Book Review

Delusions and Other Irrational Beliefs

Lisa Bortolotti
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Delusional people are people saying very bizarre things like they are dead, their spouse is a robot, the TV star is talking to them, they are possessed by the devil, aliens are following them, and so on. Even though we know that they are not identical, terms like "delusion" and "mental illness" are often used as synonyms in ordinary language. This comes from what psychopathology tradition handed down: delusion is the key psychopathological phenomenon, although essentially *un-understandable* (Jaspers, 1959). In her book Delusion and Other Irrational Beliefs, Lisa Bortolotti explores the topic of delusion from the epistemological perspective of analytical philosophy.

Do delusional people really believe what they say? This question is as interesting as it is pressing for clinics. From the very beginning however this work is engaged in defending two core ideas. First, understanding belief, regardless of whether it is a "real pattern" or not (Dennett, 1991), is relevant to understanding what delusions are. Second, delusions can be beliefs like others. This is only a small part of what makes this book a fascinating and indispensable work.

The aim of the book is arguing against accounts which deny the doxastic nature of delusion. In philosophy of mind, the claim that delusions are not beliefs is taken as a *modus tollens* argument deriving from the general premise that all beliefs presuppose a background rationality, as assumed by belief attribution theory in the Davidson-Dennett tradition. In other words, since delusions do not meet the rationality constraint (since they are irrational phenomena), they are not beliefs at all.

Chapter 1 is an opening background section devoted both to the rationality constraint in belief attribution theory and to conceptions and taxonomy of

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delusions. The problem of the aetiology of delusion is explored here, and comparisons are made to other similar phenomena like self-deception, obsessive thoughts, confabulation and hypnotically induced belief. This section of the book is accurate and rich. From the first pages, the book impresses us for its scholarliness and for author's deep knowledge of the topic in all its relevant aspects. Dominic Murphy is right in affirming that this book is «a tour de force» (2011, p. 1).

The book structure reflects the main counterarguments to which the author aims to reply. Each chapter is dedicated to common accounts of belief to their relation to the theory of rationality. Beliefs are shown not to be procedurally rational (Chapter 2), epistemically rational (Chapter 3), and agentially rational (Chapter 4). Moreover, as suggested by the book's title, delusions and ordinary beliefs are shown to share the same features of irrationality without compromising either their doxastic nature, or their contribution to the construction and preservation of the conception of the self (Chapter 5).

In this way, the background rationality constraint is shown to be no more than a philosophical myth, and can thus be rejected. That is exactly what experimental psychology has told us for a while (Stein, 1996). The minimal belief account Bortolotti suggests is constructed in terms of possibility. Beliefs must be integrated in a system that has some (not any) inferential relations with other intentional states; they are sensitive (not responsive) to evidence or argument; they can be manifested in behavior; they can be self ascribed and defended with reasons. It is less clear why delusions are pathological whereas other beliefs are merely irrational.

So a question should be raised: can we establish whether delusional people are really believing what they say on the base of belief attribution theory? What is referred to as belief ascription is a heuristic strategy from the observer's perspective, where the interpreter assumes mental states in others on the basis of behavior to explain and predict their actions. Rationality constraint is a heuristic constraint too, which is presupposed in order to make interpretation work. The theoretical background of this story goes back to the problem of the radical translation in Quine (1960): if a native speaker of an unknown language says something illogical, I must conclude I have not understood him properly. According to the principle of charity, a bad translation is more improbable than the explicit violation of logical principles. This is likely to be a conventional rule. Can we characterize delusions as beliefs from the intentional stance? Maybe we cannot. Belief characterization as offered in the

book could account for why we are conventionally justified anyhow (even without the rationality constraint) to expect real beliefs from irrational patients, but we may be wrong about their having real beliefs (maybe some delusions are, some are not). The reason is that we do not know if the folk-psychology interpretative strategy is a sufficient tool for establishing the presence of beliefs. Probably it is not. Maybe holding firmly a belief is not a fact that can be established from the intentional stance, but it could be established by neuroscience, if correlated brain patterns are discovered in future. The alternative view is quite old-fashioned in cognitive science. We may expect neuroscience to empirically find brain patterns of what believing something means. Besides we are prepared to possible cases in which there might be also no clear self-transparence of our beliefs at the first-person narrative level.

Main concerns about the book include problems like natural kinds (are beliefs natural kinds?), tools to denote them (should we use philosophical or empirical tools?) and the relationship between the disciplines involved (folk-epistemology, scientific psychology or neuroscience). Accordingly, we cannot ignore the fact that many contemporary philosophers (the sort called eliminativists) claim that beliefs might not exist at all. Bortolotti intentionally avoids the problem of scientific reduction to some fundamental physical level. She is aware that there is an urgency of causal explanations in psychiatry coming from the medical model (especially, from cognitive neuroscience) and that present psychiatry taxonomy (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or DSM) is in the middle of a big crisis. DSM a-causal descriptive approach gives no definitive solution to the problem of delusion and other mental symptoms, so we are looking forward to the neuroscientific reply. Nevertheless she does not commit herself to any hypothesis of underlying causal mechanisms of delusion (although stating to be more congenial to some version of the two-factor theory, p. 35) and of the existence of belief itself. Nevertheless «questions about belief ascription» she writes «are no less important in the age of neuroscience» (p. 1). She is right. Whether delusions are beliefs is a different question from what causes delusions and what are delusions at the level of neurocomputational mechanisms (a certain breakdown of a given neurocomputational mechanism). But a problem is: what remains of this discourse about the belief status of delusion if the notion of belief comes to be replaced by a mature neuroscience?

According to Murphy, this approach «may not serve as a foundation for a developed science of abnormal intentional stance» (2011, p. 4). In a more

recent article, Bortolotti clarifies that even if she uses beliefs as fictions, she wants to give a contribute to the development of such a science by «gradually revising our existing conceptual framework» (2011, p. 13). As for methodology, in the book the author identifies four aims for philosophy: working out the implications of empirical results; suggesting new avenues; drawing some conclusions; assessing the relationship between data and interpretation. The guiding role of philosophy for the scientific domain might be considered to be a little pretentious. Murphy states (2011) that the book approach is that of a *folk epistemology of delusions*. But what must be said is that the book approach is not that of a mere folk epistemology, even more modest than a strong *naturalized epistemology* (Quine, 1969). Quine theorized the view of naturalized epistemology in terms of *replacement naturalism* (Feldman, 2001), according to which traditional epistemology should be abandoned in favor of psychology. And this is not Bortolotti's approach. However, there is also a naturalized epistemology in terms of *cooperative naturalism* (Feldman, 2001) according to which empirical results from scientific psychology allow to make progress in epistemological questions. This seems to be more her approach. Bortolotti in fact claims that philosophical inquiry should not conflict with empirical findings (p. 7). Moreover she uses a lot of data and results from experimental psychology as examples that intervene to solve epistemological concerns. What is unclear is which is supposed to have the last word on conceptual issues, whether the philosophical or the scientific-psychological domain.

Admittedly these remarks should not make one approach the book with suspicion. This book is an important contribution to the recent delusion debate. The book can also usefully work as a cognitive science textbook on delusion. The author introduces the topic in depth, covering all the right issues in a way that no one has done before. The bibliography is also an extremely rich guide for those interested in further exploring the subject, and also for finding sources relevant to disputes in the philosophy of mind.

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