

This is the accepted manuscript of a book review published in the *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 23 (4), pp. 605-609 (2015).

Review of *Irrationality* by Lisa Bortolotti (2014, Polity Press)

In this book Lisa Bortolotti does an admirable job of introducing the reader to important issues in the philosophy and psychology of irrationality. Major topics covered include the significance of irrationality to the philosophical theory of interpretationism, irrationality in psychiatric disorders, the relationship between irrationality and the emotions, and rationality and well-being. Perhaps wisely, no particular definition of irrationality is defended here, and instead Bortolotti discusses a number of different situations in which attributions of irrationality are commonly made (e.g., p. 3). The book is philosophically and empirically well informed, contains details of a wealth of fascinating experiments, and the conclusions are measured. It's also short, consisting of just an introduction and four chapters. Here I will briefly summarize and make some comments on the content of the various chapters, with particular attention given to some issues arising in Chapter 4.

In **Chapter 1**, Bortolotti criticizes the view of 'interpretationists' like Davidson and Dennett that we can only understand (or 'interpret') people as having intentional mental states (beliefs, desires etc.), if we assume that they are rational. She does this by adverting to recent psychological studies, as well as common observations, which suggest that irrationality is a familiar and widespread phenomenon among humans (the 'familiar irrationality objection'), and yet this does not seem to undermine our being interpretable as having intentional mental states. For Bortolotti, irrationality is partly a matter of failing to reason in accordance with basic principles of logic and probability (p. 32), which we routinely do, and of having beliefs with weak evidential support or which are badly integrated with other beliefs and actions (p. 19). Yet such irrational beliefs can satisfy the 'functional profile' of beliefs as much as rational beliefs do (p. 38).

Bortolotti prefers the idea that interpretation is based on the assumption that a person's behaviour is *intelligible*, though not necessarily rational (p. 19). Rationality, in her view, is an aspiration rather than a pre-condition for agency and mentality (p. 148). Her critique raises strong challenges for interpretationism and is similar to those made by Stephen Stich ('Could Man be an Irrational Animal?', *Synthese* 64 [1985], pp. 115-135) and Quassim Cassam (*Self-Knowledge for Humans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press [2014]).

In **Chapter 2**, Bortolotti discusses irrationality in psychiatric disorders. One of her preliminary aims is to criticize Thomas Szasz's view (see *Insanity: The Idea and Its Consequences*. New York: Syracuse University Press [1997]) that there is no such thing as mental illness, by arguing that there are sufficient similarities between physical illnesses and the likes of schizophrenia and psychosis to justify speaking of the latter as illnesses too. She also criticizes his 'romantic' view of psychological illness as a

deviation from social norms for failing to do justice to the distress suffered by those who have these conditions (p. 78), and she gives a thoughtful discussion of how moral responsibility and autonomy can be affected by psychiatric conditions.

Bortolotti seems successful in criticizing Szasz's influential views, but seems less so in relation to another main aim of this chapter, which is to break a commonly assumed association between irrationality and insanity (pp. 73, 77). She tries to do this by arguing that irrationality, even extreme irrationality, is not sufficient for insanity, and also that it's not necessary for it.

According to Bortolotti, irrationality is not sufficient for insanity since even prolonged and severe bouts of irrationality can occur in people not regarded as requiring psychiatric attention. She points out that epistemic and emotional irrationality are key diagnostic criteria for certain psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia and personality disorders, but she stresses the continuity between the irrationality in clinical and non-clinical populations, saying that there is only a difference in degree between them (p. 75). This may have been overdone a little, since the former sort of irrationality (as found in delusions for instance) is nevertheless deemed pathologically significant while the latter isn't, and we would like to know the distinguishing characteristics that make irrationality pathological.

