The Explanatory Burden of a Heterogeneous Account of Delusions

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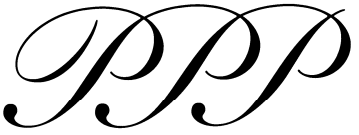

In the target article, Oliver Clark (2026) questions an underlying assumption of the 'doxasticism debate' about delusions. Why should we assume that delusions are homogeneous? That is to say, why should we assume that delusions are an expression of *one* kind of mental state? Perhaps delusions are not *just* beliefs, or imaginings, or acceptances, etc. Perhaps they are instead *sometimes* beliefs, and *sometimes* imaginings, and *sometimes* acceptances, and so on. In Clark's words, he defends a 'simple albeit inadequately considered premise: delusions are categorically heterogeneous, and it is therefore a serious methodological failure of the doxasticism debate to discuss "delusion" as a uniform term' (p. XX).

To suggest that delusions are in some sense heterogeneous is an interesting idea, and it is not without merit. As Clark intends (and as we discuss elsewhere in this article) this approach has the ability to avoid some of the issues that plague homogeneous accounts of delusions. The worry that the authors of the present commentary have, however, is that such an account is not (as Clark suggests) 'simple.' It seems to us that whilst a heterogeneous view has some explanatory benefits, it also brings with it additional, and not insignificant, explanatory burdens. In the following, we say a bit about the advantages of Clark's view, before also outlining the additional explanatory burdens that it brings. To conclude, we suggest that whilst a heterogeneous account of delusions could work, the theoretical costs of such a view might not be worth the trouble—that is, unless there is a way to mitigate those costs.

The Benefits of Heterogeneity

In offering his heterogeneous account of delusions, Clark's main aim is to answer what we can call the *nature question* about delusions (Miyazono, 2024). Answering this question involves describing what delusions are, and deciding whether or not they are beliefs. As Clark recognizes, one of the

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greatest difficulties facing homogeneous accounts of delusions—when it comes to answering the nature question—is that the properties of delusions never perfectly align with any one particular mental state. This we might call the *property problem* for homogeneous accounts. Clark thus proposes his heterogenous theory of delusions in an attempt to answer the nature question, whilst avoiding the property problem. And it is indeed in this respect that Clark's account offers up some explanatory benefits. To illustrate, we restrict our discussion to doxastic and imagination models of delusions—although the same general points can extend to all homogeneous accounts.

Doxasticism is the view that delusions are beliefs (e.g., Bortolotti, 2009). As Clark (p. XX) notes, this view sits well with our folk psychological notion of delusions. Both first-person and third-person attributions of delusions typically presuppose delusions to be a kind of belief. Nevertheless, doxasticism encounters the property problem: delusions often do not share (all of) the same epistemic and functional properties of beliefs. Epistemically, they do not respond to evidence in the same way as beliefs; and functionally, they do not guide behaviors and affective responses in the same way as beliefs (among other things). This fact—that the properties of delusions do not align perfectly well with beliefs—has led some to propose alternative views, such as the imagination model of delusions.

The imagination model holds that delusions are in fact imaginings that an agent comes to mistake for beliefs (e.g., Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002). The advantage of this view is that it avoids the property problem—as applied to doxasticism—because we have no reason to suppose that imaginings will manifest doxastic properties. Much like doxasticism, however, the imagination model comes with its own property problem. Delusions do not act entirely like beliefs, but they do not act entirely like imaginings either. Patients with delusions do act to some extent as though their delusions are real (e.g., a person with persecutory delusion who believes that his living room is wiretapped might move to another apartment); and, as Clark reports, delusions are 'asserted by the individual in a form that resembles beliefs' (p. XX). Neither of these things are true of ordinary imaginings.

It is this kind of property problem that (arguably) applies to all accounts of delusions, whether delusions are interpreted as beliefs, imaginings, acceptances, utterances, perceptual inferences, or whatever. Each account can successfully accommodate some of the properties of delusions; but it is difficult to see how any account can perfectly accommodate all of the properties of delusions (except possibly for in-between accounts; e.g., see Egan, 2009).

