Talia Ossaily

Self deception and Happiness

The argument in this essay will be divided into two parts: utilitarian and virtue ethics, where each party will agree or disagree with the idea that self-deception leads to happiness, taking climate change and meat production as examples to support their claims.

Self- deception is the state where an agent considers the positive side of a case, although its negative sides seem to be clearer and more obvious. It is simply denying the opposing evidence and convincing oneself that a certain lie is truth or vice versa. To elaborate, most of the problems the world is facing nowadays are not being solved not because the solutions are unknown, but because of the self-deceivers who believe that these problems are somehow beneficial and satisfy their interests. One can claim that self-deception is thinking positively and ignoring all negativities to live a happy and satisfying life. This essay will argue whether this claim is true or not using the language of different environmental ethicists.

Climate change is one of the cases that include self-deception. To illustrate, some people reject the idea of global warming, although all scientific evidence has proven that Earth's temperature is rising year after year; they are deceiving themselves by ignoring the existence of climate change. Other people agree that climate change exists, however, they disagree on following the producers to stop

this problem from becoming too overwhelming for they believe that their self-benefits are superior to the climate change inhibition. For instance, one of the solutions for climate change is the decrease in carbon emissions. A remarkable number of people refuse to decrease carbon emission, as –in their opinion-cars, factories, burning fossil fuels, … are important for human survival. Ignoring all the negative impacts left behind carbon emission to satisfy one's needs reveals the "self-deception action" in the climate change dilemma. Self-deceivers may tend to believe that the moment one's interests are satisfied, happiness is reached no matter what the negative consequences are.

Another case to be considered is meat production, specifically industrial meat production. Some believe that industrial meat production is another name for "animal hell" as it is the place where animals are tortured till death. Although thousands of people demand to stop industrial meat production because of the suffering animals are facing there, and encourage veganism instead, self-deceivers believe that it should not be stopped as industrial production is the reason behind the broad availability of cheap meat. This -in turn- decreases the amount of the monthly food expenses, hence, better life quality is obtained.

The irony falls when people support animal's rights such as the right to live a life free of pain and torture, but at the same time, they eat meat. Those people are indeed considered to be from the self-deceiving family as they are ignoring animal's rights and focusing on satisfying their needs and pleasures: to eat meat.

To answer the question: does self-deception leads to happiness? a utilitarian might have two answers. The first is the "yes" answer. To explain further, when an agent is deceiving oneself, that means that one is considering the positive perspective of a certain issue and ignoring the negative one, hence, happiness is achieved and well-being is maximized when thinking positively. For example, when considering the climate change issue, the presence of climate change provides new jobs known as "green jobs" which, in turn, decreases the unemployment rate, hence, maximizes well-being and happiness.

Another example is industrial meat production, which, despite animal torture, increases the amount of carbon dioxide emission, hence, increase global temperature. However, a utilitarian might argue that most people consider meat as an essential product in their diet, and industrial meat production –as mentioned earlier-provides meat in a great amount, hence, a cheap price is offered for meat. Consequently, affordable prices not only satisfy one's interest when buying the product but maximizes well-being and increase happiness for people will be able to spend the rest of their money on other items and activities that satisfy their needs and interests. In brief, some utilitarians might view self-deception as the action of thinking positively to satisfy interests and needs, hence, it maximizes well-being and happiness.

The idea that self-deception increases happiness might seem to be convincing on one hand. On the other hand, one can say that the quality of happiness offered in self-deception differs from the one stated in the utilitarian guidelines as it has nothing to do with well-being maximization. To explicate, every time a self-

deceiver ignores the negativities of a certain case, he/she does that action for him/her to be happy; which means that the surrounding agents are not taken into consideration. In other words, a self-deceiver does not care about the happiness of the affected individuals for only his/her self-interests are considered, therefore, neither happiness nor well-being is maximized.

The "no" answer of a utilitarian concerning self-deception and happiness can be summarized in one word "contrition". To explain further, almost all self-deceivers tend to regret the decisions they've taken right after the temporary happiness is over. To be clear, when considering the climate change problem, one can realize that the ignorance of people to the impacts of climate change to be happy will soon become massively clear to an extent where people can no longer ignore these impacts as it will affect their daily life routine.

