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Religious delusion or religious belief?

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ABSTRACT

How shall we distinguish religious delusion from sane religious belief? Making this determination is not usually found to be difficult in clinical practice – but what shall be our theoretical rationale? Attempts to answer this question often try to provide differentiating principles by which the religious "sheep" may be separated from the delusional "goats." As we shall see, none of these attempts work. We may, however, ask whether the assumption underlying the search for a differentiating principle – that religious beliefs and religious delusions can usefully be considered species of a common genus – is a good one. In this paper, we outline an alternative, "disjunctive," understanding of religious belief and religious delusion. By reminding ourselves both of what is central to any delusion and of what distinguishes bona fide religious claims from their pretenders, we show how to resolve our reflective puzzlement about religious delusion without recourse to differentiating principles.

Introduction

Mental health professionals are not infrequently tasked with distinguishing religious delusion from sane religious belief. Indeed, research estimates have it that between 20% and 60% of the delusional patients have delusions with religious content (Cook, 2015). Whilst we know of no evidence that the diagnosis of religious delusion is any less reliable than other kinds of delusion, the question remains as to how such determinations are properly justified. What general reflective account can be given of the distinctions we clinicians do typically draw in practice? To what criteria may we appeal when justifying our judgment that an individual is experiencing religious delusion rather than enjoying bona fide religious inspiration? Consider the case of "Colin"[1]:

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Colin is a man in his early twenties who was admitted to hospital on section after being picked up by the police whilst running naked through his local high street. When questioned, he would say only that "God had told me to do it" and would not divulge any more information. In hospital, he was polite, submissive, shy, and withdrawn – but would at times start "preaching" to other patients about the need for "repentance" and to "embrace God." He was in hospital for a few weeks before being discharged into the community.

Over time, it transpired that Colin believed that God had told him to run through the streets naked "as a test of faith" to avert a global catastrophe. Colin began hearing auditory hallucinations in his late teens in the form of a man's voice that would speak to him continuously. The voice told him he was a "special person, destined for greatness" and that he would be called to a "special mission" in the future. Colin first interpreted the voices as being "from an angel" but over time began to believe he was hearing the voice of God. Over a period of about 2 years, Colin began hearing more voices, both male and female, which he thought were angels. The voices also praised Colin, telling him how special he was, that he had been chosen, and to be "watchful." During this time, Colin became more withdrawn from social activities. He stopped attending college and did not actively seek work. Colin had attended Sunday School at his local Anglican church as a child, and sometimes went to Sunday morning church services in his teens, but has now stopped going altogether. He was never an active member of a religious community.

After about 3 years, the auditory hallucinations became more hostile. They began to berate Colin for his "lack of faith" and for being "weak." They also told him that something catastrophic was going to happen, either to his family or the rest of humanity, "sort of like the end of the world." Some of the voices told him he had the power to avert this "terrible event" if he was "obedient," whilst other voices insulted and abused him. Colin saw these latter voices as the "voice of devils or the Devil." He would read his bible almost continually in his room whilst having little contact with anyone else, even his parents. He began having several "vivid dreams" and "visions" about the end of the world. Through his bible readings, he began to interpret "signs" that the apocalypse was coming and, along with the voices, he began to believe he would avert this event by running through the high street naked. It was unclear why this act was important, though Colin alluded to references to Jesus being "naked and humiliated" and how he "needed to follow Jesus." It was also unclear if it was genuinely his own idea based on his readings of scripture, or if he was explicitly told to do this by a command hallucination.

Shall we take Colin's unusual beliefs for delusion just because they occur alongside a recognizably psychotic experience? But might he not be both mentally ill and religiously inspired – so that the clinical task is to separate out the authentically religious experiential sheep from the delusional goats? Or should we instead locate Colin's delusionality in the mismatch of his beliefs' content either with the world or with the beliefs of his peers? This latter suggestion has proved fairly tempting to clinicians when attempting to provide their clinical determinations with a rationale. But as we shall see, it turns out to be hard to achieve this without prejudice or question-begging.

Furthermore, we know of no evidence that clinicians unfamiliar with religious doctrine are on that account less able in their diagnoses of religious delusion.

Or consider not Colin but the ordinary churchgoer. The religious belief of others (especially regarding miracles, divine communication, etc.) can, at least when considered by secularists adopting a confidently rationalistic state of mind, sometimes seem "crazy." (Hence papers entitled "Why is belief in God not a delusion?" (Ross & McKay, 2017) rather than "Why is disbelief in God not a delusion?") And irreligion has been recorded as twice as prevalent among North American psychiatrists as in the general population (Larson et al., 1986). Might, then, the average Sunday school teacher only escape psychiatric attention because their beliefs cause no problems in living? Or perhaps it is the sheer prevalence of certain (religious, political, etc.) beliefs that allows them, by an act of psychiatric courtesy, to escape diagnostic attention? . . . Then again, we might ask, is it really so evident that sane reality contact is undergirded, rather than compromised, by an attitude of self-confident rationalism? The attempt to ground our sanity in self-evident principles of reason and empirical enquiry – rather than in a non-reflective, emotionally vibrant, trusting immersion in life – has, after all, been seen by some as more indicative than preventative of unreason (Chesterton, 1908; McGilchrist, 2009).