It is here that Clark's heterogeneous model is at its best. With respect to the property problem, Clark's account mitigates the concern that delusions do not fully resemble any one particular mental state. When a delusion looks more like a belief, we can say it is a belief; when it looks more like an imagining, we can say it is an imagining, etc. Clark is correct to acknowledge that adopting this view means 'relinquishing much of the standard reasoning that informs the doxasticism debate and psychiatry more broadly' (p. XX). Nevertheless, this upheaval might be justified when it comes to avoiding the property problem.

The Burdens of Heterogeneity

There is, however, another important question that all theories of delusions must answer. Whichever way we look at delusions—whatever kind of state we take them to be—it is clear that something has *gone wrong* when a subject suffers from delusions. If delusions are beliefs, then they are (in some sense) pathological beliefs; if delusions are imaginings, then they are (in some sense) pathological imaginings; and so on. Another great challenge of any theory of delusions is thus in explaining what has gone wrong with delusions *relative to* the mental state that manifests them. This we can call the *pathology question* (Miyazono, 2024).

As mentioned, Clark is interested in answering the nature question. He is not concerned with the pathology question. However, these questions are connect in an important way—especially when it comes Clark's position. In particular, they are connected in such a way that Clark's heterogeneous answer to the nature question implies a disunified and complicated answer to the pathology question (if such an answer is possible at all).

In general, one's answer to the pathology question crucially depends on one's answer to the nature question. Here is an example. One might think that part of the reason why delusions are pathological is because of their extreme insensitivity to counter evidence (or, some underlying cognitive malfunctions that are responsible for it). This view makes sense only if delusions are indeed beliefs and are thus *supposed to* be sensitive to counter evidence in the way other beliefs are. After all, if delusions are imaginings rather than beliefs, there is nothing pathological about their insensitivity to evidence (for the same reason that, for example, there is nothing pathological about imaginative daydreaming that is extremely insensitive to counter evidence). For this reason, those who think that delusions are imaginings rather than beliefs need to appeal to some other features of delusions (e.g., a metacognitive failure; Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002) in accounting for the pathology of delusions.

It is thus in this way that Clark's heterogeneous account of delusions multiplies its own explanatory burden (regarding the pathology question). It must explain why delusions are pathological in precisely as many ways as there are states that the account holds can manifest as delusions. To draw a contrast, homogeneous views only need to explain why one mental state goes wrong. For instance, that delusions are malfunctioning beliefs (Miyazono, 2018). But heterogeneous accounts need to explain why multiple states go wrong. That is to say, it is one thing to allow that delusions can be beliefs, imaginings, acceptances, and so on, but it is quite another to explain why beliefs, imaginings, acceptances, and so on, can all turn pathological. Homogeneous theories need only one explanation; heterogeneous accounts need many.

Furthermore, Clark's position in particular exacerbates this problem, insofar as he also argues for what he calls the 'internal heterogeneity of delusions' (p. XX). Clark does not only hold that delusions can be expressed by different mental states, but that individual delusions can change their mode of expression over time. The suggestion is that a delusion that was once one state (e.g., a belief) can transition, at another time, into a different state (e.g., an imagining). As Clark (p. XX) writes, this enables his account to explain the apparent fact that individual delusions appear to change their properties over time (another instantiation of the property problem); however, it raises further questions in relation to the pathology problem. Why, say, would a pathological belief turn into a pathological imagining—or into any other pathological state? Hence, even if we had an account of delusions as pathological beliefs *and* pathological imaginings *and* whatever other pathological state, we would still need a further account of why the one can transition into the other.

To summarize, we are not suggesting that these explanatory burdens cannot be met. They are, however, no small matter. Given that even homogeneous accounts of the pathological nature of delusions are controversial, heterogeneous accounts are (it seems to us) going to be an order of magnitude more controversial. This is a significant cost to pay, especially if the only benefit of a heterogenous account is to avoid the property problem.

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