Epistemic style in OCD*

Carolina Flores

Pablo Hubacher Haerle's excellent paper argues that there are cases of OCD (sexual OCD, specifically) in which people inquire in rational ways. If his analysis is correct, then OCD is not uniformly characterized by epistemic irrationality.

The analysis of the cases is compelling, and it offers valuable new resources for understanding why (some) subjects with OCD persist in their inquiries. But I want to raise some questions about whether subjects really inquire rationally. To do so, I will suggest a more comprehensive assessment of how these agents set different epistemic parameters. More generally, I will argue that by focusing on epistemic parameter settings and epistemic styles, we can clarify different loci of irrationality while destigmatizing OCD.

1 Do subjects with sexual OCD really satisfy Friedman's zetetic requirement?

Hubacher Haerle argues that some people with sexual OCD (S-OCD) do not violate Friedman's Zetetic Requirement (Friedman 2019):

> *ZR*: You ought not to inquire into p if the available evidence is such that you ought to have reached a firm conclusion about p.

In the cases he considers, people are extremely worried about violating a sexual taboo, such as being attracted to a family member. Their worries—which, Hubacher Haerle convincingly argues, are reasonable—lead them to inquire into whether they indeed experience these taboo desires. But they never settle the question.

Hubacher Haerle argues that this ceaseless inquiry is zetetically rational (i.e. rational from the perspective of inquiry). These subjects have reason to think that they are motivated to believe that they do not have taboo-violating desires. This gives them reason to think that their inquiry is biased. Consequently, they should not trust its results. For this reason, they never get to a point where the available evidence is such that they ought to have reached a firm conclusion about p. Thus they do not violate *ZR*. They are stuck in a never-ending circle of rational inquiry.

This is insightful. However, I worry that the central point about rational self-mistrust does not license concluding that these subjects never violate *ZR*. To see why, I will focus on how subjects should weigh the evidence they gather.

Suppose that patients should not *completely* disregard the evidence they gather. They should weigh it less than they would weigh evidence gathered in unbiased ways, but not fully dismiss it. If this is right, then it is possible to gather enough evidence that one ought to reach a conclusion, and therefore stop inquiring. Given how persistently people with OCD inquire, it seems plausible that they reach this point, and thereby violate ZR.

Suppose, on the other hand, that these subjects ought to *completely disregard* the evidence that their inquiry uncovers. In that case, it seems irrational to keep inquiring. After all, they gain nothing from gathering such (purported) evidence. Their position would be that of someone who keeps reading a website that only publishes fake news. It seems irrational to keep reading such a website just to dismiss all it says.

Further, as subjects inquire fruitlessly, they acquire higher-order evidence that they will be unable to settle the question. Plausibly, evidence that your inquiry is fruitless or is inevitably biased i as reason to stop inquiring in its own right (Woodard 2022). In this scenario, then, subjects ought to firmly conclude that they ought not inquire.

For Hubacher Haerle's argument to succeed, it can't be that subjects ought to attach no weight to evidence, or that they would in the course of inquiry collect enough evidence to meet the threshold for reaching a conclusion. For this threshold to never be reached, it seems that subjects must set extremely high evidential thresholds, thresholds that they don't reach even after extensive evidence-gathering.

2   Evidential thresholds, epistemic style, and epistemic evaluation

There are, then, at least two parameters that must be set in specific ways for inquiry to be rational in these cases. The first is the weight attached to the evidence collected, and the second is the evidential threshold for forming a belief on the topic. In particular, these subjects must set high thresholds to be able to avoid belief formation. But is it rational to set one's evidential threshold so high?[1]

On some views, how one sets one's evidential thresholds is beyond the reach of epistemic evaluation. William James wrote that such settings are a part of one's "passional life" (James 1979), as epistemically evaluable as one's ice cream preferences.

This take has fallen out of favor. Instead, I find it appealing to hold that evidential threshold settings are epistemically evaluable. Some are epistemically better than others, and some are impermissible while others are permissible.

The basic reason is that some such settings are more conducive to epistemic achievement (true beliefs, accurate credences, knowledge, etc.) than others. The agent who settles rashly will acquire more false beliefs than the more cautious agent, and the excessively skeptical agent will fail to acquire many true beliefs. Due to their

---

1. Thanks to Lisa Clark for emphasizing this point in conversation.

connection to epistemic achievement, evidential threshold settings are evaluable along epistemic lines.[2]

Evidential thresholds are also evaluable along practical or moral dimensions. For instance, setting (relatively) high evidential thresholds for revising beliefs in one's talents or chances of success can be adaptive, protecting us against despair (Paul and Morton 2018).Further, if moral (Bolinger 2020) or practical (Fantl and McGrath 2007) stakes can encroach on epistemic standards, then factors such as the adaptiveness of a threshold can contribute to determining which standards are *epistemically* appropriate.

