

Has the deceived businessman been deceiving philosophers?

The freebie problem and intuitions about discovered and undiscovered
deceptions

Background I: Philosophy

- Prudential Hedonism
 - All and only pleasure is directly good for us, all and only pain is bad for us
- Experience machine
 - Which life is better: real life vs. very happy machine-generated life
- Deceived businessman
 - Which life is better: both have good experiences, one is deceived about a lot
- Methodology in ethics and X-phi
 - Ethics: cases tend to do more work than principles/rationales
 - X-phi/psychology: many cases are misleading, especially unrealistic ones

Background II: Getting to judgments

- Intuitions (I use the psychological definition)
 - Psychology: gut feelings, valence but no labels/specific content
 - Philosophy: varies, but usually includes considering many things first
- Judgments
 - Our (final) view on something, which *may* be faithfully expressed, e.g. verbally
- Biases
 - Cognitive bias: mental heuristic that often inclines judgments to be inappropriate, e.g., incorrect
 - Biasing feature (of a thought experiment): a feature that that often inclines judgments to be inappropriate, e.g. by triggering a mental heuristic to misfire, leading to an inclination toward an inappropriate judgment

Background III: Judging scenarios

- Confabulation
 - We often use our deliberative cognition to justify our intuitions
 - The lawyer riding the elephant (Haidt)
 - It's not easy to tell when we are confabulating and when we are using “rationality” to come to a judgment
- What is “doing the work” in thought experiments/scenarios?
 - The features/values of philosophical interest
 - Irrelevant features (not related to the philosophical question)
 - How can we know?
- Are philosophers better than regular folk at judging scenarios?
 - Philosophers are experts at logical and coherent justifications
 - Do philosophers even have different judgments?

Background IV: Thought experiments and fitness-for-purpose

- Thought experiments
 - Research topic, e.g., “prudential well-being - what makes life go well?”
 - Research question, e.g., “are experiences all that matter for well-being?”
 - Hypothesis, e.g., “more than experiences matter for well-being”
 - Experiment (scenario), e.g., “imagine 2 lives... , which is better?”
 - Data (judgments), e.g., “the vast majority of people think that life 1 is better”
 - Conclusion, e.g., “the data show that more than experiences matter for well-being”
- Is a thought experiment-audience pairing fit for purpose?
 - Is the scenario (directly and only) relevant to the research question?
 - Can we trust the data (judgments about the scenario)?
 - How can we know?

The main question

- Is being deceived only indirectly bad for you?
 - I.e. Is being deceived bad solely because it will probably (or does) lead to bad experiences (or less good experiences)
- Or,
- Is being deceived (also) directly bad for you?
 - I.e. Is being deceived intrinsically bad for you (bad for you regardless of whether you experience it)?

The Deceived Businessman Thought Experiment (the DBTE)

- Research topic: “Prudential well-being - what makes life go well?”
- Research question 1: “Are experiences all that matter for well-being?”
- Research question 2: “Is being deceived directly bad for well-being (even when not experienced in any way)?”
- Hypothesis 1: “More than experiences matter for well-being”
- Hypothesis 2: “Being deceived is directly bad for well-being (even when not experienced in any way)”
- Experiment (scenario): “Imagine 2 happy lives, one involves a lot of deception. Which is better?”

The Deceived Businessman Thought Experiment (the DBTE)

- 2 people live experientially identical lives (experiences = internal only)
- Shelly Kagan, *Normative Ethics*, 1998, p34-36. (+ James Rachels etc.)
- Imagine 2 successful businessmen who died thinking that they had achieved everything they wanted: a loving wife, adoring children, a successful business, and the respect of the community
- But 1 was completely wrong about his assessment of how things had gone: his wife was cheating, his children and the community at large were just using him for their own ends, and his business partner had been stealing from the business, which will soon be bankrupt.
- Which life would/should you prefer?

The Deceived Businessman Thought Experiment (the DBTE)

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- Research question 1: “Are experiences all that matter for well-being?”
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- Hypothesis 1: “More than experiences matter for well-being”
- Hypothesis 2: “Being deceived is directly bad for well-being (even when not experienced in any way)”
- Experiment (scenario): “Imagine 2 happy lives, one involves a lot of deception. Which is better?”
- Data (judgments): “the vast majority of people think that the non-deceived life is better”
- Conclusions: “Truth of hypotheses + \sim prudential hedonism is false”

Is the DBTE-audience pairing fit for purpose?