This, then, is our question: what principled grounds – if any – can we call on to distinguish bona fide religious commitment from religious delusion? We are of course not the first to address the matter (fairly recent contributions include DeHoff, 2018; Jackson & Fulford, 1997; McKay & Ross, 2021; O'Connor & Vandenberg, 2005; Pierre, 2001; Sanderson et al., 1999; Sims, 2009). Our solution, however, is new. In fact, to call it a "solution" is misleading insofar as our aim is better characterized as not to solve, but to dissolve, the puzzle of religious delusion as it is typically framed, and to instead clarify the concepts of "religious delusion" and "religious belief" in such a way as will prevent, rather than scratch, the itch of a desire for a principle by which religious delusion and religious belief may be distinguished.

Standard approaches

The question we are considering here is not a psychological one: the issue is not what, if any, different processes happen to give rise to religious delusion or religious belief. The question is instead philosophical: what definitive account can we give of what religious belief is and what religious delusion is? Let us call "standard" those approaches which take this question of religious delusion to be asking for a differentia or differentiae (i.e., differentiating principle/s which help us tell apart different species within a common genus) marking off the delusionally religious goats from the bona fide religious sheep. Four standard answers to this question can be found in the literature:

A. The first proposal – we shall call it the "anomaly argument" - has it that the atypicality or anomalousness of religious delusion can be explicated in statistical terms – i.e., in terms of the scarcity of the belief in question relative either to the common beliefs of mankind or to a culturally relevant comparator group. Thus, the idea of listening to God's voice is a common motif among religious believers in Abrahamic traditions; being told by the God of Abraham, as Colin was, to run naked through the streets to prevent a global catastrophe, is not. To be diagnosed as suffering religious delusion, then, amounts to failing at a numbers game: to be in our own, rather than living in a shared, world is, on this view, to have beliefs which happen to not be widespread (see, e.g., Iyassu et al., 2014). After all, if Colin's belief was that God had told him to quietly attend the local church service, or to pray for the sick in his congregation, he might not, we can readily imagine, have been so readily diagnosed "delusional."

Against the anomaly argument, consider the matter of how to decide what shall count as the most relevant comparator population. There are, after all, sects of various different sorts and sizes: are the beliefs of the smaller of these to be counted delusional simply on the basis of their relative marginality? And what, say, of Christianity's Jewish founders: did this faith only become non-delusional when popularized by emperor Constantine? Or: what if Colin invites us to take his own person as a community of one – within which, it might be said, his beliefs are 100% standard? Or: what shall we make of such cults as enjoying a uniformity of prima facie delusional belief: is the possibility of them being delusional really to be ruled out just by conceptual fiat? (We do after all *have* a concept of mass delusion!) Empirically speaking, it is of course extremely unlikely that we would find such a cult – but this hardly speaks to the conceptual point. We may note too that it is an essential element of Christian belief that it is only given to a few individuals to take up a position partly outside of their society so as to be able to speak into it in that radical manner the Bible styles "prophetic." The statistical atypicality of the role Colin adopts will then in this respect be considered consonant with, rather than contradictory of, mainstream doctrine, so we shall be forced to look elsewhere for an understanding of what makes his own pronouncements delusional rather than truly prophetic. Furthermore, there are various other ways in which someone's religious belief may be idiosyncratic – we shall consider some of them later – without their warranting psychiatric description. Finally, we might ask whether this approach does not just commit the naturalistic fallacy. That is, is it really so evident that the anomalousness of religious delusion is to be understood statistically rather than normatively? Delusionality, one might surely think,

has to do with thought that is more corrupted than niche, a point we explicate further in this paper's penultimate section.

B. A second suggestion has it that a religious belief is to be counted delusional in virtue of it having a particular kind of psychological formation. Perhaps it is delusional, for example, if it is born more of a wish to quell feelings of dread, brokenness, unlovedness, and wretchedness than of a pure search for truth (Freud, 1927). It is after all not a stretch to imagine that Colin's delusion that God deemed him a "special person" with a messianic role developed as a way to combat devastating feelings of inadequacy (Isham et al., 2022). Might the relief it brings him supply not merely the motivation for the formation, but also the essential pathological marker, of his delusion? This suggestion can be termed the "argument from psychological roots".

Against this we may ask whether this argument from roots does not commit the genetic fallacy. The fallacy, that is, of taking facts about a belief's origination to automatically impugn the validity of its content. As Freud himself recognized, beliefs that spring, say, from wish-fulfillment may nevertheless still be true (Cottingham, 2005, p. 539) ("A middle-class girl may have an illusion that a prince will come and marry her . . . and a few such cases have actually occurred"; Freud, 1927. Conversely, "St Theresa might have had the nervous system of the placidest cow, and it would not now save her theology, if the trial of the theology by [theologians] should show it to be contemptible";, p. 213; James, 1902, p. 18). So too we might note that the same psychological roots can eventuate in quite different psychopathological phenomena than delusion – such as in a bona fide or corrupt religious belief that is merely overvalued rather than delusional. Unless we specify that the roots in question are themselves delusional – which would anyway be question-begging – we may simply point to the wide array of defensively motivated yet non-delusional beliefs in our lives to see off the argument from roots. Finally, we know of no evidence to suggest that delusion, including religious delusion, is less ably diagnosed by those who lack insight regarding psychogenesis. If the argument from roots – when taken not merely as a psychological theory about pathogenesis but rather as an actual analysis of what it so much as means to be deluded – were on target, this diagnostic facility would be hard to understand.

