Delusions and Dispositional Beliefs

Abstract

In some ways, someone suffering from the delusion that his or her spouse has been kidnapped and replaced with an imposter appears to *believe* that he or she eats dinner with an imposter every night. But the imperviousness of delusions to counter-evidence makes it hard to classify them as beliefs, and easier to classify them as imaginings. Bayne and Pacherie want to use Schwitzgebel's dispositional account of belief to restore confidence in the doxastic character of delusion. While dispositionalism appears to allow us to classify delusions as beliefs, this allowance isn't a robust vindication of doxasticism. The significance of the allowance can be increased by emphasizing the role of folk-psychological norms in individuating propositional attitudes. But letting those norms play a large role in the individuation of belief makes it hard to count as believers the deluded subjects who violate most such norms. Dispositionalism about belief can't defend doxasticism about delusion.

Introduction

Most accounts of belief make links between belief and action, belief and evidence, and belief and overall rationality that delusional subjects violate. Deluded subjects do inferentially elaborate on their delusions, sometimes act on them, and may appreciate that others find their content evidentially implausible. But the affective, motivational, and inferential links deluded subjects make to and from the contents of their delusions are not what one would normally expect from a subject who truly believed that (for example) his wife had been kidnapped and replaced by an imposter, or that she were dead.

This has led some to argue that delusions are not beliefs, and even that seriously deluded subjects cannot be ascribed any beliefs at all.[1] Because it nevertheless seems natural to describe such subjects as believing their delusions, in part because such descriptions make apparent sense of their behavior, there is interest in defending

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[1] Especially when influenced by Davidson (1984) or Dennett (1987). See discussion in Davies and Coltheart (2000) and Bortolotti (2005).

delusions' status as beliefs. This may be done by arguing that the links between belief and rationality should not be over-tight, or by arguing that beliefs can be present even when subjects are failing to manifest them normally.

Bayne and Pacherie use both strategies to defend the doxastic account of delusions against arguments that delusory content is not believed but imagined.[2] On the imagination account, a deluded subject does not (for example) believe that his wife is an imposter. He imagines this. But, in part because this imagining is playing belief-like motivational roles in his life, he believes that he believes his wife is an imposter. He doesn't have improper beliefs about his wife, but about the nature of the attitude he takes towards the content 'My wife is an imposter'.[3]

Bayne and Pacherie argue directly against the imagination strategy, but I focus on their indirect argument, which aims to restore confidence in the doxastic character of delusion. They appeal to Schwitzgebel's dispositional account of belief to explain away deluded subjects' failure to manifest their beliefs in normal ways.[4] They claim that difficulties for the doxastic account can be resolved if belief-ascriptions are context-dependent. But the tools Schwitzgebel uses to make room for non-normally manifesting beliefs, and for context-dependent belief-ascriptions, are not available to Bayne and Pacherie. A dispositionalism radical enough to include the odd behavior of deluded subjects will also blur the boundaries between doxastic and imaginative attitudes. The boundaries can be shored up, but only by giving a role to folk-psychological norms that Bayne and Pacherie cannot afford. They can't use dispositionalism to cope with

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[2] Bayne and Pacherie (2005).

[3] Currie and Jureidini (2002). Gendler (2007) uses a non-manifestation strategy in accounting for self-deception in terms of pretense rather than belief.

[4] Schwitzgebel (2002).

abnormal manifestations of belief without re-tightening the connection between belief and rational ideals.

Dispositional Stereotypes

Bayne and Pacherie follow Schwitzgebel in construing beliefs as clusters of dispositions. Believing that it is raining is being disposed to carry an umbrella when I go out, to avoid planning picnics, to react with surprise and delight if someone says, "The rain stopped!", and so on. (Schwitzgebel identifies a belief that *p* with the set of dispositions stereotypically associated, in folk-psychology, with believing that *p*. The dispositions can include dispositions to draw inferences, take action, or feel certain emotions.) They also follow Schwitzgebel in allowing that dispositional actualization varies with context. (Your presence would inhibit the actualization of my disposition to avow my belief that planning for your surprise birthday party is going well.)[5]

Bayne and Pacherie endorse Schwitzgebel's view that belief-ascriptions are easily made when a subject clearly fits the dispositional stereotype for the relevant belief, and also when his failure to do so is easily excused. Without such an excuse, they note, "whether or not the attributor ascribes the belief will depend on the context of the belief ascription and what her interests are" (181). Bayne and Pacherie under-emphasize Schwitzgebel's distinction between excused non-manifestations of dispositions and explained dispositional absences. They also underplay the fact that once a profile has been exhaustively specified, there is no further factual question as to whether or not e.g. a

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[5] Bayne and Pacherie assert that beliefs are context-dependent, because "what a person believes depends on the dispositions she manifests" (180), and context determines disposition manifestation. Schwitzgebel holds rather that what a person believes depends on the dispositions she *has*, understanding that dispositions aren't always manifest.

subject really believes that *p*. Dispositionalism is neither plausible nor distinctive without these points, but they are in tension with Bayne and Pacherie's aims. Examining Schwitzgebel's explanation of the context-dependence of ascription shows this.

