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THE EPISTEMIC INNOCENCE OF IRRATIONAL BELIEFS

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Full Title: The Epistemic Innocence of Irrational Beliefs

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Some of your beliefs are irrational. That is not such a terrible thing. In this excellent book, Bortolotti explains the usefulness of irrational beliefs. For example, being delusional is being an irrational state of mind, Bortolotti does not deny that there are better states to be in; however, she shows us that there are epistemic benefits of being delusional that we could not otherwise enjoy.

The concepts covered in this book include belief, irrationality, epistemic performance, and epistemic goal. Tying the concepts together, this book shows that (and how) epistemically irrational beliefs play positive epistemic roles in epistemic performances toward epistemic goals.

The Project

This is not a book about how agents form epistemically irrational beliefs. Instead, we are discussing the relationship between an agent's epistemically irrational belief and the agent's capacity to nevertheless pursue (and attain) epistemic goals. More specifically, we are discussing the capacity to pursue and attain epistemic goals because of the irrational belief.

It is common practice to analyze an agent's epistemic performance without focusing on how the agent's physical and social environment affects the agent's epistemic performance. Bortolotti brings those effects center stage. It is also common to write off irrational beliefs as unimportant or only problematic. Bortolotti shows us why that's wrong. She argues that some beliefs contribute to an agent's functionality (epistemic and otherwise) and describes exactly how epistemically undesirable beliefs can support and benefit an agent's overall success.

Terminology

We should avoid predetermining our evaluation of Bortolotti's ideas in light of contemporary proclivities. We need to adopt terminology. In Chapter One, Bortolotti offers reasons to use the notion of epistemic functionality rather than epistemic agency. The notion, epistemic functionality, characterizes an agent's mere capacity to pursue and attain epistemic goals. The focus on epistemic functionality also serves as a natural bridge between concerns in philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science.

If a belief is *impervious* to counterevidence, then it does not typically update in light of contrary evidence. If a belief is ill-grounded, then it is not supported by evidence (or it is "supported" by irrelevant evidence). If a belief is either impervious to counterevidence or ill-grounded, then it is an irrational belief.

Bortolotti offers reasons for introducing the notion of epistemic innocence. The notion, epistemic innocence, describes the epistemic status of some of our beliefs, the beliefs which are both epistemically irrational and provide distinctive epistemic benefits for the agent. Call a belief epistemically innocent when the belief is irrational because it is either impervious to counterevidence or ill-grounded but brings about an otherwise unachievable epistemic benefit or averts an epistemic cost which would be unavoidable without the irrational belief.

Kinds of Epistemic Innocence

In cases of epistemic innocence, there exist epistemic benefits that would be unattainable without an irrational belief, but what exactly makes a particular irrational belief beneficial varies case by case. An agent's irrational belief is epistemically innocent when it is epistemically beneficial for the agent to adopt, maintain, or report the belief. Bortolotti discusses the epistemic innocence of distorted memory beliefs (Chapter Two), everyday confabulations (Chapter Three), elaborated delusions (Chapter Four), motivated delusions (Chapter Five), and optimistically biased beliefs (Chapter Six). Bortolotti illustrates the distinctive benefits of these kinds of irrational beliefs in Table 1 (page 133).

In some kinds of cases, the epistemic benefit of an irrational belief depends on adopting the belief, some kinds of cases depend on maintaining the belief, and other kinds of cases depend on reporting the belief. In Chapter Two, Bortolotti discusses distorted memory beliefs (such as dementia). For this kind of irrational belief, epistemic benefits come from repeatedly reporting the beliefs. In Chapter Four, Bortolotti discusses delusional beliefs (such as schizophrenia). For this kind of irrational belief, adopting the belief benefits the agent whereas maintaining and reporting are less relevant to epistemic success. In Chapter Six, Bortolotti discusses how maintaining an irrational belief plays a positive role in one's performance; for example with optimistically biased irrational beliefs about oneself. For these, adopting and reporting are less relevant for the epistemic benefits.

Significance

In Chapter Seven, Bortolotti makes explicit the value and significance of her research. In Section Two, Bortolotti sells the notion of epistemic innocence to philosophers; and in Section Three, she sells it to those working in psychology. According to Bortolotti's research, philosophers working on epistemic evaluation should stop assuming that agents must jettison any and all irrational beliefs upon discovery. Since some epistemic benefits and successes are possible only given an irrational belief, we should take pause and evaluate what it would be best to do with an irrational belief. Moreover, by showing us that rationality is not the only path to epistemic success, Bortolotti's research suggests that we stop assuming that rationality and accuracy are chief values for every case. For each field, there are distinct advantages of adopting Bortolotti's theory of epistemic innocence, and new research questions arise after doing so. Epistemic innocence fits well with a unified conception of the human being, and the notion also fits independent literature on an agent's epistemic or psychological dimensions. Thus Bortolotti's research bridges philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science by presenting a notion at their intersection.

Audience

Bortolotti's research will be most useful to scholars working in her field. I predict this book will be listed as recommended or required on the syllabi of graduate courses in psychology and philosophy, especially courses on mental health, rationality, philosophy of mind, philosophy of psychology, and epistemology. The examples Bortolotti presents are real-world, plausible, and digestible. An advanced undergraduate student will find the book useful.

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