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Inferentialism and Social Delusion

Abstract

This work sets out to present how the notion of delusion may be understood (and extended) within the semantic framework of Robert Brandom's inferentialism. The mechanisms of reliability and community-oriented proprieties, among others, provide inferentialists with effective tools for understanding commitments (and so beliefs) in communities. These tools may be used to describe and assess both commitments that we might consider sound and commitments that we might consider delusional, both in terms of how they arise and in terms of how they may be reinforced. Delusions are accordingly rendered in perspectival and normative terms, which is elaborated through a number of examples. The picture of how a delusional commitment may be understood, how it may be reinforced, and its character as community internal or external provide some interesting perspectives on delusions in shared social contexts, as well as how they may originate intractable conflicts and disconnects between sub-groups within a broader linguistic community.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to sketch how delusions may be understood within the inferentialist framework developed by Robert Brandom (1994, 2001; Weiss and Wanderer 2010). Though seemingly distant to the matter of delusion, the normative-deontic nature of inferentialism together with its unique characterization of beliefs and contents provides for a dynamic construal of delusions along with an intuitive schematic of their theoretical structure from a normative rather than clinical perspective. While the social focus of inferentialism precludes it from accounting for the sources and causes of delusions, that same focus allows it to account for and build upon their interpersonal aspects, which can in turn be used to better understand the perspectives of individuals, whether deluded or not, and extended to account for socially shared delusions and the communities that sustain them. Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to extend our theoretical understanding of delusions not in the clinical terms of the causes of delusions in the context of a single individual in abstraction, but in terms of our assessments of delusions and the normative context that surrounds them. As such, this is an exercise at the intersection of social, psychological, and linguistic fields, bringing forward a unique application of the inferentialist framework in order to analyze a traditionally psychological concept from a social perspective, not unlike semantic analyses in the considerable literature on phenomena like lying (see, e.g., Jary 2018; Stokke 2016; Sorensen 1972).

Section one of the text establishes the general picture of delusion we will be working with, beginning with a characterization taken from clinical psychology as a point of departure. Section two describes and develops Brandom's inferentialism and his notion of deontic scorekeeping together with his rough account of knowledge, which we will be adapting for our purposes. It concludes with two example cases demonstrating how the inferentialist framework can be applied to standard interactions and delusions, respectively. Section three consists of an

extension of that framework using a more robust example, where we can see how delusional commitments held by individuals may spread to others and support communities based upon shared perspectives.

Section One - Delusions

The phenomenon of delusion is notoriously difficult to characterize – whether it is understood in psychological, behavioral, or neural-cognitive terms (for an overview, see Garety and Freeman 2000; McKay, Langdon, and Coltheart 2007). As Anthony David notes, "despite the façade created by psychiatric textbooks, there is no acceptable (rather than accepted) definition of a delusion" (1999, 16; see also Coltheart 2007) – which is followed by a brief sketch of the issue in his "On the Impossibility of Defining Delusions." Producing a definition in natural contexts like this is already inherently difficult, and that difficulty is compounded in this case by the *definiens* corresponding to a phenomenon that seems to be exceptionally broad – ranging from run of the mill beliefs concerning cheating spouses to spectacular delusions involving multiple personalities (see Breen at al. 2000) and anomalous appendages (see Coltheart 2007).

Rather than pursuing an exhaustive definition to build upon, we can use a naïve one to give us a general bearing, from which we can proceed to producing our own characterization of delusion within the theoretical framework of inferentialism. The simple definition of delusion found in the DSM-5 (2013) will suffice:

> Delusion. A false belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly sustained despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary. The belief is not one ordinarily accepted by other members of the person's culture or subculture (e.g., it is not an article of religious faith). When a false belief involves a value judgment, it is regarded as a delusion only when the judgment is so extreme as to defy credibility.