This claim sounds continuous for what Dale Jamieson has mentioned in his article "When Utilitarians Should be Virtue Theorists"; when he mentioned the epidemic of extinction(climate change)that will cause human extinction. Jamieson was able to reveal climate change as a moral problem where ethicists, including utilitarians, hold opposite ideas and acts that do or do not support climate change.

Jamieson's assertion strongly appears in the point of industrial meat. People are indeed, at this moment, happy driving their cars and benefiting from the industries and factories by buying affordable cheap necessities. Nevertheless, people will encounter a day where the world's temperature will exceed 60 degrees Celsius. In this case, neither living things will be able to handle this temperature, nor technology will be able to solve the droughts, burning forests, or even save lives.

Here is where the happiness and the comfortable life will end, and the misery life will begin. In brief, according to some utilitarians, the temporary happiness experienced in self-deception is believed to turn into contrition and misery over time.

Utilitarians will be against self-deception when considering this scenario for self-deception led to temporary happiness followed by misery and regression. The problem in this utilitarian perspective is "foreseeability", as utilitarians can never know whether misery will be followed by this temporary happiness or not.

In short, it seems that the utilitarian party has failed to draw an exact relation between happiness and self-deception as the term "happiness" is observed differently. Frankly, self-deceivers tend to be somehow egoistic when thinking about happiness. Oppositely, utilitarians aspire to maximize happiness and well-being among all affected individuals. For this reason, one can say that self-deception and act-utilitarianism can never meet, as each party is observing self-deception from a different perspective to achieve opposite goals.

From here, one can deduce that utilitarians are not equipped to talk about self-deceiving happiness as there are many obstacles this ethical party is facing with happiness itself when combined with self-deception. Utilitarianism has only one value: maximizing happiness. This means that happiness is good –and it is never the case that some happiness is better than others. Better happiness can only mean more happiness. For this reason, it is hard to establish which happiness is better.

Unlike utilitarianism, virtue ethics seems to have succeeded in explaining the reasons behind self-deception. One of the reasons can be a lack of proper appreciation. To demonstrate, as mentioned earlier above, self-deceivers tend to focus on satisfying their needs and interests; that is obvious in the climate change case as some people refuse to stop all actions that lead to carbon emission to satisfy their daily needs such as driving. These actions are massively destroying nature. If people were to know the importance of nature and its role in this world which is to protect and keep their nature safe, then climate change would have deceased long years ago.

Similarly, Thomas Hill elaborated in his article "Ideal of Human Excellence and Preserving nature" that "those who destroy their natural environment must lack a proper appreciation of their place in the natural world, and so must either be ignorant or have too little humility". Humility, or modesty, is a vital characteristic any virtue ethicist should preserve. Self-deception is opposite to humility; a self-deceiver tends to think that his/her interests are superior to others, as well as to nature. That does not mean that a self-deceiver is an egoist or a dehumanized agent, but it means that a self-deceiver is the one who visualizes certain cases from a perspective for his/her good to satisfy his needs and interests, even if it costs to believe a lie and ignore the truth. Self-deception is an internal state that may or may not affect others, but for sure affects that self-deceiver. For that reason, self-deceivers are considered to lack humility.

Industrial meat is a case that can strongly be related to a lack of appreciation. To clarify, self-deceivers encourage industrial meat for cheap meat can be afforded. Ignorance is obvious in this case as people are ignoring animal's pain and the high

amount of carbon emission resulted from industries and concentrating on saving money. Here, the self-deceiver knows that animals and nature are being harmed because of this act (industrial meat production), however, they focus on satisfying their needs and ignore all the harmful results.

In addition to ignorance and lack of humility, honesty is another topic that virtue ethicists can handle. Virtue ethics does not focus on happiness as much as on honesty; the important feature in mankind. Since self-deception refers to a person being dishonest towards him/herself, virtue ethicist is against it. No matter what the case is, and no matter the extent of happiness one is reaching because of self-deceiving oneself. Such deceivable actions should be avoided for truth and honesty are major moral aspects in virtue ethics, and these two terms are absent in self-deception.

