

Phenomenology and delusions: Who put the ‘alien’ in alien control?

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Abstract

Although current models of delusion converge in proposing that delusions are based on unusual experiences, they differ in the role that they accord experience in the formation of delusions. On some accounts, the experience comprises the very content of the delusion, whereas on other accounts the delusion is adopted in an attempt to explain an unusual experience. We call these the *endorsement* and *explanationist* models, respectively. We examine the debate between endorsement and explanationist models with respect to the ‘alien control’ delusion. People with delusions of alien control believe that their actions and/or thoughts are being controlled by an external agent. Some accounts of alien control (e.g., Frith, Blakemore, & Wolpert, 2000a) are best thought of in explanationist terms; other accounts (e.g., Jeannerod, 1999) seem more suited to an endorsement approach. We argue that recent cognitive and neurophysiological evidence favours an endorsement model of the delusion of alien control.

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1. Introduction

Current models of delusion converge in proposing that delusional beliefs are based on unusual experiences of various kinds. For example, it is argued that the Capgras delusion (the belief that a known person has been replaced by an impostor) is triggered by an abnormal affective experience in response to seeing a known person; loss of the affective response to a familiar person’s face may lead to the belief that the person has been replaced by an impostor (Ellis & Young, 1990). Similarly, the Cotard delusion (which involves the belief that one is dead or unreal in some way) may stem from a general flattening of affective responses to external stimuli (Ellis & Young, 1990), while the seed of the Frégoli delusion (the belief that one is being followed by known people who are in disguise) may lie in *heightened* affective responses to unfamiliar faces (Davies, Coltheart,

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Langdon, & Breen, 2001). Experience-based proposals have been provided for a number of other delusions (Breen, Caine, Coltheart, Hendy, & Roberts, 2000; Breen, Caine, & Coltheart, 2001; Davies et al., 2001; Davies, Aimola Davies, & Coltheart, 2005; Langdon & Coltheart, 2000; Maher, 1988; Stone & Young, 1997).

But behind this broad agreement lies an important controversy about the precise role that experience plays in the formation of delusions. On some accounts the experience comprises the very content of the delusion, such that the delusional patient simply believes what they experience; the delusional belief encodes the content of the perceptual experience in linguistic form. We will call such accounts *endorsement accounts*, on the grounds that the person believes—that is, doxastically endorses—the content of their perceptual state, or at least something very much like the content of their perceptual state.¹ An endorsement account of the Capgras delusion, for example, would hold that the Capgras patient sees the woman he is looking at (who is his wife) as an imposter (that is, as someone who merely looks like his wife).

Other experience-based accounts of delusion construe the relationship between delusional experience and delusional belief in *explanationist* terms. The patient adopts the delusion in an attempt to explain, or make sense of, an unusual experience. According to the explanationist, the Capgras patient does not perceive his wife as an imposter, rather, he simply fails to have the expected experience of familiarity when looking at his wife. He forms the belief that the woman he is looking at is not his wife in an attempt to explain his lack of affect.²

In this paper, we employ the distinction between endorsement and explanationist models to evaluate accounts of the ‘alien control’ delusion. People with delusions of alien control believe that their actions and/or thoughts are being controlled by an external agent. Some accounts of alien control (e.g., Frith et al., 2000a) are best thought of in explanationist terms; other accounts (e.g., Jeannerod, 1999) seem more suited to an endorsement approach. We argue that recent cognitive and neurophysiological evidence favours an endorsement model of the delusion of alien control.

2. Two experiential routes to delusion

Let us consider the distinction between endorsement and explanationist models in more detail. First, it should be noted that it is possible that a comprehensive account of delusions will contain both endorsement and explanationist elements. Perhaps some delusions should be accounted for in endorsement terms and others in explanationist terms. It is also possible that in some instances patients adopt delusional beliefs in an attempt to explain their unusual experience, but as a result of having adopted the delusional belief their experiences come to inherit the content of the delusion itself. For example, someone might form the Capgras delusion in an attempt to account for their strange experience of lack of affect, but having formed the delusion may come to see their wife as an imposter (see Fleming, 1992).

Experience-based accounts of delusions involve (at least) two components: (i) an explanation of the delusional patient’s *experiential* state; and (ii) an explanation of the delusional patient’s *doxastic* state (his belief). Endorsement and explanationist models face distinct challenges in providing these explanations. Explanationist models appear to have an easier job of (i) than endorsement models: the less one packs into the content of the perceptual experience, the easier it is to explain how the experiential state acquires its content. Very primitive explanationist models, according to which the delusion in question is generated by nothing more than an absence of certain kinds of affect, would seem to have rather little work to do here.

But what explanationist models gain with respect to (i) they lose with respect to (ii). The explanationist holds that delusional beliefs are adopted in an attempt to explain unusual experiences. The problem with this suggestion is that delusional beliefs are typically very poor explanations of the events that they are supposedly intended to explain. More plausible explanations of their strange experiences are available to the patients, some of which might be actively recommended to them by family and medical staff. Furthermore, delusional patients do not appear to hold their delusions in the tentative and provisional manner with which explanations are usually held. Explanationists are well-positioned to account for the content of the patient’s experiential

¹ The “something very much like” clause is intended to handle the worry that while the delusional belief has conceptual content, the perceptual state might have only non-conceptual content.

² For discussions of the possible contents of the abnormal experience in Capgras delusion see Bayne and Pacherie (2004a, 2004b); Pacherie (forthcoming).

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