

CAN COMPARTMENTALIZATION MAKE SENSE OF AN AGENT HOLDING INCONSISTENT BELIEFS?

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While there is freedom to fantasize or suppose as one wishes, believings are more tightly constrained. It would seem, for one thing, that one cannot believe something that one does not regard as true. And yet people do appear to believe propositions that they know to be highly dubious or even false, where the evidence as they understand it does not to their minds support the propositions' truth. How can this be? How can cognitive states that are epistemically irrational in being insensitive to known evidence still qualify as *beliefs*, given that in disregarding evidence they seem not sufficiently regulated by standards of truth? In this paper, I develop recent accounts of cognitive compartmentalization (by Mandelbaum, and Lengbeyer) in order to explain how such epistemically-irrational believings are possible, in part by responding to skeptics (Evnine, and Bortolotti) who deny that a compartmentalized cognitive architecture can satisfactorily play this explanatory role.

Beliefs, understood as specific propositions or sentences held with a distinctive kind of attitude, reside (along with images) within the individual agent's mental repository of representational resources for cognizing. The beliefs must satisfy a distinctive set of constraints, or they do not function as beliefs. The constraints are commonly taken to include what we might term Stability (beliefs are enduring attributes of the agent), Governance (they govern reasoning whenever they are relevant to the topic of thought), Unification (they afford and constitute a single, unified, coherent outlook, with exceptions being irrational anomalies), and Truth-directedness (they reflect what their possessors take to be true).

This standard "Integrationist" picture of cognition, whereby beliefs are the cognizing instruments of a thoroughly unified self and are all ready to contribute to each cognitive process, has come under challenge by those who have noted familiar psychological phenomena that seem irreconcilable with it. Ordinary language-users are surprisingly tolerant of folk psychologizing that allows for cognitive non-integration and willingly ascribes beliefs even where the Governance, Unification, and/or Truth-directedness conditions are not met. While there may be senses of "belief" that make it infelicitous to ascribe belief in a proposition thought by the agent to be unsupported by the evidence, there is a familiar sense for which such ascriptions pose no problem.

Even those open to the possibility of mental compartmentalization, however, tend to see it as incapable of all the heavy lifting needed to make sense of inconsistent beliefs. For Evnine, for example, "[p]artitions arise to ward off potential conflict between different sides of our lives" (95)—like Geach's Japanese astronomer who treated the sun alternately as a divinity and as a natural body to be scientifically investigated (94)—and can thus be of psychic service in limited life circumstances. But quirky exceptions cannot overcome the fundamental need for that "single, integrated informational system provided by belief," because an agent must react flexibly to a complicated world using "everything a person knows that might be *relevant*" (emphasis added).

Yet Evnine is too quick to assume that relevance means *topic*-relevance, and that an agent must adopt one and the same overall outlook and reasoning toolkit at all times. Such a single cognitive stance might be maximally functional were we to inhabit a homogeneous lifeworld. But that seems not to be our lifeworld. Ours is fragmented into diverse, layered, and quickly-shifting pragmatic situations or immediate mental tasks. In this world, the inconsistent representational resources enabled by a compartmentalized cognitive endowment can be exploited to productive effect. Compartmentalization also facilitates an urgently-needed abbreviation of the process of recruiting cognitive resources for the agent's immediate current project, by storing resources in clusters that are keyed to recognizable contexts of purposive activity that have been experienced as units in the past. All of this cognitive division brings possibilities for resistance to evidence that bears upon our cognitive commitments, and hence for *epistemically*-irrational believing that may or may not be *practically* rational.

Compartmentalization has the edge over Integration in handling conflicting evidence, because discrepancies in our fragmented lifeworld are not always within our powers to reconcile, and sometimes they are not within our interests, either. Compartmentalization allows us to subsist comfortably within these bounds. It lets good use be made of *special-purpose ideas* whose limitations are not exposed (or 'corrected') by the ideas having to interact with certain of their peers (as they would in a thoroughly integrated mind). One such special-purpose cognitive asset is the *simplified idea*: a more elementary version of a representation that also resides in one's cognitive pool, which in its proper context can be more useful than the non-simplified one would be.