C. Stressing faith's experiential aspect, it has been suggested that whilst both religious and delusional experience involve a destructuration of the psyche, what makes of the former a genuine "participation mystique," and of the latter a sheer psychic collapse, is whether the experience is under agential control (Parnas & Hendriksen, 2016). In other words, a mystic can return at will to mundane consciousness in which a clear self-world distinction is regained; psychotic subjects such

as Colin, however, are suffering from a psychotic illness in which qua illness impinges on their agency. We shall designate this approach the "agency argument".

One issue with the agency's argument is that it makes the erroneous assumption that bona fide religious experience is typically strived for and under the control of the mystic or saint. Against this, we note that religious experience can be – and typically is in the epiphany – overwhelmingly thrust upon one and that it is of the very nature of epiphany in particular that it is not subject to the will.

Furthermore, the suggestion that, aside from the will's involvement, psychotic and religious experiences are anyway identical risks committing what has been called a "pre-trans" fallacy (Wilber, 1982). Yes, there are indeed similarities in the form of some of our *descriptions* of apophany and epiphany, i.e., in how we articulate the collapse of ego boundaries in psychosis and in the spiritual experience of participation mystique. Thus, we may in both cases talk of, say, a "fading of ordinary self-world duality." But bring the experiences under a thicker description and their rather different characters will begin to show. Thus, the mystical experience has typically been understood in terms of surrender, submission, trust, and the progressive overcoming of illusions of self-dependency. The psychotic experience, by contrast, typically involves a regressive vitiation of such self-world differentiation as is the condition of possibility for meaningful experience, combined with a retreat to an unassailable, solipsistic, world of one.

Consider too the following two different senses of the term "ego." It is "ego" in the moral sense that is meant when we are talking of the breaking apart, in religious experience, of those grandiose illusions of self-sufficiency that quell anxiety whilst voiding our experience of grace. But it is that more purely psychological sense of "ego" as a singular subject of experience which is in play when we are discussing the loss of ego boundaries in psychotic self-disturbances. Regardless of the above-described differences, there may well yet be significant phenomenological similarities between certain mystical and the psychotic states (Parnas & Hendriksen, 2016). What remains uncertain, however, is that an appeal to agency can help us distinguish sane from delusional forms of religious belief.

D. A fourth suggestion sometimes found in the literature is that what distinguishes religious delusion from sane religious belief is its effect on the believer's life (James, 1902). This approach can be termed the "argument from fruits." Religious belief is on this score to be counted psychopathological if it impairs functioning in, say, love and work. Colin's psychosis resulted in him cutting off from meaningful social relationships and acting in ways that were disturbing to those around

him, ultimately resulting in an involuntary detention in a psychiatric hospital under the Mental Health Act. Perhaps if Colin's pre-psychotic faith had been stronger it would not only have bolstered his fragile sense of lovableness in realistic and helpful ways but also have encouraged participation in the supportive fellowship of a church.

Against the argument from fruits we may note that many non-delusional beliefs (e.g., straightforward errors, or non-delusional fantasies, or the beliefs of those who are politically or religiously persecuted for their faith) are also disruptive to believers' lives. (For example, being a Christian in Afghanistan, Eritrea, Pakistan, or Nigeria today is to risk significant oppression, death, or forced psychiatric treatment from Islamic authorities.) And there is surely nothing self-contradictory about the idea of a highly functional person suffering genuine delusion which they have nevertheless kept quietly encapsulated. We may therefore ask if we are truly ready to rule out a priori the idea of a genuine religious revelation deconstructing someone's coping strategies. Correlatively, we may wonder too whether we do not do well to consider the idea – here outlined by Schopenhauer (1969, p. 193; see also Garson, 2022) – of delusion primarily functioning not to disrupt but to preserve life:

> Now if such a sorrow, such painful knowledge or reflection, is so harrowing that it becomes positively unbearable, and the individual would succumb to it, then nature, alarmed in this way, seizes upon madness as the last means of saving life. The mind, tormented so greatly, destroys, as it were, the thread of memory, fills up the gaps with fictions, and thus seeks refuge in madness from the mental suffering that exceeds its strength.

The notion of the protective function of a delusional belief – that it might actually serve to protect the psychotic from something much worse – has often been elaborated by the psychoanalytic and humanistic literature. And it may surely be true that delusions, even when defensively mobilized to dread-negating ends, often end up making life worse rather than better. Even so, such effects on one's life are perhaps rather better understood as the accidental product of delusion's nature – rather than delusion's essence itself being well-explicated in terms of its dismal effects.

Now the failure of the above-described attempts to provide differentiae of religious delusion and religious belief does not of course entail that the question they address is misconceived. In the absence of a further such answer, however, it does motivate us to consider a quite different tack. The approach which follows addresses the question of religious delusion not by providing another attempted differentia of religious delusion and religious belief, but instead by focusing on what (following Phillips, 1963) we shall

call the *reality* of religious concepts and on what (following Jaspers, 1963) we shall call delusional *form*.

