

Title: Feeling like an impostor

Abstract:

Katherine Hawley (2019) shed critical light on our everyday concept of impostor syndrome. She asked "So, what are impostor attitudes: beliefs, doubts, feelings or fears?", and what is their content? By applying findings on epistemic feelings drawn from studies in metacognition (see, e.g., Proust 2013) onto her analysis, I aim to address criticisms of her account (e.g., Paul 2019) and complement her approach. Hawley suggests that one's suffering from impostor syndrome involves a "lack of belief in one's own adequacy". I propose that the mechanisms leading to such a lack exemplify a broader cognitive adaptation: negative epistemic feelings can yield cognitive dissonance with respect to candidate beliefs, and thereby block belief formation. This raises two related philosophical points, which this paper explores.

First, epistemic feelings can be epistemically justified, or unjustified, according to the environment in which they arise and to the subject's doxastic attitudes and other background states, independently of facts. As Proust (2013, Ch.8) defends, several epistemic norms which do not have truth as their epistemic standard (e.g., coherence, plausibility, relevance) can guide decisions under uncertainty. Diminished feelings of fluency frequently lead us to block belief formation so as to withhold belief until more information is obtained. I suggest that diminished fluency is key to impostor syndrome. Adverse environments impact which beliefs are formed or prevented from forming (as Hawley proposes), by affecting our appreciation of fluency with respect to propositions judging adequacy or inadequacy at a task, skill, etc. This discussion allows me to expose how the mechanisms at the heart of impostor syndrome can help us appreciate how seemingly irrational attitudes can be the product of rational processes: sensitivity to the higher order evidence pervasive in polluted epistemic environments can yield attitudes at odds with the evidence in a rational way (c.f. Levy 2022).

Second, impostor syndrome, once acquired, is self-reinforcing. Better understanding the relationship between diminished fluency and failure to

form beliefs that one is adequate may help provide better tools to address it. Moreover, understanding the rational processes leading to impostor syndrome and the role played by polluted epistemic environments suggests that one way in which to address it is through epistemic engineering, ‘the management of the epistemic environment’ (Levy 2022, xv), through careful attention and crafting of the messages, agents and institutions making up the epistemic environment. I offer some practical suggestions here with respect to how we might want to engineer epistemic environments to combat impostor syndrome and discuss whether we should engage in such manipulation.