Refusing self-deception does not mean that virtue ethics is against happiness. Virtue ethics does not encourage happiness experienced from pleasures and deceiving. On the contrary, "good" and "virtuous" happiness known as eudemonia is the one virtue ethics cheers up to. In simple words, virtue ethicists motivate people towards pure and simple happiness which is far away from lying and deceiving.

However, what if people are unaware of self -deceiving themselves? Then virtue ethicists stand aside because virtue ethics holds nothing but a guide to the behavior a person is willing to commit; it deals with revealing the wrongness and rightness of an agent's actions rather than providing exceptions and solutions. A wrong

action is wrong despite realizing that is wrong. Similarly, self-deception is wrong according to virtue ethics, even if the self-deceiver is unaware of self-deceiving him/her self; that will change the truth.

In other words, virtue ethics may have succeeded in giving a direct answer concerning self-deception and providing the reasons behind this answer. However, it seems that it fails to deal with human's irrationality for sometimes people tend to do certain actions they are unaware of. Here, self-deception is considered to be weak in providing exceptions for emotional behaviors any person might tend to. It might be true that mankind is rational, however, emotions can sometimes drive a person towards making irrational decisions. Nevertheless, virtue ethics cannot be lenient toward these irrational actions as it is believed that the rational part in every agent should control the irrational part no matter what the case is.

The problem here is that perfect virtue is absent in most of us. A significant number of people can be considered as "partially virtues", that's because sometimes emotions intervene in their decisions which lead to attempting behaviors virtue ethics is weak in explaining. That idea is also mentioned in the article "Virtue Ethics" published by Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. This article mention that virtue ethics is sometimes reckless in explaining a series of actions because of an agent's normal irrational behavior. An example related to self-deception is when people convince themselves that a beloved person is alive although he/she is not. That is an emotional action that virtue ethics is unable to

explain for these self-deceiving people are irrational. So, virtue ethics seems not to hold guidelines for irrational actions committed by partially virtue people.

In conclusion, self-deception is an irrational action that many people commit in their daily lives. It is simply escaping from the truth to satisfy one's needs and interests. The idea of whether self-deception leads to happiness or not has been quite a debatable topic as most people think that if one focused on his interests, then one is happy despite the misery one's surrounding is passing through. This essay tried to answer this question from the utilitarian and virtue ethics perspective, but it seems that self-deception is beyond the ability of these two parties. Here, utilitarians tried to solve the puzzle by drawing a relation between self-deception and happiness. However, two answers were given and each answer had a set of objections. The lack of foreseeability and the quality of happiness are the obstacles that utilitarianism has faced when concluding self-deception. In other words, utilitarians failed to give a clear answer concerning the nature of the relationship between self-deception and happiness.

Virtue ethics tried to explain the reasons to avoid self-deception. Lack of humility and truth, which are considered to be the base of this ethical theory is absent in any self-deceptive action. Self-deceptive happiness is against the laws of virtue ethics, therefore it is wrong. Instead, virtue ethics encourages eudemonia as it results in "good" happiness and well-being. However, the weakness of virtue ethics appeared when considering the irrationality of a human. Humans are indeed rational and capable of making logical decisions, however, emotions can

sometimes drive one towards irrationality. Here, virtue ethics fails to explain and understand any irrational behavior.

All in all, “Does self-deception leads to happiness ?” is indeed a debatable topic as many ethical parties contain gaps and weaknesses when discussing self-deception. I believe that self-deception and happiness can never be in harmony for one reason: even if the self-deceiver makes a decision that satisfies his/her interests, which in turn makes him/her happy, the affected individuals may not experience any of this happiness, and living in an area where people are in miserable will be reflected on to you, hence, you will also be miserable. But one might say that self-deception does not always drive the affected individuals towards misery; it may not affect others at all. That makes us conclude that self-deception is not an easy topic to be discussed as it holds many pros and cons that environmental ethics itself may not be able to handle.