Religious reality

When true believers recite the Nicene creed, their recitation typically counts as an expression and affirmation of their Christian belief. If atheists recite the same words, they are not thereby expressing beliefs of their own. This is to say that whether an utterance counts as a genuine expression of belief depends on the context in which it is issued: who is saying it, in what situation, to what end, as part of which cultural practice. We can understand this lesson as an example of Wittgenstein's extension of Frege's "context principle." Frege (1884/1980) taught that words only have meaning in the contexts of sentences. Wittgenstein (1953) extended this by reminding us of the wider context: that sentences can only be meant and understood by she who knows a language and that languages are spoken and understood only by those who are also engaged with one another and with their environments in a whole range of ways (our labor, commitments to one another, domestic lives, worship, procreation, play, etc.). The words of the creed, then, have the meaning they do for those who profess them because of their being uttered in the context of worship, by those whose relationship with others, and with their life as a whole, is partly regulated by their faith.

Now, we sometimes use our terms "true" and "false" to describe the content of beliefs or judgments: "Colin was a data scientist" is true if and only if Colin was a data scientist. But we also use these terms more generally to distinguish between i) the genuine, actual, bona fide, authentic, and ii) the sham, fake, pretend, forged, artificial, ersatz. Thus, we talk of a true (or genuine or authentic) Vermeer painting, or smile, or a five dollar bill, by contrast with false or fake or forged variants. Let us call this cluster of related normative notions that cut across a whole swathe of different conceptual contexts, concepts concerned with something's *reality*. What it is to be a genuine Vermeer (or smile) is clearly a very different matter than what it is to be an actual law of nature (or a bona fide dollar bill). What makes something a real Vermeer is the identity of the artist; what makes something a real five dollar bill is not the person who made it but its place of manufacture; what makes a smile real is not the person whose smile it is, nor its location, but that it manifests happiness, warmth, resignation, or agreeableness; what makes a promise real is the promiser's sincerity. "Real" is, we might say, often an "attributive adjective" (Geach, 1956): what it amounts to in any particular case depends utterly on the nature of that which is under discussion. As Foot (2001, p. 3) writes regarding the attributive adjective "good": "'bad' may change to 'good' when we consider a certain book of philosophy first as a book of philosophy and then as

a soporific." At other times, however, "Real" does not designate a property but is instead a synonym for "extant" or "actual," and has "hallucinated" or "imagined" for common antonyms. Thus, Colin sometimes thought he had heard his parents' talking, but in fact these voices were not *real*, i.e., he was hallucinating.

Turning now to the question of the reality or truth of religious belief, our interest is not in such matters as whether Jesus ever lived, whether the communion wine really turns into Jesus's blood, whether God exists, etc. Instead, we are interested here in how to distinguish the genuine variants of religious belief from its pretenders. And in order for us to assess whether a putative instance of anything is the real deal, we must also have a grasp of the kind of reality enjoyed by such a thing. Might it be enough to enjoy a genuinely religious belief that one holds forth on the topics of religious observance: God, Abraham, Jesus, the Prophet, the Holy Spirit, the second coming, atonement, etc.? No; this is no more prima facie compelling than taking he who writes "$0/0 + 2 = 3.93\text{-}\sqrt{0} > 1.3\%$" to have thereby performed some mathematics. In truth, such a man has not even made a mathematical mistake: his use of what, because of their use in other contexts, we call "mathematical signs" is too awry for talk of mistake to be on the conceptual table. Maybe this man is an actor in a play, chalking signs on a blackboard, pretending to be a professor; maybe he is a young child acting out of an identification with his mathematics teacher mother. What he is not doing is evincing a grasp of mathematical reality, since his use of mathematical symbols is not woven into a mathematical praxis. So too for religious discourse: to understand what we are here calling faith's reality we must consider what the characteristics are of the verbal and non-verbal praxis into which putative expressions of belief must be woven before they can intelligibly be described as genuine.

Abrahamic religions distinguish variously between i) authentic belief and ii) heresy, superstition, idolatry, and prelest (or, in Islam, ightirār – i.e., religious illusions, narcissistic preoccupation with altered internal states, hypomanic enthusiasms, ego-trips, etc.). Mastering such distinctions requires a familiarity with diverse aspects of faith. We may at first think to consider only a belief's compatibility with scripture and with the body of revered writing concerned with scripture's elaboration (Hadith, writings of the Church fathers, Talmud, Midrash, etc.). Yet underlying and interlaced with matters hermeneutic are a range of what are at least equally if not more fundamental strands of the religious life – strands such as worship, fellowship, the interpersonal moral life (i.e., charity, forgiveness, repentance, the cultivation of virtue), the divine moral life (i.e., cultivating a morally apt, non-egocentric, non-entitled, reverent, and humbly courageous relation both with being ("creation") itself and with that "ground of being" gestured at with terms like "Allah," "God," and

"YHWH") prayer and meditation, fasting, pilgrimage, the sacramental life (i.e., communion, confession, marriage, baptism, etc.), the establishment and ongoing enaction of sacred space (in churches, synagogues, mosques, etc.), and so on. Let us call this whole sense-providing context the "life of faith." The point of seeing how belief must be situated within this life of faith is not that one must have a living familiarity with every single part of it before one can understand anything of these parts. (Such an extreme holism takes far too all-or-nothing an approach to meaning and understanding.) The point is rather that, as Wittgenstein (1969, §141) put it, "light dawns gradually over the whole": we understand more of what is meant by talk of "real (as opposed to inauthentic) belief" as we gain a greater familiarity with the whole life of faith.

