

Sebastian Schmidt: “Why we should promote irrationality”

The author argues that there are cases in which we should promote irrationality. In order to reach this conclusion, the author argues for the following claims: (1) that it is sometimes better to be in an irrational state of mind, and (2) that in some of those cases, we can (purposefully) influence our state of mind via our actions. The first claim is supported by presenting cases of irrational *belief* and by countering a common line of argument associated with William K. Clifford, who asserts that having an irrational belief is always worse than having a rational one. In support of the second claim, the author then explains how the control we have over our beliefs could look like and suggests that his argument is not restricted to the irrationality of beliefs, but can be applied to irrational states of mind in general (like desires, intentions, emotions or hopes).

The central case is one of *religious* belief, where a subject believes in an omnipotent and benevolent god because of her religious upbringing, but now comes to believe that there is sufficient evidence speaking against her belief in god. The subject’s belief nevertheless persists, which is possible due to the firmness and importance of the belief (as experienced by the subject). The claim then is that – other things being equal – the subject should adopt strategies in order to uphold her irrational belief, because it promotes her own well-being. Later in the paper, the premise that it is sometimes better to have an irrational belief is supported by a further case, where the subject profits from having irrational and over-optimistic beliefs about herself (the case is taken from Allan Hazlett’s study on the value of truth, who also works with empirical data).

In arguing for the first premise as stated above, the author counters Clifford’s objection, which claims that truth is such an important good that we should never allow ourselves to be epistemically irrational. The objection is countered on several interpretations, the central case of religious belief always being in the background. On each interpretation of Clifford’s argument, truth is either not as important as claimed, or the importance of truth is not sufficient to allow for the conclusion that irrational beliefs can *never* be better than rational ones.

Since “ought implies can”, the conclusion that we should sometimes promote irrationality can only be true if in fact we can do so sometimes (premise (2)). The author points out, following Herbert Fingarette, that we can sometimes purposefully influence what we believe via mechanisms of self-deception. Self-deception is not always passively operating below the level

of voluntary or conscious monitoring, but goes hand in hand with, or maybe often consists in, controlling our mind via actions (including mental activity).

It is finally pointed out that if premises (1) and (2) are true with respect to belief, it can be expected that there will also be cases where the premises are true when we substitute other mental states in their formulations.