

Delusions as Doxastic States: Contexts, Compartments and Commitments

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Although delusions are typically regarded as beliefs of a certain kind, there have been worries about the doxastic conception of delusions since at least Bleuler's time. 'Anti-doxasticists,' as we might call them, do not merely worry about the claim that delusions are beliefs, they reject it. Reimer's paper weighs into the debate between 'doxasticists' and 'anti-doxasticists' by suggesting that one of the main arguments given against the doxastic conception of delusions—what we might call the *functional role objection*—is based on a fallacy. She also draws attention to certain parallels between delusions and what she calls "nihilistic philosophical doctrines," such as the skeptical position that we have no knowledge. I read Reimer as presenting the anti-doxasticist with a dilemma: they must either adopt an anti-doxastic treatment of philosophical nihilism or they must identify a crucial respect in which nihilistic states differ from delusional states. As she puts it, "If we are to withhold the label 'belief' from psychiatric delusions, . . . parity of reason requires that we withhold it from seemingly sincere endorsements of [standard] philosophical doctrines" (2010, xx). Although Reimer herself stops short of endorsing the doxastic conception of delusions, she is clearly very sympathetic to it.

Reimer's discussion is a very welcome contribution to the contemporary discussion of delusions, and I have learnt much from it. I do, however, have questions. In the first part of this commentary I focus on the question of what exactly Reimer's position is. Her view has multiple strands, and it is not clear to me that each of its various strands can be

reconciled with each other. In the second and third sections, I take a step back from Reimer's paper and ask what exactly might be at stake in the debate about the doxastic status of delusions.

Contexts and Compartments

Reimer begins with the worry that motivates much of the current enthusiasm for anti-doxastic treatments of delusions: Delusions do not play the functional role that beliefs (ought to) play (Bayne and Pacherie 2005; Bortolotti 2009; Stone and Young 1997). On the input side, delusions are often unresponsive to evidence; on the output side, delusions often fail to generate the kinds of actions and emotional responses that one would expect them to generate were they beliefs. As Reimer acknowledges, it is something of an open question just how much force these worries have—some monothematic delusions do seem to be evidentially grounded, and of course patients do act on their delusions at times—but there is certainly *something* to them. At a minimum, the functional role of many delusions seems to set them apart from quotidian beliefs. Let us call this the 'functional role objection' to the doxastic account.

Reimer argues that the functional role objection does not have the force that it is often thought to, for it commits what she calls the 'fallacy of ignoring anomalies':

the mere anomaly of psychiatric delusions, qua beliefs, is little reason to suppose that such delusions are not genuine beliefs. If something is unusual for an x , even highly unusual for an x , we cannot conclude without further argument that it is not an x . (p. xx)

Reimer is surely right to point out that delusions could be beliefs without behaving like ordinary or paradigmatic beliefs. But, although certain presentations of the functional role objection may have been guilty of committing this fallacy, fallacy-free versions of the objection are not hard to find. On my reading, the fundamental worry that motivates the anti-doxasticist view is the thought that delusions are anomalous in ways that are at odds with their putative status as beliefs. In a nutshell, the worry is that delusions fail to play the functional role that is *essential* to a state's being a belief (see, e.g., Egan 2009, 265ff). Reimer suggests that delusions might be anomalous beliefs in the way that penguins are anomalous birds. The anti-doxasticist will resist the analogy, and may even suggest one of her own: Delusions, she might suggest, are better compared with whales—just as whales are mammals that seem to be fish, so too delusions may be (say) imaginings that seem to be beliefs.

At this point it is useful to introduce the second strand of Reimer's paper—namely, her comparison between delusions and what she calls 'nihilistic beliefs':

Advocates of [global skepticism, hard determinism, and moral anti-realism] typically behave, in their day-to-day lives, as if knowledge is possible, as if persons are free in the sense required for moral responsibility, as if there are moral facts. Their everyday conversations are peppered with seemingly sincere and literal utterances of (e.g.): “I know that such-and-such.” . . . Importantly, nihilistic thinkers making these sorts of common sense claims seem to act on the beliefs to which such claims give expression. (p. xx)

At least on the output side, nihilistic beliefs seem to depart from quotidian beliefs in much the way that delusions do: These states fail to issue in the kinds of behavior that one would expect them to generate if they really were beliefs. But, says Reimer, it would be implausible to deny that philosophical nihilists really believe what they seem to. Better, she says, to find a way of accommodating nihilism—and, by extension, delusions—within an account of belief.¹

How does Reimer propose to do that? In light of the above, one might have expected Reimer to argue that the functional role objection presupposes an overly-demanding conception of belief’s (essential) functional role, but in fact Reimer’s analysis proceeds in a rather different direction. She suggests instead that the philosophical nihilist actually *loses* her nihilistic beliefs when caught up in the hum-drum reality of everyday life.

