

False Beliefs With a Purpose and Optimistic Bias

Falsas Creencias con un Propósito y Sesgo Optimista

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ABSTRACT

In their insightful work on False beliefs and their relationship to optimistic bias, Anneli Jefferson and Lisa Bortolotti (2007, 2018) and other members of their research team have been interested in introducing trans-disciplinary understandings of the epistemology behind the social use and the psychological mechanism of optimistic bias and thereby show their useful functions. In this critical note I will reflect on the epistemic value of such phenomena by establishing a dialogue with some of William James' ideas about the place of optimism and the possibility of reading it not so much as a bias but even, in some cases, as an epistemic virtue.

Keywords: optimistic bias, epistemic virtue, false belief, belief-formation, William James

RESUMEN

En su perspicaz trabajo sobre las falsas creencias y el sesgo optimista, Anneli Jefferson y Lisa Bortolotti (2017, 2018) y otros colaboradores de su proyecto, nos presentan fascinantes estudios interdisciplinarios contemporáneos que arrojan evidencia sobre el uso social y psicológico del sesgo optimista. El tono de esta nota crítica va a ser bastante favorable al entendimiento de que las creencias intencionales son epistémicamente valiosas -un punto no siempre fácil de defender, pero ofrecerá algunos comentarios sobre por qué el optimismo podría ser considerado como una virtud epistémica, después de reflexionar cómo William James trató este tipo de formación de las creencias.

Palabras clave: sesgo optimista, virtud epistémica, creencias falsas, William James

In their insightful work on false beliefs and optimistic bias, Anneli Jefferson and Lisa Bortolotti (2017, 2018) and other contributors of their project, introduce us to fascinating contemporary inter-disciplinary studies that throw evidence on the social and psychological use of optimistic bias. As these au-

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thors point out, the case of optimistic bias seems to exhibit a poor relation to a fact-based focus in belief-formation. Sullivan-Bisset & Bortolotti (2017) and Jefferson & Bortolotti (2017, 2018) present a range of cases in which utility seems to justify a thwarted truth-conditioning of belief if not downright false belief, or, additionally, that this beliefs can be quite unreasonable given the evidence ad hand. People with strong evidentialist concerns will respond, almost faster than anyone else, that no matter how useful a belief can be, a false belief leads us to inconsistency and thus we ought to forget about entertaining whatsoever ambiguity with respect to the search of sole truth. Jefferson, Bortolotti and others defend that there might be cases in which optimistic bias is acceptable, specially when is involved in circumstances when a person might be involved in a dire need for medical or psychological recovery (Jefferson & Bortolotti 2018).

The tone of this critical note, however, it is going to be quite sympathetic to the understanding that purposive beliefs are epistemically valuable -a not always easy point to defend, but will offer some remarks as to why optimism could be considered as an epistemic virtue, as opposed to one of some tolerated elements of practical doxastic attitudes, in order to achieve that I will try to present a case of understanding the truth of a belief not only as a relationship of such belief to past evidence, but to future inquiry. Such is the case that will emerge by considering some of William James arguments in his famous 1909 *The Will to Believe* and Charles Sanders Peirce's idea that the most important commandment for the intellectual life is "to not block the road of inquiry" (Peirce 1898, 178).

It seems to me that the matter at issue in the often favoured rejection of optimist bias is our failure to see that there are different legitimate contexts of belief-formation and then we tend to favour a process of belief formation that is based on considering truth as the sole end of inquiry, and that our judgment of how reasonable a belief is sometimes is only exclusively oriented to past evidence. Truth, conceived in this traditional approach, is a constitutive component of any content inasmuch as it is a candidate to be considered knowledge. However, as Davidson points out, how do we recognise a true proposition when we see it? My view is that the act of acknowledging truth is more complex than a fact-checking exercise, the truth of a proposition is certainly not a tag that has to be compared to a single state of affairs, a true belief has breadth and depth of truth. In this critical note it will be stated that the reasonableness and truth of a belief should not be exclusively assessed in terms of past evidence, but also in terms of the correlation to future evidence that can be established by adopting a given promising belief. Some of these beliefs can be the object of what has been called

optimistic bias. According to Jefferson, Bortolotti and Kuzmanovic (2017, 5), beliefs that are result of optimistic bias are both false and irrational:

False beliefs and inaccurate predictions, no matter how they were formed, misrepresent how the world is or is going to be. Epistemically irrational beliefs and predictions can be either true or false, but what makes them irrational is that they were not formed on the basis of (sufficiently robust) evidence or are insufficiently responsive to evidence after being adopted.

Given this distinction between truth and rationality, falsity or inaccuracy is a red herring when we look at specific beliefs and predictions. Surely, what primarily makes these cognitive states problematic is the worry that they are epistemically irrational. Optimistically biased beliefs and predictions can be true or accurate by luck, and still count as irrational. Alternatively, beliefs can be rational, and still happen to be false or inaccurate. (Jefferson, Bortolotti & Kuzmanovic 2017, 5).

