds on them and explains them in more modern language.

The Ten Commandments might be ancient, but they are important and have lasted thousands of years; they work to create social peace and harmony. They affirm the primary rules of socialization that are achieved in self-transcendence. Practicing the Ten Commandments causes harmonious relations in society, even if individuals or their parents fail internally to accomplish self-transcendence. Even if one is not mature, if they obey these commandments they will stay out of trouble. These commandments exist for the same reason Adam and Eve were given a commandment not to eat of the fruit.

### **Conclusion**

I have discussed the Fall in terms of human development and the role of cognitive dissonance, something that occurs everywhere in human life. Neither a conservative reaction nor a liberal rejection is an integral, mature way to solve a problem. Much of the behavior among people who are supposed to be adults is some form of reaction in the form of self-justification, dismissal of other's views, the attempt to impose their own view through force, and the unwillingness to gather new information and solve a problem integrally. This is fallen nature, and it is on display everywhere, particularly in religious and political rhetoric.

However, once we know the cause and effects of the Fall, we are in a position to do something about it by transcending ourselves and our groups and seeking out the knowledge and principles that exist in the physical and social realities outside our minds. Human dialogue and good science can help resolve seemingly the intractable conflicts caused by those who want to childishly either wish a problem away and bury their heads in the past, or by those who would throw the baby out with the bathwater. If you feel frustrated or angry, count to ten. Seek a transcendent position and information that can integrally reduce dissonance and create peace.

---

*Dr. Gordon L. Anderson is the President of Paragon House, Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal on World Peace, and Adjunct Professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies. He earned an M.Div. in Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. in Philosophy of Religion from Claremont Graduate University.*

Photo at top: "Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden" (1978-85), by Marc Chagall, portion of stained glass window in St. Stephen's Church, Mainz, Germany.