Consider now the following two fallacious suppositions. The first has it that doctrine can be understood for what it is independently of its engagement with other aspects of the life of faith – as if the sense of the latter were informed by the former but not vice versa. Here, we find a reductive disposition which ignores the context principle, i.e., which severs one part of a form of life (the doctrine) from its sense-conferring context (Phillips, 1963). To take a Christian example, what it *means* to proclaim "Thy will be done" (in the Lord's Prayer) is hardly intelligible outside the context – not only of the theological understanding of God's will but, rather more importantly – of the moral practice of humility in one's relationships, and the cultivation of existential humility and courageous trust in and through the inner life of prayer. The second fallacious supposition has to do with a misreading of "faith" or "belief" as the matter of *assent to propositions* such as "God exists" (Audi, 2008). This ignores the fact that, for the believer, talk of "faith" and "belief" has rather more to do with the presence or absence of attitudes such as trust, commitment, perseverance, and a humble openness to love. (Compare "I believe *that* it is raining" with "I believe *in* you.") And the proof of such attitudes lies in the pudding of one's moral life: "By their fruit" shall false prophets be known; "every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit" (Matthew 7:15–20). (The argument from fruits was unhelpful when attempting to distinguish clinical delusion from religious belief, but it is rather more useful when distinguishing religious belief from religious corruption.) The distinction between real faith and its pretenders is then manifest in how the belief both expresses and in turn helps regulate the believer's life. Does it evince pride, narcissistic ambitions of self-sufficiency, vanity, hatred, fear, self-satisfaction, isolation, and egocentricity – or instead the selfless humble courageous acknowledgment of dependence, peace of mind, the love for God, and the love of one's fellow man? Does it manifest what Saint Ignatius called "consolation" (the movement toward God in trusting faith, love, and hope), or instead "desolation" (toward ego, doubt, fear, and anger)?

The above may be but elementary lessons from the philosophy of religion. We draw them here, however, because it seems to us that discussions regarding religious delusion often falter because they proceed in isolation from an understanding of what makes a statement genuinely an expression of a religious belief. With them in mind, let us return to the matter of the religious reality or unreality of Colin's belief and experience. Colin, recall, said he was told by God and the angels that he should run naked through the streets as a test of faith and to avert a global catastrophe and that he was a special person destined for greatness. As an adult Colin had been a member of no religious community. Furthermore, he used his own idiosyncratic bible readings to interpret signs that an apocalypse was imminent. Nothing here suggests that his belief in his prophetic greatness partakes in the reality of religious belief. It is embedded in no sense-conferring scriptural, ecclesiastical, or religious community context; it neither manifests nor issues in morally significant action. Colin uses *words* that are used in religious contexts, and engages in certain acts (bible reading, mouthing words to himself) which in other contexts could count as religious but is not himself livingly embedded in such contexts and so cannot, on the basis of the above acts alone, be counted a true believer.

So far, we have only argued that Colin's beliefs are not genuinely religious – except in the thin sense in which they are articulated using religious terms – and we have not as yet addressed the question of whether they are delusional. If they are established as being delusional, this may also be considered another defeating condition on their claim to be truly religious. This delusionality, however, must be separately established, since belief may be religiously awry not merely through manifesting delusion but also because it takes the form of heresy, prelest, naive error, and passing confusion. It is to the issue of the distinctive reality of delusional thought that we now turn to.

Delusionality

Colin's delusions are in some sense idiosyncratic, radically out of step with the thought of those whose belief enjoys the reality of authentic faith. However, their being statistically anomalous is not, we suggested, the way to parse their normative atypicality. This latter atypicality rather has to do with the way in which Colin is, when he is in his delusion, *in a world of his own*. In the original (pre-autistic spectrum disorder) sense of the term, Colin suffers an "autistic" disturbance: his mind is, when he is in his delusion, now somehow self-enclosed (Bleuler, 1950). At such times, he struggles to enact a cogent mindedness through an ongoing participatory "vital contact" with his environment (Minkowski, 1953). Or, to borrow now a philosophical analogy, his mode of consciousness, when in his delusion, is "solipsistic"

(Sass, 1995): the very idea of others who could meaningfully challenge or affirm his thought has somehow gone missing. Or, to use a final metaphor, Colin is, when in his delusion, caught in a "waking dream" (Frierson, 2011, p. 211; Schopenhauer, 1851/2014, p. 202). . . . But how shall we understand this intrinsic solipsism, autism, or waking dream of the delusional mind?