While immersed in the classic arguments for global skepticism, the philosopher believes the conclusions of those arguments; when she is preparing the morning coffee, arguing with her husband, or cleaning out the refrigerator, she does not. This is not to say that, at such moments, she believes that global skepticism is false, it is only to say that she does not believe, at the moments in question, that knowledge is impossible. Certainly, her thoughts and behaviors at such “mundane moments” lend no credence to the idea that she believes the very doctrine(s) with which those thoughts and behaviors seem to conflict. (p. xx)

The claim, I take it, is *not* that nihilistic beliefs are anomalous in the sense that they can be held without having the kinds of theoretical and practical effects that are typical of beliefs, but rather that they are anomalous in the sense that their very *existence* is highly context sensitive. (“I would maintain that the ‘venting’ in question is evidence that the nihilist, at the time of venting, does not believe the moral nihilism she does believe on reflection” [p. xx]). The crucial contexts here, Reimer seems to suggest, are epistemic (p. xx). Applying this model to delusions, I take Reimer’s suggestion to be that delusions are

also context sensitive: Those with delusions are delusional only when attending to the evidence in which their delusions are “grounded” (p. xx).

I am very sympathetic to the thought that many delusions are highly context sensitive. In reading Reimer’s proposal, I was reminded of the Capgras patient who took his parents to be impostors when in visual contact with them, but who readily recognized them when speaking to them on the telephone (Hirstein and Ramachandran 1997; see also Stewart 2004). We might think of this patient’s delusion as “stimulus bound.” Whether this approach to delusions might apply more widely is another question. It may not even apply to Capgras patients in general, and it is certainly hard to see how it might gain any traction with respect to delusions that are not “grounded” in any particular stimulus. But rather than pursue that question, I want to focus on whether Reimer’s account does justice to the skeptic’s situation.

An initial question is whether Reimer takes the skeptic’s *common sense* beliefs to be context sensitive. If, as Reimer seems to suggest, the philosopher loses her nihilistic beliefs when immersed in everyday life, so too she ought to lose her common sense beliefs when engaged in philosophical pursuits. But if that is right, then we seem to have lost the intuitive contrast between common sense beliefs as paradigm beliefs and philosophical and delusional beliefs as non-paradigm beliefs, for all of these states will be context sensitive.

A second question is whether we should regard the skeptic as losing her skeptical beliefs in everyday contexts. Suppose that one were to interrupt the skeptic during a routine everyday exchange—say, immediately after she had claimed to know the location of her car keys—and remind her of her commitment to skepticism. What would she say? She might attempt to reconcile her mundane claims to knowledge with her skepticism. For example, she might explain that her ordinary knowledge claims are to be understood in terms of ‘low-grade’ knowledge, whereas her skeptical claims are to be understood in terms of ‘high-grade’ knowledge. A response of this kind would indicate that the skeptic continues to endorse skepticism even when immersed in the mundane realities of everyday life. But here we see the contrast between the skeptical and the delusional, for whereas the skeptical recognize a tension between their philosophical commitments and their common sense judgments those who are delusional seem to recognize no such tension. The delusional seem to treat their delusions not as states that must be *reconciled* with common sense but as states that have *replaced* common sense. Indeed, the very fact that a patient is troubled by the tensions between their delusional beliefs and their common sense beliefs is a sign that they may be emerging from their delusional state.

More generally, there seems to be a stark epistemic contrast between the patient and the philosopher. The delusional patient's appreciation of her evidential situation might fluctuate from one context to another, but this is not true of the philosopher. The skeptic who admits to knowing the location of keys does not need to be reminded of the arguments for global skepticism in the way in which the Capgras patient described by Hirstein and Ramachandran needed to be reminded of the reasons for thinking that the people in front of him were his parents. What fluctuates is not the philosopher's appreciation of the evidence for certain claims, but the *costs* of endorsing those claims. Philosophical contexts allow one to get away with assertions that one cannot get away with in everyday life. As Reimer points out, everyday communication becomes rather fraught for the consistent skeptic.

A third strand in Reimer's paper involves the thought that delusion and nihilism both involve a kind of compartmentalization akin to that which may occur in the context of self-deception (see Sass 1995). I think compartmentalization is likely to play an important role in understanding delusions, but I am not sure how to integrate (so to speak) Reimer's commitment to compartmentalization with her contextualism. In a nutshell, the problem is this: If delusional and nihilistic beliefs are quite literally *replaced* by ordinary beliefs and vice versa, then there is no need for doxastic compartmentalization. The demand for internal 'firewalls' within the subject's cognitive architecture is rendered redundant by changes in their environment. Indeed, Reimer's contextualism seems to imply that nihilistic/delusional beliefs and common sense beliefs *could not* interact for they are not co-present.