No-further-facts

Schwitzgebel discusses

> a child studying for a test [who] reads, 'The Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620,' and remembers this fact. She is a bit confused about what Pilgrims are, though: She is unsure whether they were religious refugees or warriors or American natives (257).

This girl (call her Jane) deviates from the stereotype for the belief that Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620 in certain ways—for example, she "will not conclude that Europeans landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620" (257). And no available excuse makes ascription of that belief to her uncontroversial. What determines how Jane is described depends, now, on such practical matters as whether we are concerned with her "likely performance on a history dates quiz" (ibid.)

No-further-fact dispositionalism means subjects with identical dispositional profiles can't have different beliefs in distinct contexts. So using belief-ascriptive language does not add information beyond that contained in a dispositional profile but refers to that information in a convenient way (252n6). Context affects only the attributor, not what she describes, because the interests that shift with context are communicative. No interpreter wants to ascribe a belief if doing so will mislead her

audience. The decision to say that Jane believes the Pilgrims landed in 1620 will not mislead a teacher or parent expecting her to do well on that quiz question. But it might mislead a psychologist interested in researching children's views of racial justice.

In this example, dispositionalism ends a dispute about how to specify the content of Jane's belief. We might wonder whether she believes *the Pilgrims landed in 1620*, or rather that *some people landed in 1620*. Schwitzgebel offers us a way out: specify her dispositions (to do well on the quiz, to imagine Native Americans climbing out of a boat onto Plymouth Rock), and let the communicative expectations decide if *believing the Pilgrims landed in 1620* is a useful thing to say about Jane.

Schwitzgebel also discusses Geraldine, who has dispositions in the stereotype set for believing that her son Adam smokes marijuana and dispositions in the stereotype set for believing that Adam does not. Here dispositionalism helps with the question of what attitude to attribute to a subject when it is clear at which content that attitude would be directed. The content here is "Adam smokes marijuana", and the question is whether Geraldine believes it or disbelieves it. Dispositionalism says that the communicative demands on the person describing Geraldine will determine whether or not 'belief' is an appropriate way to signal the dispositional structure that constitutes Geraldine's (contextually invariant) mental state.

Excuses, explanations, and blurred attitudes

Bayne and Pacherie want explanations for manifestation-failures to make room for belief-ascriptions. But they miss Schwitzgebel's implicit distinction between excuses and explanations. An excuse explains why someone fails to manifest a disposition while

suggesting she in fact has the disposition. The reason Bayne and Pacherie offer for why

so few deluded subjects act on their delusions is an excuse: these individuals know they

are likely to be committed if they so act (185).[6] They wish to act in ways that are made

(other things being equal) practically rational by the content of their delusion, but fail to

act as they wish because things are not equal: because they are at risk of involuntary

commitment.

An explanation of a manifestation-failure, on the other hand, suggests a subject

lacks the disposition in question—he deviates from the dispositional profile of the

relevant belief.[7] This is where context-relativity comes in on Schwitzgebel's account:

with interpreter's pragmatic judgments as to whether a particular deviation is *important*.

The more important an interpreter judges a dispositional deviation to be, the less likely

she is to use belief-ascriptive shorthand to express facts about her target's dispositional

profile.

When Bayne and Pacherie talk about non-standard situational features that

explain deluded subjects' failures to manifest belief-appropriate dispositions, particularly

failures connected with the appreciation of evidence, they discuss global alterations in

perception, and global disruptions of the affective states that feed motivation. But these

global non-standard features look less like manifestation-excusers than reasons to suspect

some or all of the dispositions in the relevant dispositional profile are absent.

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[6] This might require seeing one's delusion as a delusion, in addition to knowing others find one's belief implausible. If so, this manifestation-excuser works only by partially assimilating delusion to self-deception.