Thought can fail to partake in reality in a variety of ways. But what makes for a specifically delusional unreality can, we suggest, best be brought out by first considering the distinction between *imagination* and *reality-oriented judgment*. The thought of she who has not lost the capacity for (what is perhaps misleadingly called) "reality testing" may happily be assigned to *either one or the other* of these two categories (Gipps, 2022). We are sitting near the open window and I start to speak about the fruit of an apple tree on the lawn outside. And here there is a fact of the matter as to whether I am making a judgment about a tree's fruit or instead indulging imaginative whimsy. Utterances expressing world-oriented judgment may properly be said to be either right or wrong – they are accountable to the facts. Contrast such utterances as instead express self-conscious imagination: these are not meaningfully considered accountable to facts beyond one's person. What makes it apt to say of some utterance ("The apples from that tree are simply delicious") that it expresses judgment or alternatively imagination is what else the person who voices it says and does. What this "else" looks like in either case will depend upon the utterance and its context. We might, for example, imagine someone who is genuinely to be understood as expressing their imaginings becoming puzzled or vexed when asked "Are you sure?" Or we understand that someone who is properly said to be issuing a judgment should have something ready to say to questions like "What evidence are you basing that on?" ("We visited here last year too; all of us really enjoyed them then").

For the delusional patient, however, imagination and judgment have collapsed in on each other. When he is in his delusion, there is no fact of the matter as to whether Colin is imagining or instead judging. Note that we do not say "no fact of the matter *for him*": he often enough – let us imagine – repudiates the idea that he is imagining and instead maintains that he is making a genuine judgment. And yet, despite his protestations, the surrounding linguistic and non-linguistic behaviors in this particular context do not allow us to sustain the ascription to him of ordinary judgment. He boldly and baldly asserts outlandish notions that, to be taken seriously, would require extraordinary evidence; our requests for reasons why we should believe what he says meet with tacit repudiations of the need for such evidence. Indeed, his attitude rather suggests that he considers the talk of evidence to be by the by ("I just know that it's angels that are talking to me!") (Rhodes & Jakes, 2004). The form of the certainty of the delusional person is akin more to the ungrounded first-person

authority of she who is imagining than it is to the grounded confidence of the genuine judgment-maker (Spitzer, 1990). It is the possibility of cleanly separating out imagination and judgment in the non-delusional subject that constitutes these forms of thought as meaningful. And a precondition for ordinary imagination ascriptions is that ordinary judgment, as opposed to imagination, can at times meaningfully be ascribed to the person in question. (One can only be properly said to have "off-line" moments if one is capable of engaging in an "on-line" manner.) This is not, then, to make the epistemic claim that the delusional person mistakes what are actually imaginings for beliefs (for which see Currie, 2000), but rather the ontological claim that delusional thought does not enjoy that differentiated structure required before it could meaningfully be sorted into either actual judgment or actual imagining. What the paradoxical notion of the "waking dreamer" captures, then, is a collapse of this very contradistinction: the delusional subject's delusional discourse belongs neither to the genre of imagination nor to that of judgment.

Encountering Colin for the first time you might naively assume that he is being playful when he talks of being chosen for greatness by God – that he is, in fact, indulging his imagination. What he says is after all outlandish, unanchored from the reality of faith, unaccountable to faith's domain-specific norms. And yet Colin forcefully disavows any such unseriousness. This in turn may make you want to say that he sincerely believes what he says. And if what you are aiming to register with such talk of "sincere belief" is Colin's disavowal of make-believe, then it is of course well-taken. Even so, now we are left with the puzzle of how someone *could* believe what Colin does. You find yourself reaching for "but you would have to be *mad* to think that." Which, of course, is not to say that, if you were mad, then you could now find intelligible what he maintains – but rather that only someone who has lost his grip on reality would not be attentive to the distinctive *unbelievability* of what Colin maintains with such dreamy yet insistent insouciance. As he blithely puts it, he "just *knows*" he has this divine mission. (The extent to which Colin is open to dialogue and challenge, the extent to which he is, for example, responsive to counter-evidence, is, we might say, the extent to which he is not in fact given over to actual delusion.)

We are now in a position to better understand what is meant by the *idiosyncrasy* of Colin's delusional belief that he has a divine mission. We note above the temptation of those looking for a simple differentia for distinguishing religious delusion from religious belief to reach for a statistical notion of idiosyncrasy. This, we said, will not do: the first few Christian apostles are not happily counted delusional simply because their beliefs are sparse in numbers compared with those of their fellow Jews. The sense in which Colin's belief is idiosyncratic must be normative rather than statistical. We might think it could be judged delusionally aberrant by

referencing the normative standards internal to the faith itself. And in truth various similar-sounding claims to Colin's – the belief, say, that Marie Paule Giguère is a reincarnation of the Virgin Mary – are typically understood that way by religious believers – i.e., as heretical. Yet whilst we need insist on no artificially strict distinction between religious delusion and heresy, the distinctive manner in which Colin's belief loses contact from reality itself rather obviates the description of it as either heretical or as one of genuine faith's moments. It is at least conceivable that heresies be shared. Yet even if others came to beliefs with what in some sense was the same *content* as Colin's – that Colin was a special person destined to perform great spiritual acts and that Colin can avert an apocalypse by running naked through the streets – there is yet a sense in which his delusion cannot be shared. It cannot be shared because of its delusional form; it cannot be shared in the sense that Colin is, as we say, and when in his delusion, "in his *own* world".