Perhaps this tension can be resolved by thinking of beliefs as dispositional states that give rise to occurrent states ("judgments"). On this view, nihilistic and common sense dispositions are both present in philosophical and everyday contexts, but they have different 'triggering conditions'. Roughly speaking, the subject's nihilistic dispositions will be 'occurrent'—that is, will play an active and direct role in regulating behavior—only when her common sense beliefs are not occurrent, and vice versa. On this view, compartmentalization ensures that the dispositions associated with the two types of beliefs do not 'interfere' with each other. This account allows Reimer to say most if not all of what she wants to say, but it does require that we take talk of nihilistic beliefs "replacing and being replaced by" ordinary beliefs with a grain of salt, for it is not the beliefs as such that are replacing each other but the occurrent ('conscious') judgments to which those beliefs give rise.

Beliefs and In-Between States

Although Reimer does not explicitly commit herself to the doxastic conception of delusions, she is clearly very sympathetic to the claim that delusions are best thought of as beliefs, albeit anomalous rather than paradigmatic beliefs. She contrasts this position with a position recently developed by Andy Egan, according to which delusions are ‘bimagnations’—states that are “in between” belief and imagination. In what follows, I want to explore the question of what exactly the difference between these two proposals might amount to.

Suppose that we think of ‘belief’ and ‘imagination’ as picking out two families of functional roles that mental representations can play.² Within each of these families there is the functional role that is distinctive of ideal—or at least paradigmatic—instances of that kind, but the families also include states whose functional roles depart from these ideals. In other words, to be a belief or imagination a state need not play the functional role distinctive of *paradigmatic* beliefs or imagination.

From this perspective, it is not entirely clear what the difference between the positions developed by Reimer and Egan might amount to. On Egan’s view delusions play a functional role that is intermediate between that of belief and imagination (hence “bimagnations”), whereas on Reimer’s view delusions are anomalous beliefs. However, the contrast between these two proposals is substantive only if functional roles of ‘bimagnations’ and ‘anomalous belief’ are distinct, and it is far from clear that that is the case. Another way to put the issue is this. Both parties agree that the functional role played by anomalous states (such as delusions) differs from that of paradigm (ordinary) beliefs. Those who are sympathetic to the doxastic account, such as Reimer, add that this difference is not so marked as to exclude delusions from the doxastic realm altogether, whereas those who reject the doxastic account, such as Egan, hold that although the functional role of delusions may be belief-like, it is not sufficiently belief-like for delusions to qualify as beliefs. But without an account of the functional role of belief it is not clear whether this is really a debate about how best to understand delusions, as opposed to a debate about how to use the term ‘belief.’ I suspect that there may not be enough determinacy in our ordinary conception of belief for there to be a fact of the matter as to whether many belief-like states are really beliefs or not.

Even if the concept of belief were sufficiently precise, it is a further question as to why we should care about whether delusions are anomalous beliefs or some in-between state such as bimagnations. Arguably, what matters for many purposes is the question of what functional role delusions actually play, rather than whether this functional role falls within the boundary of belief or not.

Belief and Commitment

So much for the question of how this debate looks from the perspective of functionalist treatments of belief. But there is another conception of belief, and from this perspective of this conception the contrast between beliefs and merely belief-like states is both substantive and important.

The perspective that I have in mind is normative.³ At the heart of the normative conception of belief is the notion of commitment. It is no accident that in speaking of a person's belief we refer to their *commitments*. The behavioral corollary of commitment is assertion. As Reimer notes, "it seems reasonable to suppose that sincere assent to *p* constitutes prima facie evidence for supposing that the assenting agent genuinely believes that *p*, at the time in question" (p. xx). Indeed, from the perspective of the commitment-based approach to belief, sincere assent to *p* might be partially constitutive of belief rather than merely prima facie evidence for it. We are puzzled by someone who asserts "that *p*" but does not follow through on this commitment. Do they believe that *p* or are they merely toying with us? Did they *really* assert "that *p*," or was their speech-act nothing more than faux assertion?