My main worry, however, concerns her argument that irrationality is not necessary for insanity, which seems to be based on a tacit conflation of insanity with mental illness. Bortolotti correctly points out that irrationality is not necessary for mental illness and cannot be used to define it, since some forms of mental illness such as depression (a mood-related affliction) may not involve it (pp. 50, 74). Indeed, some empirical studies suggest that depressives tend to be more realistic in their views of themselves and of life than non-depressives. She then explores other more promising characterizations of mental illness. However, because she doesn't distinguish between mental illness and insanity, she takes the example of depression to show that irrationality is not necessary for insanity. But insanity is only one form of mental illness. Depression, in some of its guises at least, is a mental illness but not a form of insanity; we do not regard depressed people as being insane (that is, mad or crazy), in virtue of being depressed (depressed people need not act, speak, or think in crazy ways). Thus the example of depression does not show that irrationality is not a necessary condition for insanity.

In **Chapter 3**, Bortolotti investigates behaviour and choice that is considered irrational because of the influence of emotion and intuition. According to Bortolotti, from as far back as in Ancient Greece being rational and living wisely and well has partly been understood as a matter of being able to control our emotions and appetites: of the 'higher faculties' reining in the 'lower' ones. For Plato for instance, when 'reason rules', it disciplines the passions and appetites (p. 84), an idea she also finds in the thought of the Stoics, of Descartes, and permeating Western thought more generally. All this talk of our having to gain mastery over our unruly emotions suggests, in her view, that they have no positive contribution to make to good decision-making.

To challenge this idea, she adverts to the work of Antonio Damasio, who studied people suffering from brain damage affecting the emotional centres of the brain. Damasio found that people whose capacity to feel emotions was stunted were ‘unable to make good decisions, to prioritize tasks and, more generally, to give shape and direction to’ their lives (p. 86). Emotions, apparently, have essential contributions to make to behaviour and choice: they enable us to see goals as desirable, and motivate us to maintain the pursuit of those goals. Bortolotti also argues that emotions play a key role in motivating moral behaviour.

It wasn’t obvious how these points about the positive contribution of the emotions in motivating choice and behaviour are incompatible with the core idea that part of what it is to be rational is to be able to control one’s emotions. Suppose, for instance, that one has the goal of getting revenge. It is unlikely that one could have this goal if one had no emotions (anger, hatred, indignation etc.). But this is compatible with the point that one can pursue that goal rationally or irrationally, and that the former may require controlling and even concealing one’s emotions (and so it’s said that revenge is ‘a dish best served cold’, and not by responding with impulsive violence or anger without reflecting on the consequences). The findings discussed may be damaging to the idea that rationality (in the practical sphere) involves being entirely free from the influence of emotions, but it’s doubtful that this extreme view was widely held. Bortolotti notes that Plato didn’t have this view, for instance, (p. 84). Also, in Aristotle’s influential view, rationality was not a matter of eliminating the influence of emotions, but of involving feeling them towards the right things, for the right reasons, to the right degree etc. Perhaps a better example of a philosophy where the emotions are viewed as mental disturbances is in Eastern thought like Buddhism, where the passions are sometimes spoken of as ‘mental defilements’, fires to be quelled by meditative practice (though the aspiration in Buddhism is Nirvana, not the worldly one of the ‘good life’).

Bortolotti also investigates the roles of reflection versus intuition in producing good decisions, and criticizes the over-intellectualized conception of rational decision-making as being reflection-driven. Studies of expert decision-making have found that experts don’t rely heavily on reflection to make decisions but make fast intuitive judgements: ‘[t]heir extensive experience crystalizes into habit’ (p. 106). However, she also finds some of the rhetoric against reflection coming from psychologists too extreme (p. 110). Reflection is a necessary part of the process of becoming an expert, and even at the expert level reflection and intuition often work in tandem.

Chapter 4 starts with a discussion of whether science is the manifestation of human rationality *par excellence*, and of the debate about whether scientific development is prompted by rational or non-rational factors. Bortolotti then moves on to examine the impact of ordinary human irrationality on our well-being, and discusses the many studies which have emerged challenging the conventional wisdom that rationality and self-knowledge are good for us. For instance, ‘positive illusions’ and ‘self-enhancing biases’ such as overly flattering self-appraisals and overestimations of our capabilities, and various forms

of ‘unrealistic optimism’, are said to bring numerous benefits. These include boosting our self-esteem and confidence, enhancing interpersonal relationships, lowering stress, promoting better physical health, and staving off anxiety and depression (p. 139).