- Audience
 - Philosophers
 - “Reasonable people”/”educated lay people”
 - All are potentially subject to biases
- Scenario
 - The scenario is relevant to the research question
 - The judgments may be biased by the experimental set up (I think they are)

The main point of this talk is to argue that:
the DBTE-audience pairing IS NOT fit for purpose

Potential problems with the DBTE

- Experimental setup is unfair
 - Freebie problem
- Scenario is implausible
 - Too much deception to go unnoticed
 - Deception is too significant not to result in worse experiences

Freebie problem I

- Life 1 vs (identical) Life 2 + a freebie
- Some philosophers (e.g. Edin Lin): Choosing Life 2 reveals that the freebie has greater value than zero
- Me: Every reasonable person should choose Life 2 unless the freebie is not plausibly of value
- Reasonable people do not have 100% credence in their preferred theory of value
- Reasonable people have greater than 0% credence in other major theories of value
- Freebies of plausible value are viewed as valuable according to at least one major theory of value

Freebie problem II

- Basically, unless you are 100% (not rounded) sure that only experiences matter, you should take the non-deceived life to be on the safe side
- Compare:
- Theory: Only truth, beauty, friendship, and their appropriate appreciation are directly valuable for well-being
- Test: 2 lives with the above, one is very happy and one very sad throughout – which would you choose?
- Even a staunch supporter of the theory should choose the happy life
 - Failure to choose the happy life seems arrogant, irrational, or both

Freebie problem III

- This problem is common in ethics
- Solution:
- Set up comparisons more like the experience machine
- I.e., trade two rival goods against each other
- Decreasing the deception is not enough, we have to add some extra happiness to the deceived life
 - But how much?
 - It depends on what credence in a theory of value is reasonable (95%?!)

Scenario is implausible

- Too much deception to go unnoticed
- Deception is too significant not to result in worse experiences (hugs will lack some tenderness, etc.)
- Solution:
- Decrease the amount of deception
- Keep deception significant (most don't care about white lies)
- Add details to the scenario to make it much more plausible that deception doesn't result in worse experiences

The Deceiving Businessman I

Imagine Jenny and Fred, a recently deceased happily married atheist couple, who nevertheless experienced the typical ups and downs involved with any committed relationship. Jenny and Fred were intelligent and articulate. Throughout their relationship, they really enjoyed talking about religion because they always productively shared philosophical arguments and scientific evidence against various claims of religions without arguing against each other. Jenny, especially, found this delightful.

A few years after getting married, Fred became curious about his spirituality. He began innocently browsing religious websites. Before long, he had become a firm believer in a relatively obscure religion. Jenny hadn't noticed Fred's innocent online research, and Fred decided that the right thing to do in the situation was to keep his newfound religious belief a secret, as that would be better for Jenny and for their relationship.

The Deceiving Businessman II

One of the fundamental tenets of Fred's new religion was in the personal nature of the relationship between oneself and God, a relationship that would be different for each individual, and possibly not always positive. So, even though his new religion brought him great joy, Fred did not feel compelled to tell Jenny about his newfound beliefs—she wouldn't be swayed from her firm atheism, and even if she was, she may not benefit from the religion in the way Fred did. Furthermore, it would ruin their animated discussions about atheism.

Indeed, even after becoming religious, Fred continued with these conversations as if he was still an atheist because Jenny enjoyed their agreement on this issue so much, and because he feared revealing the truth might cause a rift between them. In the past, they had had a disagreement about the degree to which climate change was caused by humans, and disagreeing about this important topic made them less keen to discuss things for a while, bringing about a low-point in their relationship that included fewer positive interactions than they were used to.

The Deceiving Businessman III

Fred knew that telling the truth would not make Jenny love him less. Jenny has always had a great relationship with her parents, loving them dearly. After Jenny left home, her parents became openly religious, but Jenny still loved them just as much. You see, despite being a firm atheist, Jenny was also a humanist with a truly open heart for people of all beliefs. Fred's worry about telling the truth was that it would take away Jenny's favourite pastime, and cause them to have less positive interactions.

Once Fred decided to make his religion a secret, he took all the possible steps to ensure that Jenny would never find out. The religion that Fred joined was based overseas but broadcast their services online. Fred watched these services in secret, always making sure of the whereabouts of Jenny, and any friends that might pop in, before watching a service. He was also careful to leave absolutely no trace of his religious practice or association with the group; he deleted his browsing history, never used hard copies of any religious texts, and never mentioned any of this to his wife or anyone else.