[7] Schwitzgebel does occasionally say that someone's excused failure to manifest a disposition is a deviation from a dispositional profile. But elsewhere he uses the phrase 'deviate from the stereotype' to refer exclusively to cases where the subject lacks a disposition in the profile for a given belief. I am following that latter usage. Note that whenever we observe a manifestation-failure, we apparently have evidence for the absence of a disposition. Only a subset of those manifestation-failures, however, are rooted in disposition-absences. Someone unaware of an excusing condition might incorrectly judge a subject to deviate from a dispositional stereotype she in fact fits.

Consider, for contrast, how my desire to surprise you on your birthday counters my natural impulse to avow my beliefs when asked about them. That desire explains my reticence without thereby representing me as prey to a force strong enough to seriously disrupt or eliminate the basic disposition to avow beliefs. Bayne and Pacherie owe an explanation of why global disruptions in affective, perceptual, or inferential processes are strong enough to inhibit dispositions to act and think in belief-relevant ways, and yet are *not* forceful enough to warrant a judgment that dispositions to act and think in those ways are absent altogether.[8]

Suppose such an explanation can't be had, so that deluded subjects appear to lack dispositions and not just manifestations. Bayne and Pacherie could still argue that interpreters will decide a particular deviation from the dispositional stereotype for (say) the belief that your wife has been kidnapped and replaced by an imposter is relatively unimportant. That would preserve our ability to say that a patient *believes* that his wife has been kidnapped. But that doesn't preserve our ability to say that the sum total evidence of his dispositions points towards his so believing, where his so believing is a fact over and above his having the dispositional profile he has. It only preserves our ability to refer to those dispositions without misleading our audience about them. Dispositionalism has the resources to generate the ascriptive claims Bayne and Pacherie want precisely because it doesn't give them the same weight they do.

Radical dispositionalism not only finesses debates about how to specify content, or about which of two opposed attitudes (of the same kind) a subject holds towards some

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[8] This is a version, specific to dispositionalism, of a general challenge for explanations of monothematic delusions. It is hard to find a cognitive deficit that is severe enough to explain the formation and maintenance of the delusion that is also more or less restricted to the domain of the delusion. See McKay, Langdon, and Coltheart (2007).

specified content. It also finesses debates about which kind of attitude a subject has towards some content. The question about Geraldine was whether she believed or disbelieved the content: Adam smokes marijuana. The question raised by Currie about deluded subjects is whether they believe or imagine the content: *My kidnapped wife has been replaced by an imposter*. A consistent dispositionalist should say: We can specify the dispositional set of such patients, being careful not to overlook dispositions that stereotypically belong with imagining that content rather than with believing it. And then we let the question 'Does he believe it or imagine it?' be settled by the practical demands of the interpretive context. If there are contexts in which ascribing an imagining-attitude would be misleading or otherwise problematic but ascribing a believing-attitude would not be, then the belief-ascription is appropriate.[9] But Bayne and Pacherie wanted more than pragmatic permission to talk about delusions as beliefs.

Securing appropriate status for ascriptions

Schwitzgebel has the resources to take our ascriptive claims seriously, despite the merely pragmatic nature of the decisions he thinks lead us to make them. (I'll make Schwitzgebel's resources explicit and then challenge Bayne and Pacherie's ability to deploy them.) Schwitzgebel can count a belief ascription where someone fully fits the dispositional stereotype for a belief *simply accurate*, because being so disposed constitutes so believing. Ascriptions in cases where non-manifestation is obviously

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[9] Cognitive-behavioral therapy for delusions might be such a context. Bayne and Pacherie take the fact that therapists, construing subjects as believing their delusions, have success in treating them to be a potential empirical argument in favor of the doxastic account. But that begs the question by assuming only beliefs can play the motivational roles investigated in ordinary explanation and (presumably) manipulated by cognitive-behavioral therapy. Some theorists explicitly choose to let states other than belief play belief-typical motivational roles precisely to avoid having to classify as belief a state that e.g. lacks essential connection to evidence. See Gendler (2007) and Velleman (2000).

excused are also simply accurate. The tricky cases are those in which someone deviates from the dispositional stereotype. Ascriptions made despite deviations—and all ascriptions of belief in delusional content will be of this kind—cannot be simply accurate. What other type of appropriateness could they have?