Within this definition, we will be focusing on (1) belief and truth, (2) the resilience of belief in the face of strong evidence, and (3) the social aspect of assessments. They cover the major points. Belief and truth are foundational for a discussion of delusion. The insensitivity of the beliefs in question to new information or change in general is perhaps the defining feature of delusion. And the social aspect is essential to just about any form of interpersonal assessment, which is doubly true in this case given that our definition includes a stipulation comparing the belief in question to the individual's culture.

Inferentialism provides us with an interesting vantage point over all three. The position itself is many-sided and nuanced. It fixes on inferences and maintains its own analog of belief. That in turn is paired with a view of truth drawn from the pragmatic tradition, together with a category analogous to justification that roughly aligns with the proof or evidence called for above. All of which rests upon varying personal perspectives, norms, and practices – which is to say that it rests upon essentially social mechanisms. While certainly well suited to addressing delusions as described above, the inferential, pragmatic, and social nature of the position will limit our analysis of delusions to cases where genuine inference and social interactions are

possible, that is, to cases where the individual in question is still broadly coherent and maintains some semblance of consistency. While the account developed here can be readily extended to even the most severe cases, they will not be considered in any detail as they do not prove to be particularly relevant.

Section Two - Inferentialism

The normative inferentialist program at issue here is complex and of considerable theoretical depth, in light of which our task here is to produce an appropriately simple sketch of it and to reconstruct the features relevant to our purposes.[1] Inferentialism in a broad semantic sense relates to foundational theories of meaning that present a holistic understanding of how language works, according to which the meaning of a given expression is constituted or determined by the inferences it supports.[2] As such, knowing what "cat" means consists in also knowing that cats are animals, which is in turn expressed in the inference that moves us from the claim that something is a cat to the claim that it is an animal. The inferentialism developed by Brandom is unique in its appeal to normativity and its distinctly pragmatic character. One of the core ideas shaping his inferentialism is that we are tied together through our shared discursive practices. These practices come about in the language games we play with one another in the process of interacting and communicating, with these practices ultimately conferring the contents and proprieties we think and operate with. Even simple interactions engage this sense of practices and games, in that moves are made, recognized, and responded to in the course of our everyday lives. The place of inferences in all of this is, among other things, to make these contents and proprieties explicit, to articulate the moves and rules of the games that we play and the connections that we make.

In developing the relevant aspects of his system, we can turn specifically to the fundamental *game of giving and asking for reasons*, taken from Sellars (1956), that Brandom sees as central to all of our discursive practices (Brandom 1994, 89). It helps illustrate the way we make moves, what it is that our inferences make explicit, and indeed the sense in which games tie us together. At its simplest, the game of giving and asking for reasons is the generalization of our tendency to ask others for reasons with respect to the things they do and say, and our sense of obligation to provide those reasons when we are asked for them or even simply our tendency to offer reasons for the things we do and say on our own accord, with the consequences of these exchanges drawing us together in complex systems of deferrals, inquiries, expectations, and the like. The moves of this particular game bring us to the linguistic basis of the position and set us on our way in terms of introducing the facets of the position relevant to us here: the paradigmatic moves are assertions. As Brandom puts it, "The practice of giving and asking for reasons must be conceived as including assertion because, although there are other kinds of performances besides assertings that can stand in need of reasons … to offer a reason is always to make an assertion" (1994, 158). Assertions are traditionally

[1] For a comprehensive introduction to the position, see Brandom (2001).
[2] For an overview of foundational or metasemantics, see Burgess and Sherman (2014). For an overview of semantic holism, see Dresner (2012; cf. Fodor and Lepore 1992).

associated with beliefs as well as truth and a variety of other semantic categories. Brandom, however, pairs them with two deontic statuses, namely commitment and entitlement:

> The fundamental normative concept required is the notion of *commitment.* Being committed is a normative status – more specifically a *deontic* status … that can do much of the explanatory theoretical work that is normally assigned to the notion of intentional state. But deontic statuses come in two flavors. Coordinate with the notion of *commitment* is that of *entitlement.* Doing what one is committed to do is appropriate in one sense, while doing what one is entitled to do is appropriate in another. (1994, 159)