The Deceiving Businessman IV

Fred maintained this deception perfectly for his whole life. He left no evidence of his religious belief or practice whatsoever, and so it was no surprise that Jenny never noticed or suspected a thing. Indeed, Fred and Jenny died in a hot air balloon accident last year, so Jenny died with no idea that Fred was deceiving her about his religion, and no possible way to ever find out.

You might think that Jenny would be disadvantaged by Fred's deception. Perhaps Fred would be slightly less interested in Jenny and discussing atheism with her because of his new beliefs? The opposite is true. Fred's new religious beliefs celebrated marriage and compelled him to place more effort into communicating and demonstrating his love and commitment to Jenny. Knowing how much Jenny enjoyed the conversations about atheism, Fred continued to engage in them, even putting in extra effort, because he wanted Jenny to be happy. Fred's new attitude towards marriage and his extra effort in his conversations with Jenny improved both their relationship and Jenny's satisfaction with their marriage.

The Deceiving Businessman V

So, despite Fred's deception being significant and ongoing, it was well-intentioned and actually made Jenny happier than she would have been otherwise.

Now compare the lives of two possible "Jenny"s.

First Jenny: The first Jenny lived the life described above. She was deceived by a person very close to her for most of her life, but she never experienced any negative effects from the deception, in fact she lived a happier life and had a better relationship because of the deception.

Second Jenny: The second jenny lived a life very similar to the first, except her husband played an online game, rather than researched religion, and never became religious. As a result, this Second Jenny was *not* deceived by a person very close to her for most of her life, and as a result led a normally happy life with a normally up-and-down relationship with her husband. So Second Jenny, had no great deception in her life, but wasn't as happy, and didn't have as a good a relationship as First Jenny.

The Deceiving Businessman VI

1. Disregarding moral considerations, and based on the limited information available, which life is better for the person living it? Does First Jenny or Second Jenny experience the best life?

First Jenny, with more happiness, a better relationship, and a lot more *unexperienced* deception

Second Jenny, with less happiness, a worse relationship, and a lot less *unexperienced* deception

Did your decision mirror the DBTE?

If not, why not?

Differences etc. between the scenarios

Feature of scenario	Deceived B'man	Deceiving B'man
Relative amount of +ve experiences	Same as non-deceived	More than non-deceived
Amount of deception	Lots (implausible)	Some (plausible)
Proximity of deception	Very close	Very close
Meaningfulness of deception	Very important	Important
Intention of deceiver	Selfish/callous	Benificent
Deceived person is morally wronged	Yes	Maybe not
Deceived person is flawed	Yes	Probably not
Deceived person will find out	Probably	Probably not
Deceivers give less love	Probably	No. They give more love
Knowing unknown deception	Yes	Yes
Freebie problem	Huge freebie (non-deception)	Tradeoff (+ve exp vs non-d)
Protagonist	Deceived person	Deceiving person*

Conclusion

- The deceived businessman thought experiment (TDBTE) should not be used as an objection to prudential hedonism
- Because ...
- TBDTE doesn't give us any reason to think that being deceived is directly prudentially disvaluable
- Because ...
- Our preference for the non-deceived life is overdetermined by factors irrelevant to questions of prudential value
 - It's not reasonable to choose the deceived life (freebie problem)
 - We can't get on board with the "identical experiences" stipulation
 - Our intuitive cognition can't unknow the unknown deception

Extra slides for question time

Why not just slightly alter original?

