



DIALOGUES

The falsity criterion in the definition of delusion

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Reflection upon and attention to the clinical literature raise a number of difficulties concerning the DSM's attempt to define delusion. Chief among the contested aspects is what I will call *the falsity criterion*. Should delusion be defined as being false? The answer is usually a resounding *no*. I agree - the fact that the DSM still chooses to include the falsity criterion is an unfortunate oversight. However, what concerns me here is the way that most authors, including Maung (2012) in a recent issue of this journal, argue for this plausibly true conclusion.

Maung (2012, p.34) presents two types of cases to support the conclusion that falsity is not a *necessary* criterion for a belief to be delusional. First, he cites a case evocative of Jaspers' (1913/1963, p.106) discussion of an Othello syndrome patient whose wife, after becoming exasperated by the behavior of her morbidly jealous husband, finds comfort in the arms of a friend. This raises the question whether the patient ceases to be delusional just because his belief is verified by his wife's recent infidelity. Note that nothing has changed in the patient's mind: he still holds that his wife is unfaithful without having any evidential justification for this belief. This case illustrates that it is not the truth-value of the proposition believed that is epistemologically interesting to the characterization of delusions, but the fact that they are held with little or no grounds.

Second, Maung cites a case evocative of

claims made in the context of schizophrenia. He conjures up a scenario wherein a patient claims that an angel wants her to be a messenger and to rescue the world. There are countless concrete clinical cases such as this. A famous example is that of Schreber (1903/2000). The core of Schreber's delusional system was the conviction that he had a mission to redeem the world and to restore mankind to its lost state of bliss. In order for this to happen, divine forces were preparing him for a sexual union with God by changing him into a woman, so that he could give birth to a new race of humanity. What this type of case illustrates is the *unfalsifiability* of many delusions - there is absolutely no way of knowing whether some claims made by delusional patients are true or false, however outlandish they may be. This raises the question of whether determining if God had chosen Schreber as the vessel for a new race was of any consequence to his diagnosis. The fact is that delusions are not diagnosed on the basis of an extensive investigation of the truth of the patient's claims.

What is actually established by the use of these kinds of cases? As I mentioned, Maung uses these cases to support the exclusion of the falsity criterion from a definition of delusion. The implicit argumentative structure being employed by him is something along the following lines:

1. If falsity is a necessary criterion for a belief to be delusional, then all delusions are false.
2. But not all delusions are false (and the truth of some delusions cannot be ascertained).
3. Therefore, falsity is not a necessary criterion for a belief to be delusional.

What I claim is that this conclusion, though plausibly true for independent reasons, is *not* established by the use of examples such as the ones invoked because Maung cannot substantiate the second premise of his argument without *stipu-*

lating what is a delusion. To argue against the necessity of the falsity criterion, Maung incurs in circularity by adhering to a pre-defined conception of delusion. Note, however, that I am not taking issue with Maung's view of what kinds of cases constitute delusion, but with his implicit assumption that one can decide what is and what is not an essential feature of delusion by conjuring up cases that one *presumes* are delusions.

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