

Delusions and Other Irrational Beliefs. BY LISA BORTOLOTTI. (Oxford: OUP, 2010. Pp. xvii + 299. Price £41.99.)

While the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is psychiatry's premier guide to classifying and treating mental disorders, it is also renowned for the history and implications of its errata. Regarding delusions, the DSM partially defines them as 'false beliefs based on incorrect inference about external reality'. But correctness is not a property inferences can bear, strictly speaking; and falsity cannot be a defining property, as some delusions can be

accidentally true (e.g., conspiratorial beliefs that the government is recording one's conversations), while some firmly entrenched inferentially based false beliefs either are not delusions (e.g., beliefs that the sun sets in the west) or are delusions that are unjustifiably excepted from the definition (e.g., a magic man lives in the sky, listens to our thoughts, and occasionally demands filicidal sacrifice). These and other mounting conceptual difficulties have led several philosophers to doubt whether the DSM definition of delusions is viable (e.g., Stephens & Graham (2004).

Bortolotti's *Delusions* takes up this challenge. The book has two overarching projects: first, to defend the doxastic conception of delusions, according to which delusions are beliefs, and secondly, to show why the nature of belief should not be tied too closely to rationality. These two projects are closely related. For instance, irrationality is a signature feature of pathological delusions. So tying the nature of belief to rationality would seemingly imply that pathological delusions are not beliefs. Since any defence of the doxastic conception must reject this implication, it is understandable that she would be keen to show that everyday beliefs are often imperfect (yet non-pathological) instances of rationality.

Her general approach is to specify how delusions violate normative constraints on rationality, and then provide examples of putative beliefs exhibiting those very same violations. Inter alia, chapter 1 articulates the so-called *rationality constraint on belief ascription*, which is the (idealized) norm requiring interpreters to ascribe beliefs only to subjects that manifest rational behaviour. The core of her book is formed by the next three chapters, which are occupied with demonstrating that beliefs, like delusions, often violate three central constraints on rationality.

Chapter 2 evaluates the objection that delusions are not beliefs because beliefs are procedurally rational. The procedural rationality constraint concerns the extent to which beliefs are 'well integrated' or logically cohere with one's other beliefs. To show that both delusions and beliefs violate it, Bortolotti cites cases of arbitrary preference reversals, failures of probabilistic reasoning, and superstitions in normal subjects. Chapter 3 evaluates the objection that delusions are not beliefs because beliefs are epistemically rational, where the epistemic rationality constraint concerns whether beliefs are evidentially supported. While resistance to counterevidence is a characteristic of delusion, she observes that many beliefs are also badly supported, self-serving, and closed to revision. And beliefs about causation and others' intentions are plagued by psychological biases, racial prejudice, and religious superstition; other beliefs exhibit systematic mistakes in reasoning, such as evaluating data in accordance with some favoured theory rather than impartially. Chapter 4 evaluates the objection that delusions are not beliefs because beliefs are agentially rational, where agential constraints regard how beliefs guide action and factor in

reason-giving practices. As in the previous two chapters, she contends that delusions do not satisfy this constraint, but neither do beliefs. Hypocritical beliefs and so-called *aliefs* are cases in point Gendler (2008). Chapter 5 applies lessons from cases of thought insertion to issues of belief formation and ownership; ch. 6 concludes.

Bortolotti's literature review of the many ways in which beliefs violate these idealized norms is highly persuasive, and sounds an important note of caution against overidealized folk psychology. But she seems to suppose that showing how delusions cannot be denied belief status just because they are irrational suffices for a defence of the doxastic conception. Such arguments are plainly invalid, though:

- (1) delusions are irrational;
- (2) many workaday beliefs are irrational;
- (3) so, delusions are beliefs.

So while the two projects of Bortolotti's *Delusions* are closely related, the relationship between them is not entailment, and success in one need not entail success in the other. Hence, her general approach is suspect: to show that arguments based on idealized conceptions of rationality fail to undermine the doxastic conception is not yet to show that the doxastic conception is the correct, or even just best, way to conceive of delusional phenomena.

In clarifying DSM definitions and articulating conceptual missteps, philosophers of psychiatry have major opportunities to help determine how mental disorders should be conceived, and making the most of these opportunities may effect improvements in classification and treatment regimes. So it is not unreasonable to expect a book-length defence of the doxastic conception to articulate an explicit definition of the theoretical term *delusion*. Bortolotti's reluctance to do so is therefore disappointing, and results in the absence of a positive account (which reinforces the point that the doxastic conception has been given only a backhanded defence). She also demurs from the metaphysical project of specifying the nature of belief and the necessary conditions on being a doxastic mental state. Instead, she claims that delusions are 'on a continuum with irrational beliefs, and you are likely to find them towards the "very irrational" end of the line, where the degree of rationality tracks both how much they deviate from norms of rationality for beliefs and how many norms of rationality they deviate from' (p. 260). Of course, by pinning all delusions to this doxastic continuum, she is assuming that all delusions (and indeed, all beliefs) ought to be described in terms of how they satisfy, or fail to satisfy, norms of rationality.

There is compelling evidence suggesting that delusions are a heterogeneous class of phenomena. They present under varying circumstances and affect individuals' lives differently, and they often co-occur with other pathological

symptoms. Even within a single type of delusion, such as Capgras, experiences with the delusion may vary, as when some individuals are largely acquiescent about their spouses having been replaced by a double while others are highly distressed. However, to robustly describe delusions as having a high degree of irrationality, it would help one to explain what constitutes a high degree of irrationality, and in what respect and precisely to what extent which of the rationality constraints is violated. Unfortunately, Bortolotti does not sufficiently address how to quantify over these issues. She does acknowledge the heterogeneity by granting that some delusions are doxastic states while others are not; yet, to accommodate this possibility, the aforementioned continuum is not appealed to. Rather, she suggests that delusions sometimes result *not* from a failure in rationality, but rather from a breakdown in our capacities for ownership and authorship of thoughts. In particular, she thinks that the phenomenon of thought insertion, in which individuals experience thoughts as not having originated from within their own minds, are describable as failures of our capacity for ownership. This move away from irrationality as a marker for delusion suggests that Bortolotti's championed criterion is inessential to the description of delusions. We're again left to wonder what her definition of *delusion* is, such that the doxastic conception is correct.

These problems should not detract from Bortolotti's larger accomplishment, however. Her work is lucid—clearly written, very well organized, and accessible to a broad audience—and much of the book's tarnishing of belief is forcefully argued, and, even if delusions are heterogeneous, she provides a compelling context in which to debate their doxastic status. *Delusions* has great merit, and has really driven the new interdisciplinary research in philosophy of psychiatry. It is a model contribution to this literature for philosophically minded clinicians and clinically minded philosophers, as well as philosophers of mind and naturalistic epistemologists concerned with conditions on belief ascription.

REFERENCES

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Advance Access Publication 26th November 2014 doi: 10.1093/pq/pqu083