The two sorts of propriety represented by commitment and entitlement are roughly that of obligation and permission, respectively.[3] What you are committed to is what you must accept responsibility for – e.g., if you make a promise, you are going to be held responsible for doing whatever it is that you promised to do. What you are entitled to is what you may do if you so wish – e.g., to frown at someone who did not keep their promise. The two statuses are taken to be primitive and intended to be understood intuitively, and used in tandem to produce further features of the framework, like a notion of material incompatibility.

To really actuate them, we need to introduce some of the social aspects of inferentialism. For that, we need to understand deontic *attitudes*, which communicate deontic statuses as perceived by individuals. They too come in two forms – *acknowledging* and *attributing*, and they are every bit as important as, and in fact even more fundamental than, the statuses they concern (Brandom 1994, 626; cf. Rosen 1997). Though a slight simplification, we can think of acknowledging as an attitude concerning our own statuses and attributing as an attitude concerning the statuses of others. The commitments and entitlements I acknowledge are the ones I take myself to have, and those I attribute to others are the ones I take them to have. We can see how they relate to deontic statuses following a simple example, better illustrating the statuses themselves along the way:

> Deontic statuses of the sort to be considered here are creatures of practical attitudes. There were no commitments before people started treating each other as committed; they are not part of the natural furniture of the world. Rather they are social statuses, instituted by individuals attributing such statuses to each other, recognizing or acknowledging those statuses. Considered purely as a natural occurrence, the signing of a contract is just the motion of a hand and the deposition of ink on paper. It is the undertaking of a commitment only because of the significance that performance is taken to have by those who attribute or acknowledge such a commitment, by those who take or treat that performance as committing the signatories to further performances of various kinds. Similarly for entitlements. A license, such as a ticket, entitles one to do something. Apart from practices of treating people as entitled or not, though, there is just what is actually done. The natural world we consider when bracketing the influence of such social practices contains no distinction between performances one was entitled to and those one was not. (Brandom 1994, 161)

Apart from effectively anchoring statuses in a general sense, these attitudes allow us to project the contents of sentences in particular cases, shaping what we think people mean by their assertions relative to the statuses we acknowledge ourselves and the statuses we attribute to

[3] Granted, the traditional distinction has its differences (Brandom 1994, 159).

them. And of course, those others do the same for us – what we attribute to them ought to be what they acknowledge for themselves, and what they attribute to us ought to be what we actually acknowledge. What I acknowledge myself and what I attribute to you will affect how I understand you, and the same is true from your perspective. The discursive community is built out of just these sorts of attitudes and the perspectives they communicate.

The complicated state of affairs this all produces may be thought of more easily on the scorekeeping metaphor that Brandom appropriates from Lewis (1972; Brandom 1994, 180). In the games we play, we can think of ourselves as keeping track of statuses and attitudes on scorecards – one that we keep for ourselves and one we keep for every interlocutor we deal with (and they do the same). Whenever I make an assertion, I publicly acknowledge a commitment and let everyone know that it is on my scorecard. Others, hearing it, attribute it to me and mark that commitment on the scorecards they are keeping for me. They might also acknowledge my commitment themselves, adding it to their own scorecards they keep for themselves. The scorecards kept by any given individual represent their discursive perspective, accounting for how they see themselves and how they see others in deontic terms. The complex network of commitments and entitlements obtaining within a given community is properly understood through these sets of scorecards kept by individuals within that community.