To be in such a world in such a manner as legitimates being described as deluded is to suffer what we might call *illusions of thought*. Genuine thought's expressions either constitute, or are subject to, standards of rationality. (Constitute: I ask you the time and, looking at the clock and seeing that it is 3pm, you say "It is 3pm"; it is rational to believe your senses' deliverances unless you have reasons to do otherwise; you do not require reasons for believing them unless what they are "delivering" is odd. ... Subject to: I say "it is time to go" and you say "but it is 3 pm now, we're due there at 5pm, and it takes only 30 minutes"; my judgment about our need to leave now is thereby shown up as unreasonable.) Delusional thought, however, is paradigmatically irrational (so cannot itself constitute a norm of rationality) and is, so long as it remains delusion, incorrigible (because unaccountable to shared norms of reason). This is not to say that thought must always be rational (my thought that it was time to go was unreasonable: it was an irrational thought), nor that irrational intransigence is delusion's peculiar preserve. What it is to say is that the collapse into one another of imagination and judgment that we find in delusion makes for a particular form of unaccountability. The delusional thinker, for example, is not in a position to doubt the deliverances of her senses any more than the non-lucid dreamer is in a position to doubt the veracity of her dream experience: it is intrinsic to such forms of thought that the very distinction between appearance and reality finds no registration within them. The delusional mind has, we might say, escaped the gravitational pull of shared rational norms; it is now accountable only to itself – which is to say: it is now no longer in the accountability business. It "short-circuits" (Minkowski, 1953): the current of the mind is no longer subject to the resistance of the world. Or, to deploy another metaphor: we may say of an ordinary driver that he is in the

wrong gear given his speed, the gradient of the road, the speed limit, and so on. The car of the delusional driver, however, has been placed up on bricks, so now makes no contact with the road. Changing gear, depressing the accelerator, revving the engine: these now do nothing to affect his passage. Even so, the speedometer still registers now 0 kph, now 40 kph, now 50 kph depending on his "driving." So too we may say that Colin has delusional *thoughts*. And these thoughts are often still bound up with powerful emotions and sometimes inspire actions – rather as dreams inspire the movements of sleepwalkers. And as with expressions of ordinary thought, we may paraphrase what he says, proffer negations of it, translate it into French, and so on (Teichmann, forthcoming). Delusional discourse is in this way more expressive of thought than is gobbledegook, and there is yet a sense in which we may properly be said to understand what the delusional person is saying, even whilst there is yet another sense in which we just cannot understand how they could think as they do. The same may of course be the case for someone who lacks an aesthetic, religious, or ethical sensibility: the psychopath, for example, may be able to paraphrase what the moral theorist says without having a sense of how to make her words his own. There are more ways of not being part of a relevant "we" than are thrown up by delusion.

Conceptual diagnosis, conceptual treatment

To summarize our discussion so far: our question was how we shall understand the difference between religious delusion and religious belief. We looked at four standard approaches to that question – the arguments from roots and fruits, the anomaly and agency arguments – all of which assumed that a correct answer will supply us with a distinguishing mark that separates the sheep of bona fide belief from the goats of religious delusion. The answers were judged to fail – and rather than come up with a fifth, we instead took a new tack. Rather than offer a differentia to distinguish two species within a putative common genus, we separately investigated what distinguished bona fide from bogus religious belief, and what distinguished delusional from non-delusional thought. In what remains we shall first characterize more carefully the conceptual character of what we take to be the underlying mistake embodied by standard approaches and then end by considering why such a mistake is so readily made.

Asking "how to differentiate 'normative' religious or spiritual beliefs, behaviors, and experiences from 'psychotic' illnesses" (Bassett & Baker, 2015) can look, on the face of it, like asking "how shall we distinguish British from French currency?", or "what is the difference between male and female alligators?" In asking such questions, we are not so much asking

how we can find out which is which (an epistemic question), but rather what it is for something to be one rather than the other (an ontological question). Standard approaches, however, bring with them a questionable assumption about the nature of religious delusion. We may question this assumption by asking whether the question of the difference between religious delusion and religious belief might not better be got at my comparing it with such questions as "was that episode you mentioned of being chased by an alligator a real safari encounter or a night terror?", or "what is the difference between a large tomato and a large elephant?" (See also Marzanski & Bratton, 2002, p.366.) In short, these questions all invite us to think that we have here two species of a common genus, and so the task becomes one of supplying their differentia. However, that task will look rather different if we instead take it that here we have items more helpfully thought of as belonging to two different genuses, items which may nevertheless sometimes be brought under a common description (both Colin and Saint Paul "believed that they heard God's voice"). For what we will now be concerned with is instead separately elucidating what it is that warrants bringing each of these separately intelligible phenomena under that common description. We will, that is, now be reminding ourselves about the natures of tomatoes and elephants, safari encounters and night terrors, suffering delusions and enjoying sanity.