Bortolotti, for her part, takes Compartmentalism to lack the resources to make sense of cases where people are aware of their inconsistencies but refuse to correct these. Her ‘exhibit A’ is Kahneman & Tversky’s “Asian Disease Problem,” where experimental subjects reversed their preferences between two options based simply upon the linguistic framings of the options (2010: 80-81), and would not alter their answers after debriefing (87). But she seems to presuppose that we inhabit a single, all-encompassing domain within which all propositions can be logically combined, as opposed to a world divided into pragmatic spaces that might call for intellectual stances that are differing and incompatible. A Compartmentalism that indexes cognition to pragmatic task contexts can account for the Asian Disease Problem by showing how Kahneman & Tversky caught their participants between two notions of cognitive relevance—the familiar one defined on sameness of substantive topic, and one defined on pragmatic utility for the immediate practical thinking task at hand.

Compartmentalism thus brings with it a metaphysics, one inflected by phenomenology—i.e., a humanly-experienced reality that is not susceptible to one and only one complete, coherent, and true account, but comprises diverse and complexly-interrelated pragmatic situations or locations. While it is a conception of reality that lacks the perfection of the Integrationists’ ideal—e.g., because pragmatic contexts that we ordinarily keep distinct can on occasion merge and cause us indeterminacy in cognitive processing (as was artificially induced, ingeniously, by Kahneman & Tversky)—this conception might be the best-available means for explaining realistically how humans (and perhaps non-humans, too?) can cope successfully with life.

Bortolotti’s critique of Compartmentalism is also hampered by a too-rough conception of cognitive synchronicity or simultaneity. She grants that compartmentalization permits *diachronic* inconsistency between cognitive states that are kept from being brought together in the mind, but she insists that when *synchronic* dissonance threatens, there must inevitably be some sort of reconciling action to prevent or eliminate the inconsistency. Yet she does not slice the stream of consciousness finely enough. Her examples of simultaneous inconsistent cognitive commitments may actually be rapid, unnoticed diachronic shifts as the specific micro-purposes that agents pursue from moment to moment evolve.

If cognition is compartmentalized, then Unification and Truth-directedness cannot be absolute requirements for belief attribution. Governance is the core component, but it too needs qualification. Consider an agent who supposedly believes *p* and believes *not-p*, and who, according to Compartmentalism, reasons at times only with *p*. How, Evnine asks, can we say that *not-p* is a *belief* that Governs mental life if it is not used when it is relevant? Were Governance based on *topic*-relevance, this critique would land: surely whenever *p* is topic-relevant, so too is *not-p*, and to ignore the latter would be to exclude it from Governance, hence belief.

But with the shift to pragmatic situation/task-relevance, *p* and *not-p* are no longer peas in a pod, destined both to be employed in identical cognizing situations. So *not-p*’s Governance credentials need not be impugned by it lying dormant while one utilizes *p*. Beliefs must indeed be involved in governing reasoning, but they need not *always* be involved, in particular where they are topic-relevant but not situation-relevant.

The dividedness of our cognitive systems thus in effect reduces our reliance upon evidence in making, retaining, and revising our cognitive commitments. Yet despite this, routine folk psychologizing, including reasoning about minds that incorporates attributions of belief, productively (if imperfectly) goes on.

And if one’s life is not a coherent unity, but is divided among recurring pragmatic task-types that elicit differing personas from one’s repertoire, then cognitive assets like beliefs start looking like *special-purpose tools* and not (or not always) general *all-things-considered convictions* or commitments. The agent, rather than identified with a single coherent, principled perspective, comes to look like a more-or-less integrated collectivity of practically-oriented agents whose mental activity is motivated more by pragmatic efficacy, and less by truth, than we are accustomed to think.

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