Now in order to relate this more directly to the sketch of delusions we started with, we can look to how Brandom characterizes knowledge – or rather, how he recasts the traditional justified true belief account of knowledge in the inferential idiom. Each element of the traditional account is relevant to our account of delusions, and so bridging between the two will help us better understand those points within the inferentialist framework. We will have to go through it in a different order, however, going from belief, to justification, to truth.[4]

Commitment effectively plays the role of belief. An attributed commitment is what we take someone else to believe. An acknowledged commitment is what we ourselves believe. Asserting something is an explicit acknowledgement of the voiced commitment, which in turn prompts others to attribute it to the speaker; in other words, asserting something communicates that you believe it, which in turn prompts others to take you as believing it too. Justification comes in when those commitments are questioned or challenged. It corresponds to entitlement in any number of forms and again pairs with the attitudes of acknowledging and attributing, though less significantly here. For our purposes, a simple overview of entitlement through noninferential reports, inferences, and deferrals will be sufficient (Brandom 1994, 174, 213). Noninferential reports are reliable perceptual claims – seeing something, hearing something, etc. That in itself is a form of entitlement. On the basis of seeing something, we can take inferential relations to entitle us to further commitments; for instance, if we see that it is raining, we can infer that the streets are wet. Our entitlement to the streets being wet is a matter of our being entitled to the report initiating it (seeing that it is raining) and the goodness of the inference (in this case, it being materially good). Deferrals are an interpersonal form of entitlement. Say that Lotta tells me it is raining and I believe her. I might step into the other

[4] Again, the below is something of a simplification, as Brandom's approach cannot be as easily equated with the traditional epistemic terminology as presented; it is done rather as a convenience than as a serious identification of the two with one another.

room and mention that it is raining. If someone presses me about it, I can simply tell them that that is what Lotta told me. I effectively direct further inquiries to Lotta and hold onto my commitment until further notice. These entitlements may interact with one another, forming chains of deferrals, inferences, and noninferential reports. Entitlements in this context work a lot like one might think a basic picture of justification might. Scorekeepers accordingly attribute and acknowledge commitments and can further attribute and acknowledge entitlement to those commitments – in the traditional idiom, that is to say that they attribute and acknowledge beliefs and can further judge those beliefs to be justified.

The final component is truth, and there is quite a twist here. Setting aside Brandom's anaphoric approach, he is a pragmatist that takes a phenomenalist stance, such that truth is essentially understood in terms of *taking* something to be true (cf. 1994, 285-293).[5] Taking something to be true is an attitude – one that ensures that we will act accordingly, folding whatever it is that we are taking to be true into our inferential apparatus, into how we approach the world. In the broader deontic context, taking a commitment to be true is specifically *acknowledging* it over and above merely *attributing* it. If I assert something about it raining, I'm presumably acknowledging that commitment and so taking it to be true. If a scorekeeper hears my assertion, they will attribute the corresponding commitment to me. Assuming they generally trust me with reports like that, they will also attribute my entitlement to it. The scorekeeper can then acknowledge the commitment themselves – taking it on as something they themselves believe and so take to be true. That clearly runs well wide of the traditional sense of truth intended in the justified true belief account of knowledge – it is not thought of as a property (where something *is* true) but rather the product of an attitude. It is a weak, deflationary picture of truth, and I'm just going to leave it at that (see 1994, 325). We will not be developing it any further for our purposes, though it is worth noting that the full story does indirectly step past personal perspectives and that Brandom does make a considerable effort to introduce a weak form of objectivity that pairs with his approach and compensates for some of the *prima facie* issues that come to mind (1994, ch. 8).

That gives us the general characterization of knowledge Brandom puts together. If a scorekeeper *attributes* a commitment, *attributes* entitlement to that commitment, and *acknowledges* that commitment themselves, they take the person to know whatever it is that they are asserting (1994, 297; 2001, 168). We are not really interested in the inferentialist account of knowledge, but we can use the pieces of that account to produce an inferentialist conceptualization of delusion. Putting it schematically, an individual is considered to harbor a delusion from the perspective of an assessor if they (a) maintain a commitment with respect to which the assessor is unwilling to attribute entitlement and (b) which proves insensitive to otherwise compelling contradictory evidence when ably confronted with it – which is roughly congruent with our initial clinical definition involving (1) belief and truth, (2) resilience in the face of evidence, and (3) the social aspect of assessment.