Given all this, a case can be made for the epistemic impermissibility of the high evidential thresholds at play in Hubacher Haerle's cases. Plausibly, one should not set evidential thresholds so high as to preclude settling questions, thereby making it impossible to achieve knowledge and other positive epistemic goods. If it is right, then very high thresholds are epistemically impermissible.

The above is a purely epistemic point. On the practical side, setting very high thresholds is a recipe for psychological torment. So, even if a high threshold is epistemically permissible, subjects should all-thing-considered adopt a lower (also epistemically permissible) one to avoid suffering in these ways. More strongly, if practical factors can encroach on epistemic standards, then people in these cases epistemically ought to adopt the lower threshold.[3]

If this is right, then we have identified a source of epistemic irrationality in these cases: irrationally high evidential thresholds for belief formation. This re-opens the possibility that these subjects violate *ZR*. Even if the available evidence does not surpass *their* excessively high evidential thresholds, it may well surpass all epistemically permissible evidential thresholds. They may be in a position where they ought to cease inquiry, even if they unreasonably want something close to certainty before settling.

None of this provides a knockdown argument against Hubacher Haerle's claim that these subjects are rational. I can get in the mindset of thinking that people with S-OCD are rationally tormented by these worries. Perhaps their evidential situation never licenses coming to a conclusion. Perhaps, given the importance of the question to their lives, they should set high thresholds. Perhaps they should also attach really low weight to the evidence they gather. Consequently, perhaps they are never rationally compelled to cease inquiry.

Be that as it may, this discussion suggests that assessing whether subjects are rational requires us to carefully think through how subjects set different epistemic parameters, and to consider how different settings interact with one another. This leads to a suggestion about methodology. To assess reasoning and inquiry, we should more systematically attend to *epistemic parameter settings*, and at a more general level to *epistemic style*.

---

2. Multiple such settings might be permissible: perhaps subjects can permissibly assign different values to collecting truth vs. avoiding falsehood. This does not compromise the point that there is genuine epistemic evaluation at play.

3. Of course, it is unlikely that patients can voluntarily choose which standards they adopt. This does not undermine these "ought" claims. They have the same strength as claims about what beliefs agents ought to have.

I have elsewhere ([Flores 2021](#)) defended the view that we should understand many cases of variation in interactions with evidence in terms of epistemic styles. Epistemic style are ways of interacting with evidence that express an epistemic personality, in particular, an internally unified set of epistemic parameter settings. Thinking in terms of epistemic style could be fruitfully applied to the ways in which people with OCD engage with evidence.

This approach encompasses asking: How do people with OCD set epistemic parameters, including evidential thresholds, epistemic risk preferences, preferences for different kinds of evidence, and go-to reasoning rules? How are these ways of setting parameters unified, and what epistemic personality do they encapsulate? Finally, is having such an epistemic style rational?

Like Hubacher Haerle's own approach, this steers us away from addressing questions about rationality by narrowly asking about whether OCD beliefs are justified. And, like his approach, it does not assume that there must be deep irrationality at play in OCD. But it supplements Hubacher Haerle's approach by going beyond considering whether subjects' behavior satisfies specific rules such as *ZR*.

A point of contrast is that this approach is not motivated by establishing that people with OCD are rational. Indeed, this approach is conducive to identifying loci of irrationality, such as setting irrationally high evidential thresholds. At the same time, unlike traditional irrationality-seeking approaches, it highlights the continuity of reasoning and inquiry in OCD with that of agents without OCD. Specifically, differences between the two groups emerge as differences of degree in the setting of shared parameters, not as radical deviations from normal cognition.

In this way, this approach may contribute to de-stigmatizing OCD without denying the powerful intuition that something is going epistemically awry and, as such, is a proper object for treatment.

Works Cited

Renée Jorgensen Bolinger. Varieties of moral encroachment. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 34(1):5–26, 2020.

Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath. On pragmatic encroachment in epistemology. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 75(3):558–589, 2007.

Carolina Flores. Epistemic styles. *philosophical topics*, 49(2):35–55, 2021.

Jane Friedman. Checking again. *Philosophical Issues*, 29(1):84–96, 2019.

William James. *The will to believe and other essays in popular philosophy*, volume 6. Harvard University Press, 1979.

Sarah Paul and Jennifer Morton. Grit. *Ethics*, 129(2), 2018.

Elise Woodard. A puzzle about fickleness. *Noûs*, 56(2):323–342, 2022.