It is useful to distinguish two kinds of norms that apply to belief: 'Long-arm norms' and 'short-arm norms.'⁴ Long-arm norms govern the relationship between belief and the world, whereas short-arm norms govern the relationship between belief and the subject's other mental states. The long-arm norm of belief is arguably truth (or something akin to truth), whereas it is arguable that the short-arm norms of belief include rationality and consistency.⁵

What might the debate between Egan and Reimer look like from the perspective of a normative conception of belief and of the propositional attitudes more generally? The first question to ask here concerns what sense we can make of Egan's "in-between" proposal. If bimaginations are genuine propositional attitudes—as Egan seems to suggest—then they must be governed by norms. What kinds of norms might govern bimaginative states? The natural thought here is that the norms governing bimagination must be intermediate between those of belief on the one hand and those of imagination on the other. But are there norms for acts of imagination?

Some acts of imagination are governed by norms. Suppose that you are moving into a new house and are trying to determine whether a couch might fit comfortably into the living room. You might attempt to answer this question by imagining the couch in the living room.⁶ This imaginative act will be governed by norms insofar as it can be evaluated for success. (And some of us are clearly better at such imaginative acts than

others!) But this kind of imagining—what we might call ‘goal-directed imagining’—is not the kind of imaging most closely associated with delusion. Instead, if delusions are imaginings of any kind, then they would seem to be what we might call ‘undirected imaginings,’ the kind of mental act that one engage in when one imagines on a whim that one is Napoleon or that the first person on the moon was woman. One does not engage in such acts in order to secure any particular goal. Are undirected imaginings norm-governed?

In some sense, perhaps. It is plausible to suppose that particular imaginative acts are governed by norms in a local and context-sensitive way. Consider, for instance, the norm of consistency. If I have imagined that we are on a lake in Peru then I cannot also imagine that we are, at one and the same time, in a cellar in Paris. The norm of consistency applies to belief in a global fashion—to have inconsistent beliefs is to exhibit some kind of failing qua believer—but it applies to imagination only within particular imaginative episodes.

But, although imagination may be governed by short-arm norms in a certain kind of way, it does not seem to be governed by long-arm norms. At the very least, it is not governed by the norm of truth. This fact captures a deep contrast between belief and imagination. To believe that the world contains penguins is to be committed to the truth of the claim “there are penguins,” but to merely *imagine* that the world is replete with penguins is not. Falsehood (or something close to it) is some kind of failing in belief but it is no kind of failing in imagination.

Where does this leave the question of bimaginations? Precariously placed, it seems to me. From the normative perspective, bimaginations must be guided by norms, and those norms would need to be intermediate between those of belief on the one hand and those of imagination on the other. We can perhaps make some sense of what the *short-arm* norms of bimagination might be. As noted, the short-arm norms of imagination are arguably akin to those of belief (roughly, consistency and rational integration), with the difference that these norms apply to belief in a global fashion but to imagination in only a locally ‘project-bound’ fashion. Presumably, ‘splitting the difference’ here would mean that these norms apply to bimaginations more widely than they do to imaginings but less widely than they do to beliefs. It is not entirely clear just what this proposal amounts to, but it is not obviously incoherent. But the question of bimagination’s long-arm norms is rather more challenging, for given that imagination has no long-arm norm it is quite unclear how we might ‘split the difference’ between belief and imagination here. Either bimagination is governed by the norm of truth or it is not: There seems to be no coherent halfway house here.⁷

The foregoing reveals a deep difference between the functional and normative conceptions of mental taxonomy. Functional roles seem to be continuous, in the sense that it seems possible that between any two of the propositional attitudes recognized by folk psychology there may be other functional roles that could—at least in principle—demarcate intermediate propositional attitude types, such as bimagination. By contrast, it is rather less clear whether normative conceptions of the mind have quite the same room for intermediate propositional attitude kinds, for norms may not be ‘continuous’ in the way that functional roles perhaps are.

We can now see why the normative perspective invests the question of whether or not delusions are really beliefs or merely belief-like with some importance. Return to Reimer’s example of the nihilistic philosopher who claims to know the whereabouts of her car keys. On hearing such a claim, we might be tempted to charge the philosopher with inconsistency—or at least with bad faith. Isn’t the philosopher’s endorsement of skepticism an implicit commitment *not* to claim knowledge of such matters? Of course, the skeptic might have a story to tell about how to reconcile her skepticism with her everyday knowledge claims, but unless she can tell up some such story then we have the right to evaluate her negatively.

What holds for the skeptic holds also for those who are delusional. If delusions are beliefs, then we can quite properly hold those who are delusional to account for failing to live up to the norms of belief. For example, we can criticize the delusional individual for holding to be true something that is inconsistent with other things that he or she believes. More generally, we can criticize those who are delusional for not ‘caring’ about the truth of their delusions—for not treating them as things that they do indeed hold true. Of course, such ‘criticism’ might not be warranted for a moral or clinical perspective—my point here is only that it is ‘theoretically’ warranted.) If, on the other hand, delusions are not beliefs, then the norms of belief do not apply to them, and it would be inappropriate to subject those who are delusional to the criticisms just outlined.