In order to better illustrate this, we can use two example cases, in both of which we will play the role of an observing scorekeeper. The first is a standard case, where we can see how

[5] The anaphoric component of his view of truth is significant in its own right, and his discussion of truth goes well beyond what is briefly sketched here, see Brandom (1994, ch. 5).

an interaction ought to play out and how we can withhold acknowledgement or challenge a commitment on the basis of contradictory evidence. The second is a delusional case, where we can see the sense in which delusions relate to purported entitlement and an insensitivity to contradictory evidence, distinguishing itself from the standard case on both counts.

Sam and the Standard Case

Suppose our friend Sam tells us that his wife is being unfaithful. We attribute the commitment to him, and if we are inclined to take him as reliable when it comes to serious matters like that, we might just take his word for it and acknowledge the commitment ourselves. But assume that we are skeptical by nature. We can press him for his entitlement – perhaps asking him what makes him think that is the case. Suppose he produces a supporting claim in the form of a noninferential report – he tells us that he saw her kissing someone the other day at the park.

We can sketch Sam's situation as involving the Surface Commitment (SC) that his wife is being unfaithful and the Entitling Commitment (EC) that he saw her kissing someone at the park. The entitlement to SC is the inference from EC. The entitlement to EC is Sam's reliability with respect to noninferential reports of that sort (i.e., recognizing his wife, etc.) (see fig. 1):

[Insert figure 1 here]

Figure 1. Surface commitment and Entitling commitment with connectors.

Presented with this state of affairs, we attribute both of the commitments to Sam in the sense that we take him to believe the things he is saying. We also ought to attribute entitlement to SC, given that seeing your spouse kissing someone else in the park is indeed generally grounds for inferring to their being unfaithful. It is a good material inference, and so it is entitling. Whether we attribute entitlement to EC depends upon whether we take Sam to be reliable where visual reports are concerned and whether we take there to have been any mitigating circumstances affecting this particular report.

There are three possible approaches here from our scorekeeping perspective – one where we accept the claim and acknowledge it ourselves, one where we refrain from acknowledging SC due to doubts concerning Sam's entitlement to EC, and one where we reject SC due to our rejecting EC altogether because we have conflicting commitments and entitlements – e.g., we know something that Sam does not. We can go through each of them in turn.

Accept: If we trust Sam and the entitlement to EC seems to hold up, then we ought to acknowledge EC ourselves. If we acknowledge it, we ought to acknowledge SC too – coming to share the same commitments that Sam holds. In effect, we take them both to be true.

Refrain: If we find Sam's entitlement to SC material but we are skeptical about Sam's entitlement to EC, we can simply refrain from acknowledging EC ourselves. We might wonder whether Sam had his glasses with him or something to that effect, which is just another way of saying that we do not take him to be particularly reliable with claims like EC. So while we are prepared to attribute to him the belief that he saw his wife kissing someone else, we are not prepared to acknowledge that ourselves, which is to say that we are not prepared to say that it is true that he saw his wife kissing someone else. If we are not prepared to acknowledge EC, then we are obviously not prepared to acknowledge SC either insofar as EC is the basis for the inference to SC. And so we are not prepared to say that it is true that his wife is not being faithful either.

While we do not have a clear reason to reject EC, we do not necessarily have a good reason to accept it either, since we have doubts concerning Sam's reliability. That is basically where the issue ends. The inference to SC from EC is good, it is just that we are not sure that EC actually obtains.

Reject: But now suppose that we are quite certain that Sam is wrong about his wife. Say we spent the whole other day with her at home planning a surprise birthday party for Sam. So as far as we are concerned, he could not have seen her at the park, and so he should not believe she is being unfaithful. Even if we take Sam to be quite reliable with his noninferential reports, that does not mean that he is infallible (not to mention that we can bring our own inferential reports to the table). In this case, we think he must have just gotten something wrong.