An analogy may be helpful here – or at least, may help those familiar with the philosophy of perception and action literature! Thus, a key debate in the philosophy of perception has been between disjunctivists and non-disjunctivists (McDowell, 1982). Non-disjunctivists claim that Colin's hallucinations and his veridical perception involve some experiential item in common – they might call this an "appearance" or a "percept." The question then becomes how we shall distinguish such "appearances" as are involved in Colin's audio-verbal hallucinations from such "appearances" as obtain when he is listening to what his psychologist is saying. (Perhaps, someone moots, these appearances are *brought about* in different ways, and it is in terms of this different causal history that they can be understood as either veridical or as hallucinatory.) Disjunctivists, however, dispute the suggestion that there is any such experiential item in common between Colin's audio-verbal hallucinations and his listening to his psychologist. There are, of course, common *forms of description* under which both may be brought ("benevolent," "male," "nearby" - as well as the verbal content of what is heard: "you are hallucinating again," say). But we will, says the disjunctivist, be on a hiding to nothing if we try to elucidate differentia for telling apart those "appearances" which are hallucinations from those which are veridical perceptual experiences. Such experiences, the disjunctivist says, belong to different ontological categories, and in truth the notion of an

"appearance" or "percept" which is involved in both is just an unhelpful philosophical concoction rather than anything of a respectable metaphysical standing.

Or, to turn now to the philosophy of action, we may make a useful comparison between the question of religious delusion and Anscombe's (1957, §19) discussion of what it is for an action to be intentional or otherwise. It might be thought tempting to approach the latter question by asking what must be added to an action simpliciter to make it intentional. But Anscombe urges: "We do not add anything attaching to the action at the time it is done by describing it as intentional. To call it intentional is [instead to] indicate that we should consider the question 'Why?' relevant to it in the sense that I have described. ... [An] action is not called 'intentional' in virtue of any extra feature which exists when it is performed." And what makes it proper to bring it under one description or another is, Anscombe urges, the context in which it occurs, a context which here includes what the agent sincerely says when asked why he acted as he did. In short, mere movements and intentional actions are, says Anscombe, helpfully thought of as belonging to different categories of description, rather than intentional actions being analyzable into mere movement plus some or other differentia.

Using now this language of "disjunctivism," what we have been offering in this paper is a "disjunctivist" account of religious delusion. The account does not follow the assumption made by standard approaches – that sane religious believers and those suffering religious delusions have something – "religious belief" - in common. Whilst both parties may have had their thoughts brought under the description "religious belief," this does not mean that the two thoughts are helpfully thought to implicate the same phenomenon – religious belief – but occurring in delusional and sane forms. Instead, we suggested, we must tackle the question of religious delusion by considering, in turn, two separate matters. The first of these concerns what it is for Colin to have or not have genuinely religious belief (or, in the above analogy: what makes for a male vs a female alligator). The relevant contrast here is nothing as radical as delusion but rather faith's more ordinary pretenders. Reflecting on these largely contextual considerations helps us get our reflective bearings on what it so much as means to enjoy bona fide religious belief. The second matter has to do with what it is for Colin to be sane or delusional (or, in the analogy: what makes for a night terror as opposed to a waking experience). The concern here is to understand delusion by making clear its distinctive psychopathological form – rather than by attempting to spell it out in such (non-intrinsically psychopathological) terms as reference to its content, prevalence, causes, and effects.

Why, finally, has it ever been assumed that we require a differentiating criterion to distinguish religious delusion from religious belief? The

question is closely related to another: why has the warranted diagnosis of religious delusion ever been considered to provide a challenge beyond that of any other (e.g., paranoid or erotomanic) delusional beliefs? We end with two simple suggestions, more prompts for further reflection than definitive conclusions.

First, that behind both questions lies a lingering conflation of delusional irrationality with factual falsity and with the stubborn maintenance of factual judgment despite an absence of evidence. Or, to put it otherwise, we find here a conception of disturbed reality testing which collapses this distinctly psychopathological notion into an everyday or scientific notion of the rational testing of empirical claims. Such a notion may have already been dismissed as "superficial and incorrect" by Jaspers (1963), and to have since been repeatedly dismantled in the psychopathological literature (Feyaerts et al., 2021; Gipps & Fulford, 2004). Even so, it naturally enough lingers on in the profession's more philosophically naive quarters. Once in place, it will make the diagnosis of religious delusion look unsafe, since who among us – especially when wearing our clinical hats, but no doubt at other times too – will feel comfortable in assuming the ability to confidently assess religious claims for their truth or falsity?

Second, that behind both questions also lies the above-exposed naive conception of what we called "religious reality" - not, recall, the truth of religious claims, but rather their conditions of meaning, a conception which uproots religious discourse from the sense-conferring context of the whole life of faith. Naked and alone, the religious utterance itself now inevitably looks unrooted and peculiar in a similar way to delusional discourse. Thankfully, the clinical recognition of delusion depends no more on the possession of a philosophically astute reflective conception of it than does our ability to correctly tell the time require us first to be able to eloquently discourse on what time is. In his or her reflective moments, however, the pull of superficial conceptualizations of delusion and religious belief will be more powerfully felt. And now, having reflectively misconstrued that object, which he is well-enough able to identify in practice, the clinician s(Sass)tarts to feel uneasy about the warrantedness of his own clinical determinations.

Note

1. "Colin" is not a single individual but a composite of several clinical cases.

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