Schwitzgebel does not tackle this question directly, but his view of folk-psychology contains materials for doing so. Folk-psychology is the locus of the stereotypes for specific beliefs. But it is also the locus for rational, pragmatic, moral, and social norms prescribing specific dispositional profiles. The scope of these norms, Schwitzgebel notes, is much broader than norms for procedural rationality. For example, folk-psychology includes a social norm, pertaining to the idea of personal integration, that one not avow a preference for chocolate ice cream and then choose vanilla without offering, or feeling a need to offer, some explanation (262-3).[10]

Folk judgments about which attributions made to profile-deviating subjects will seriously mislead an audience reflect decisions about the relative importance of particular deviations. And folk exert significant pressure on one another not to deviate in important ways. That is a main reason why important deviations are relatively few. So an attribution in the face of dispositional deviance can be all-things-considered-appropriate if it conforms to current folk-psychological judgment about what counts as important deviance. These attributions are appropriate because they conform to folk-psychological standards for attitudes, and the identity of those attitudes is determined by the standards. That is, folk-psychological judgments produce and do not reflect sharp boundaries between beliefs with different contents and between attitudes of different kinds.

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[10] See also McGeer (1996).

So when dispositionalism is combined with the view that folk-psychology effectively describes us because it so effectively prescribes how we are to be, it has no need for an error theory of our ascriptive talk. Since folk-psychology makes a firm distinction between belief and desire, Bayne and Pacherie might argue that dispositionalist permission to ascribe delusory content as belief does amount to a serious defeat for the imagination strategy.

But that argument faces two hurdles. First, a clear distinction between belief and desire is maintained only so long as folk practice makes judgments about the relative importance of particular dispositions to attitude-profiles, and so long as folk continue to act and think in ways that rarely violate folk expectations for person-level dispositional integration. Schwitzgebel himself thinks that at some future date our apparatus for explaining human behavior and cognition will radically change. His dispositional account of belief is meant to hold only up to that date (270-1). So to the extent that Bayne and Pacherie might share—perhaps for naturalistic reasons—ES's pro-eliminativist stance toward folk-psychology, they will need to explain how to fund a dispositional account of belief without appeal to folk categories, stereotypes, standards of explanation, and on-going folk willingness to self-regulate cognition according to those stereotypes.

Second, even in a pre-elimination short-term, everything depends on the extent to which folk-psychology really does recognize delusions as beliefs. There are at least two explanations for why interpreters say a deluded subject (for example) *believes* he is dead. Perhaps the subject's deviations from the dispositional profile for believing one is dead are taken by folk-psychology in general to be either excusable or unimportant. But

perhaps, because of mutual awareness that the subject is brain-injured or actively psychotic, his non-excusable and important deviations from the relevant dispositional profile are not taken as a bar to ascribing certain beliefs to him. Maybe the speaker and audience already suspended their background folk-psychological assumption that this person will be predictable and explainable. Maybe they won't generate expectations for future behavior on the basis of a single ascription. Communicators know they are unlikely to mislead with a single ascription because they know their audience is generally skeptical about the degree to which the deluded subject will fulfill *any* FP expectation. Only by ruling out this last explanation for belief-talk can B and P give the significance they need to that ascriptive choice.

Conclusion

Dispositionalism can't treat folk-psychological ascriptive shortcuts as reports on facts over and above those enumerated in a dispositional profile. But it could let them express interpreters' expectations that the individual to whom an ascription is made is not only subject to folk-psychological norms but has generally good odds of obeying them. The use of 'belief' rather than 'desire' by an interpreter with well-grounded expectations is seriously appropriate.

But no expectation that deluded individuals will generally comply with folk-psychological norms concerning rationality and personal integration is well-grounded. An ascriptive statement made about such an individual could be made without any expectation of norm-compliance, to an audience well-aware of his problematic status. Or it could be made on the basis of ill-grounded expectations of norm-compliance. In either

case, no weight should be put on an interpreter's choice of 'believes' over 'imagines' as ascriptive shorthand. No appropriate expectation for norm-compliance is present to provide it.

ES's dispositionalism can make the distinctions between folk-psychological categories like believing and imagining *matter* only in subjects who are generally capable of living up to most of folk-psychology's normative expectations. No one suffering from delusions is such a subject. Dispositionalism may be viewed as the best way to 'loosen' our account of belief, to ensure that our account of what belief empirically is does not get tangled up in philosophical ideals of what belief most fully ought to be.[11] But if we are to get a loose account of belief, rather than eliminativsm about belief, we need a way to hold on to some distinctions between beliefs and other propositional attitudes. If dispositionalism does that by emphasizing the role of folk-psychology's normative expectations, then it is altering the way ideals figure in the individuation of attitudes, not eliminating such appeals altogether. Dispositionalism about belief can't secure doxasticism about delusions.

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[11] On wanting to loosen, see e.g. Davies and Coltheart (2000). Bell, Halligan, and Ellis (2006) praise Bayne and Pacherie's use of dispositionalism to get a looser account of belief.

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