Things get a bit more complicated here. We can attribute commitment and entitlement to both SC and EC – we can take Sam to be reliable with respect to EC and so entitled to it and accordingly entitled to SC. The issue is that we are committed to having spent the whole day at home with his wife, which is incompatible with his having seen her at the park. They are mutually exclusive, so we cannot acknowledge both while remaining consistent, even though everything with Sam's claim is technically in order.

With that in mind, we ought to confront Sam's commitment – we can challenge him by asserting that he could not have seen her kissing anyone at the park, because we spent the whole day with her, presenting our own commitment in doing so. Assuming Sam trusts us, and given that interacting with someone over the course of an entire day is a bit more evidence than a single sighting at a park, he ought to give up EC and so give up SC along with it – perhaps concluding that he must have just mistaken someone for his wife.

David and the Delusional Case

Now suppose that we have another friend, David, who tells us his spouse is being unfaithful. And say that he presents us with a bizarre entitling commitment; suppose he tells us that he is convinced his wife is being unfaithful because he has had a strange feeling about her over the past few days. This conforms to the same scheme as Sam's case above: an SC, an EC, and purported entitlements to each of them. While there is again a set of different approaches we can take to David's claim, only one is reasonable in this case.

While we ought to attribute both commitments to him, in the sense that we take him to believe what he has asserted, we certainly should not say that he is entitled to SC – having a vague feeling about your spouse is not grounds for inferring to their infidelity. We can suspect something like that on the basis of a vague feeling, but we cannot seriously conclude that it is the case. The inference is just not good. Notice that we are not doubting whether EC obtains in this case. Rather, whether or not EC obtains, whether or not David really has a strange feeling about his wife, the inference to SC simply does not go through; it could not entitle him to that commitment either way. Putting it schematically, while we attribute SC, EC, and even entitlement to EC, we decline to attribute him entitlement to SC.[6]

Faulty inferences like this are not too hard to imagine in completely normal people. Our imagination can get away from us and we might let ourselves slip into this kind of thought. There is not anything particularly interesting about them as long as we can be snapped out of them. This kind of commitment can be characterized as delusional if and only if it proves to be resistant to revision on the basis of reflection or further evidence that we as assessors and scorekeepers take to be reasonable. Suppose we ably confront David with some good reasons to do just that; say we build a case concerning the character of his wife, tell him that in a recent conversation she had mentioned that she was excited to plan their anniversary, remind him that he has no other remotely admissible reason for concern, etc. And suppose further that David trusts us too, and even acknowledges everything we are saying. If David continues to hold SC in the face of all of that, solely on the vague feeling he has, the commitment qualifies as delusional.

It is the kind of commitment that we attribute but do not acknowledge, so one that we take David to believe but that we do not consider true, one that is resistant to strong evidence (particularly if we take David to really acknowledge our points), and that is essentially relativized to a social perspective given that it is anchored in the necessarily social framework of inferentialism. And so it lines up with the definition of delusion we started with. Much like truth and a number of other major facets of Brandom's position, a commitment is rendered delusional relative to the attitudes we take towards it, which means that delusions are not situated in a bottom-up explanatory order. Inferentialism does not purport to tell us where the delusional commitment came from or why David seems incapable of revising his commitment. The upshot is that it can generalize over, and is broadly compatible with, otherwise distinct accounts in that regard, ranging from delusions that are hypothesized to be caused by neural-cognitive deficits to motivational theories, or any variety of such positions (see, e.g., Garety and Freeman 2000; McKay, Langdon, and Coltheart 2007).