Though we live in times where truth seems to be discredited and even considered irrelevant, in my opinion, truth is very relevant and we cannot build a cogent epistemology without it. Indeed, truth is the sign we have to agree that evidence is in accordance with the facts: truth is clearly one aim of inquiry, an indispensable one. However, I think it is important to distinguish the role of truth in two different contexts that I will call “the context of description” and “the context of discovery”. Whereas we need to stick to the evidence in the context of description, we have to strive for truth and other things in the context of discovery in order to unblock the road of inquiry. The context of description is oriented to past evidence, it assess the value of a belief holding it against it the bulk of past evidence relevant to the matter at hand. The context of discovery makes us sensitive to future evidence, it assesses the value of a belief in terms of how this belief will help us to carry on the process of inquiry in which a given belief uses the place of a hypothesis that will help us find out relevant information and relevant conditions about a matter to which that belief is relevant.

Belief-formation is affected by the context of our beliefs. I find Jefferson’s and Bortolotti’s account of optimism as an important proposal to approach the context of discovery, but then again, even here optimisms necessitate clear limitations. When optimism affects the context of description, a bias is taking place: indeed, we use the word ‘bias’ to express an abnormality that distorts a description of reality, one that gives up on self-controlled and self-monitored doxastic control.

Optimism is an attitude that reflects what Charles Sanders Peirce called “the will to learn” (Peirce, 1898, p. 171), ie., the desire to push inquiry to its limits in order to make us flourish both as intelligent and emotional beings.

Of course, there is an optimistic bias in the description we tell ourselves when we want to be optimistic in the context of discovery, but here, as elsewhere, there are not clear boundaries in the distinctions of contexts and therefore we need to exercise reflective control even in our working optimism.

The ethics of belief offered by evidentialism certainly prescribes principles to approach evidence according to the facts of a bulk cumulative past that we call evidence, and this implies that we have a duty of strictly never lie to ourselves; but it is an altogether different story when the evidence is insufficient and, furthermore, the approach of an optimistic stance might allow us to perform actions that generate true beliefs and thus, the evidence required. The adoption of weak evidentialism over strong evidentialism opens our possibilities for interaction between the context of description and the context of discovery, and even more importantly, the adoption of optimism about discovery opens up the possibility of formulating working hypothesis that allow us to pursue inquiry. I suppose, however, that the bar is set high as to what counts as an optimistic belief that is not unreasonable and hypothetically valuable. I think the account presented by William James below can help us to achieve such aim.

A pragmatistic view allows us to understand that self-controlled inquiry can be the end of the process of belief formation. Such kind of process does not exclude truth as one of the relevant ends, but it does not adopt a dogmatic or strong evidentialism. This topic was clearly flesh out by William James in his classic paper 'The Will to Believe' (1897) [henceforth WB].

William James' important dilemma comes to the fore in order to understand the above consideration better. Two strategies to approach inquiry are reflected:

- Strategy A: Risk a loss of truth and a loss of a vital good for the certainty of avoiding error.
- Strategy B: Risk error for a chance at truth and a vital good.

Beliefs, hence, in the context of discovery, could thus behave as habits of thought, habits of action and habits of expectation in which the two contexts interact.

One positive way in which we can read the optimism bias is the following: even if truly unrealistic views of ourselves usually lean to unrealistic (and thus false) beliefs, the adoption of these in the context of discovery is temporarily justified if these doxastic states are adopted in order to seize us a better chance where the gain of a dominating expectation is at play. This consideration is similar to a version of Pascal's wager: weak evidentialism allows us to accept pragmatic considerations to entertain a belief if there is

no clear evidence in the side of the context of description, but the context of discovery can henceforth be pushed forward and open us the ways to achieve the missing evidence. An optimistic belief is akin to a scientific hypothesis, it is a candidate that, if turns out to be the adequate one, it will make the rest of our inquiries a matter of course.

Let us consider one of Jefferson's² examples: of our positive attitude towards our driving skills. Let us suppose that I am not good at performing one of the driving skills, i.e., parking; but I can adopt a positive attitude towards my temporary inability of park correctly as a way to change it: it might be false that I am very good at parking, but confidence and a host of psychological arrays might be improved by acting as it were: this is clearly a context of discovery. Suppose I am to apply for the driving test, the lack of confidence can actually alter my chances of performing well, and thus seems rational to entertain ideas that even though are not accurate in the context of description, can make a difference in the context of discovery. The optimism bias might be an instance of this, but then again, this apparently harmless and somewhat useful set of considerations have to be thought through, otherwise we could run the risk of mistaking a context for another and thus allowing inconsistency.

One final thought: these false beliefs indeed have a purpose, and that purpose is what can provide them of reasonableness, as long as they help us to see the kind of containment that we have to deploy to treat falsity: as long as falsity is regarded in the right context of inquiry then we contain the potential explosive nature of inconsistency (we would not allow ourselves to entertain evidently false beliefs in the contexts of description), we might know that in the light of certain evidence we do not have grounds to affirm p , but adopting p will help us to carry on to discover whether the evidence might be find in future inquiry, and therefore the likely false nature of p can be neutralised by an entertainment of p as potentially true. This means that the possibility of the falsity of p might be ignored for the sake of discovering what would optimistically ensue if we accept p , this will apply only when the hypothetical entertainment of p helps us in a momentous need to carry on out fo inaction and pursue a positive outcome in the context of discovery. One could say that the distinction of contexts of inquiry can be a pragmatic way of deal with this, and a way of having a practical use of paraconsistency, i.e., of an exploratory neutralisation of evidence as considered as the bulk of past experience in order to open ourselves to future experience.

² This example, as far as I am aware, is not in her direct writings on the topic, I listen to it in an argumental exchange we had at a conference in 2015.

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