The normative conception of belief also has implications for our conception of the compartmentalization of belief. Imagination is compartmentalized in the sense that the moves (commitments) that one might make in the context of one imaginative episode have no implications for the moves that are permitted in other imaginative episodes. But belief cannot be compartmentalized in *this* way. Insofar as we embrace a realist conception of the world—the idea that there is a single way that the world is—we must reconcile our various truth-related commitments with each other. The force of assertion is not context bound, but transfers from one context (say, the classroom) to others (say, the home). In

this respect belief differs from assumption, which can be thought of as a form of context-dependent commitment.

So much for the normative conception of belief and its implications for the question of in-between states. Assuming this normative approach, do delusions qualify as beliefs or not? I doubt that delusions have the kind of unitary nature that would be needed in order for this question to have a determinate answer. Some delusions might be best understood as commitment involving, in which case we can and should evaluate them with respect to the norms of belief. (And when so evaluated the patient will invariably come up short, for delusions are 'by definition' pathologies of belief.) Other delusions might be best thought of as a kind of imaginative charade, and not legitimately evaluated with respect to the norms of truth and rationality. The case for regarding a delusion as a doxastic state may differ from patient to patient and may even fluctuate for particular patients from one occasion to another. Not only might it be difficult to tell whether a delusion involves the requisite kind of commitment on the part of its subject to qualify as a belief, in some cases there may simply be no fact of the matter about this. In short, the normative view of things does not make it easier to answer the question of whether delusions are beliefs; indeed, it might even make it harder to answer such questions than the functional role approach does. But—unlike that approach—the normative account does invest the debate between doxastic and non-doxastic treatments of delusion with some importance.

Conclusion

Reimer's paper reminds us that belief is a many splendored thing, and that in asking whether delusions are (really) beliefs we must not overlook the kinds of beliefs that we encounter in the various forms of philosophical nihilism. Contrasting nihilistic beliefs with delusional states leads us to ask what beliefs might be, and what exactly might turn on the debate between those who recognize delusions as a species of belief and those who do not. I suggested that from a functionalist perspective the answer to this question is likely to be "not much." In response to the question of whether the action-guiding states of non-linguistic animals are beliefs, Stich (1979) once said "a little bit they are, a little bit they are not." Arguably, much the same might be said in response to the question of whether delusions are beliefs.

But things look rather different from the perspective of a normative conception of belief. Not only does this perspective suggest that the debate between doxasticists and their opponents is substantive, it also suggests that it is significant. From the normative perspective, whether or not delusions are beliefs has implications for our moral evaluation of the deluded. Should we treat delusional utterances as commitments, or should we

instead regard them as nothing but idle fantasy, akin to the speech of someone who says “The building is on fire” to test a microphone?

Notes

1. I think it is an open question just how close the parallel between nihilistic beliefs and delusions is. Although there are similarities between them with respect to the output component of their functional role, significant differences seem to emerge when one considers their input relations: As a general rule, nihilistic beliefs are formed (and revised) on the basis of evidence, whereas delusions are not.
2. Although Egan endorses a functionalist conception of belief, Reimer stays clear of offering a theory of belief, and says only that sincere assent to p constitutes prima facie evidence for belief that p at the time in question (p. xx).
3. I recognize that there are extensive debates about the norms of belief, both concerning their contents and their nature. However, considerations of space prevent me from engaging with this literature. What really matters for my purposes is the claim that the norms of belief differ from those of imagination; I am not committed to any particular account of the norms of either belief or imagination.
4. I borrow this distinction from Zangwill (1998), although he uses the terms ‘horizontal norms’ and ‘vertical norms’ for what I am calling ‘short-arm norms’ and ‘long-arm norms.’
5. On the functional picture, one determines whether a state is a belief (or belief-like) by determining what it does. On the normative conception, one determines whether a state is a belief (or belief-like) by determining what it ought to do. I leave to one side the important (but difficult) question of whether functionalist conceptions of belief might be able to capture its normative elements.
6. I am grateful to Cain Todd for this example.
7. Importantly, we should not confuse in-between states with so-called ‘partial beliefs.’ To partially believe something is to believe it to some degree—that is, to have some degree of credence toward the proposition in question. The norms of belief apply to such states, modulo the degree of credence the subject has toward the propositions concerned. But in-between states are not partial beliefs in this sense.

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