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Self-Deception

by Cynthia L. Witt

(Philosophy 1110)

Self-deception involves a belief that something that is incorrect is true even though there is overwhelming information to the contrary. Someone that is self-deceived has an idea about themselves or the world that is untrue. They may go to great lengths to maintain that belief ignoring any information that would prove their view wrong.

A common example is people living above their means as they go farther into debt. A self-deceived individual along these lines thinks he is entitled to the material things purchased even though that person's salary is unable to afford these luxuries. Another example of self-deception is a student who expects a scholarship to a university when they only have a 2.5 grade point average. I think when a self-deceiver comes to the realization that their belief is inaccurate it leads to disappointment and sometimes depression.

Philosophers debate whether self-deception is intentional or unintentional and if persons are morally responsible for the deception. I think the intentionality of the untruth has to be studied on an individual basis because I am not sure there is a way to cover all situations. If an individual does not realize they are engaging in self-deception, it would be impossible to hold them morally responsible: ". . . if a person can, by the way of self-deceit, claim ignorance, then it follows they cannot be morally responsible" (Butler 466). However, some people perceive only what they want to perceive even with tremendous evidence to the contrary. People also seem to have an exaggerated sense of themselves in comparison to others. Butler states that, "Vice in general consists of having an unreasonable and too great regard for ourselves in comparison to others" (Butler 473).

I worked for an insurance agent and his wife who believed they possessed the highest moral standards, yet they consistently cheated employees out of their commissions. When confronted with discrepancies, they judged the unhappy associates as ungrateful for your job or inadequate at producing sales. In addition, if one questioned commissions, such commissions were routinely reassessed at lower rates. Even though five to eight sales representatives quit within two years, the agents still believed they had the highest moral integrity and were baffled as to why people left. They felt their moral development was above question. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, deceiving yourself,

". . . is a problem of particular concern for moral development since self-deception can make us strangers to ourselves and blind to our own moral failings" (Deweese-Boyd 1).

You cannot advance in your life when what you live is a lie.

The agent and his wife are so miserable that they balk at everyone's successes and revel in others' misery. Not only do they not perceive their own shortcomings, they attend church everyday and feel they are on a higher moral ground than the rest of society. Their life is lonely and they have few, if any, friends. They spend most of their time working because any time they had a competent sales representative, they quit.

If someone gets into the mode of self-deception, it takes a great deal of work to get out of the cycle. First of all they would have to recognize they were deceiving themselves. It would be a tough battle to change your way of thinking to become a person of integrity, but the payoff would be a life

of contentment and peace because you would be true to yourself. It would be well worth the fight.

Works Cited

Butler, Bishop. *Quest for Goodness*. Ed. Keith W. Krasemann. Boston Massachusetts: Pearson Custom Publishing, 1999.

Deweese-Boyd, Ian, "Self-Deception", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2007 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2007/entries/self-Deception/>.

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