The positive assessment of these biases is moderated, however, by a number of other points. Overconfidence can frequently lead to disappointment, and an ill-preparedness to deal with failure. Optimism can also lead to risky, reckless, and self-destructive behaviour (pp. 133, 140). Nevertheless, the conclusion seems to be that ‘if the ultimate goal is people’s well-being, then beliefs, memories and narratives that depart from reality may be *more* advantageous than beliefs that are fully constrained by evidence’ (p. 144).

This conclusion, however, does not necessarily follow from the psychological evidence that Bortolotti discusses, at least if we understand ‘well-being’ as it is defined in current philosophy as ‘what is non-instrumentally or ultimately good for a person’ (Roger Crisp, ‘Well-Being’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).

There seems to be an assumption operating in discussions pertaining to the value of irrationality that happiness (understood as a positive mental state) is unconditionally good, and so if moderate irrationality makes us happier on the whole, then it’s good for us. Irrationality then receives endorsements like the following:

[The] capacity to develop and maintain positive illusions may be thought of as a valuable human resource to be nurtured and promoted, rather than an error-prone processing system to be corrected. In any case, these illusions help make each individual’s world a warmer and more active and beneficent place in which to live. (S.E. Taylor and J.D. Brown, ‘Illusion and Well-Being’, *Psychological Bulletin* 103 [1988], p. 205)

This passage appears to express a subtle transition from a factual judgement (commonplace irrationality promotes mental health and happiness) to a value judgement (commonplace irrationality is good/to be welcomed), guided by the suppressed premise that happiness is, in itself, good and valuable. But this, arguably, is not how we think of happiness. Suppose you buy a lottery ticket and see that you got the winning numbers. You are over the moon with joy. Except that you didn’t get the winning numbers, as you discover a day later; you misread the ticket (due to undiagnosed dyslexia say). In these circumstances would we think ‘well at least I got that one day’s worth of joy out of this debacle’? I don’t think that we would. I don’t think we would regard that happiness as being of any value (and not because it led to disappointment which outweighed its positive value). This example may suggest that the goodness or value of happiness is conditional, and that happiness based on false belief may be of little or even no worth.

It may be that this use of ‘well-being’ in philosophy is somewhat unconventional, and that in the ordinary sense, ‘well-being’ simply refers to being happy, or being mentally and physically healthy. In that case, Bortolotti may be right that moderate irrationality promotes well-being. But the deeper question should then still be asked in different terms. Is happiness (or self-esteem, or pride) based on false belief worth having? Some philosophers seem to think that it’s not. Famously, Robert Nozick would feel no inclination to attach himself to an ‘experience machine’, which would make him believe that he is living an ideal sort of life. We can also consider more realistic examples:

Imagine a man who dies contented, thinking he has achieved everything he wanted in life: his wife and family love him, he is a respected member of the community, and he has founded a successful business. Or so he thinks. In reality, however, he has been completely deceived: his wife cheated on him, his daughter and son were only nice to him so that they would be able to borrow the car, the other members of the community only pretended to respect him for the sake of the charitable donations he sometimes made, and his business partner has been embezzling funds from the company which will soon go bankrupt (S. Kagan, ‘Me and My Life’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 94 [1994], p. 311).

Kagan finds this man’s life to be sorely lacking, even though his experience of life may have been indistinguishable from someone who was really loved by his wife, children, etc. He uses the example to criticize the ‘mental state theory’ of well-being: the thesis that whether one’s life is going well is just a matter of what mental states one experiences. The question we should ask about the healthy, happy wishful thinkers and self-deceivers exposed by recent psychological studies, with their positive illusions, self-enhancing biases, and unrealistic optimism, is whether they are any better off than this unenviable gentleman. (For further criticism of the recent positive disposition towards commonplace irrationality, see D. Jopling, 1996, “‘Take Away the Life-Lie ...’ Positive Illusions and Creative Self-Deception’, *Philosophical Psychology* 9 [1996], pp. 525-544).

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