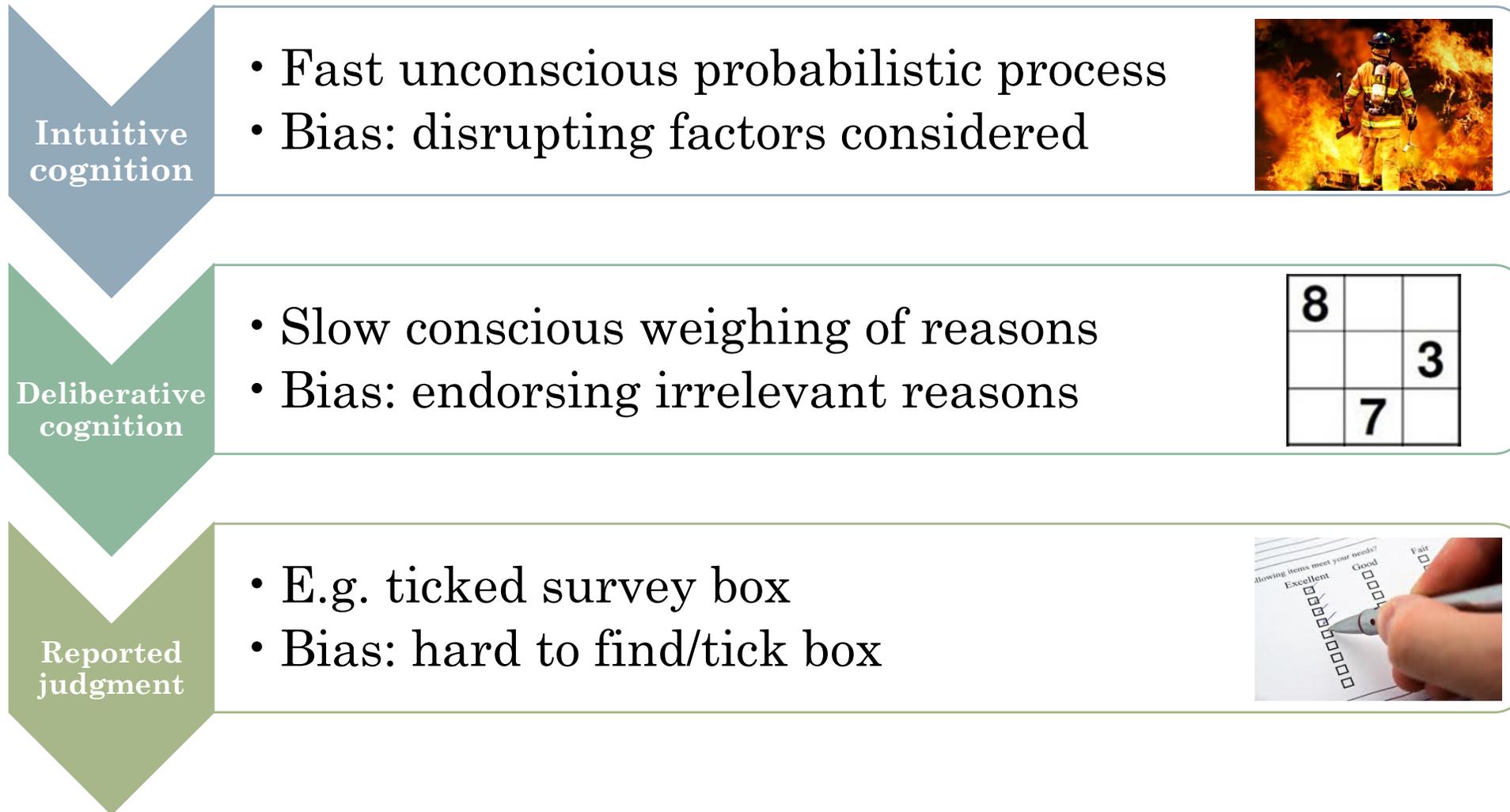
OK. New DB scenario:

- Imagine 2 successful businessmen who died thinking that they had achieved everything they wanted: a loving wife, adoring children, a successful business, and the respect of the community. Both men found their wife a little irritating, and enjoyed spending time by themselves.
- But 1 was wrong about his assessment of his relationship: his wife was cheating. Because of the cheating, he spent more time by himself than the other man, and so was happier a fair bit of the time.
- Which life would you prefer?

Problems with New DB scenario

- Being cheated on might be understood as signalling a weakness in the DB's character or abilities
 - How could you not notice, you dupe!
 - What was she not getting at home?
- Seeing the DB as a loser adds a whole other kind of consideration (not specifically about truth/deception or experiences)
- Intuitive cognition struggles with our knowing about the unknown cheating
- Our intuitions are informed by our experiences
 - We haven't experienced knowing that we didn't know we were being cheated on
 - Our experiences of cheating are uncovered ones that turn out badly

Intuition to judgment (biases)



Being deceived is bad for us because it's not what we want ← (bad idea)

- Right... But why don't we want it?
- Either our desires are arbitrary or they are based on some perceived value
- The fulfilment of arbitrary desires would often **not** be good for us
- So, what is the perceived value?
- Even Peter Singer has moved away from utility as preference satisfaction