[6] It should be stressed that we are here assuming that withholding entitlement to a commitment is not a common occurrence; in this example we are presented with a rather unusual and bold non-sequitur. Standard disagreements over taste or even sustained disagreements where the individuals at odds with one another advance incompatible claims may and often should still take one another to be entitled to their respective commitments, as one might imagine to be the case in disagreements between advocates of different theories of meaning or different approaches to steel manufacturing. More could be said here on the topic of standard disagreements, but it goes well beyond the scope of this work to do so. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for raising this matter, as it warrants further discussion.

Abstracting away from the specifics of each of these two cases, they can be put into a pair of simplified schematics with respect to surface commitments. From our perspective as assessors, each are framed as follows:

> *Standard* – We attribute commitment; *attribute entitlement* (and either acknowledge commitment or refrain from acknowledging the commitment for whatever reasons).
>
> *Delusion* – We attribute commitment; *we do not attribute entitlement* (and acknowledgement is a nonissue).

The key matter being whether (a) we take someone to be entitled to their commitment and whether (b) the individual in question is open to revising their commitment in the face of what we take to be clear and ably presented evidence to the contrary, where the former question of entitlement represents a fundamental modality of the inferentialist framework that has seen some work already (see, e.g., Rouse 2015; Kukla and Lance 2009) but which still invites further investigation. Given the fundamental place of entitlements to our interactions with one another, these schematics are constantly at issue even if we almost always simply attribute entitlement. This basic observation and the ways it can be developed further in the complicated context of different individual perspectives points to complications that allow us to recognize how delusional commitments may spread and become grounded in and even reinforced by communities.

As a final note here, for the sake of simplicity, we can assume that all of the commitments above and those we will be considering going forward are sincere; that is, for our purposes, whoever presents a given commitment is genuine in their conviction.[7] And in light of that, we can accordingly assume that David is not being stubborn or malicious in his recalcitrance, he just cannot see the need to revise SC or is otherwise incapable of doing so. While we may not be able to establish the causal basis for his commitment on inferential grounds, there is no specific need to provide one, particularly given the compatibility of this approach with any number of the clinical accounts noted above, which are equipped to do just that.

Section Three - Perspectives and Delusional Communities

For all the intricacy we can develop using the distinctions above, they all go through the same way if someone accepts them. Acknowledging Sam's initial commitment is not any different than acknowledging David's delusion. That is, if we are naïve enough or uninterested enough or if we encountered their claims in different circumstances, we could very well accept any one of their assertions as true. It is just that kind of situation that will be of interest to us, but to see how it can develop into a community, we need to have a more compelling example than our two friends, Sam and David.

We need to imagine something that can go a bit further. Suppose there is an individual named Ron who makes a series of claims concerning vague ideas involving energy, past lives,

[7] The sketch above could be extended easily enough to also account for insincerity and lying by modulating the initial step of whether we attribute a commitment to the speaker or not, drawing a neat distinction between lying and delusion, but it has not been included here due to concerns of space.

hidden traumas, and aliens. He writes a book about them that purports to be scientific, and even develops some quirky means for measuring his ideas of human energies and traumas. The scientific community flatly rejects his work, and what little is said about it is very negative, likening it to nonsense. Ron, discouraged, decides that his ideas are better understood as a religion and founds a church built upon his original convictions. He begins claiming to having special access to the energies he talks about, and appeals to that access as entitling him to the claims he makes about the doctrine and practices of the new church. He shortly thereafter starts promising would-be followers inner peace and extra-terrestrial salvation.

Suppose there are two further individuals that will play the role of scorekeepers relative to Ron: Alice and Ben. For the sake of simplicity, we can assume that Alice is well-educated, has a good grasp of logic and critical thinking, and is appropriately skeptical with respect to wild claims. Ben received a basic education, has a rather average grasp of logic and critical thinking, and is more intrigued by than suspicious of wild claims. Alice meets Ron and finds what he has to say ridiculous. She recognizes the fallacious basis of Ron's commitments – say he clearly fails to understand basic forms like *modus tollens*. That is strong evidence suggesting that whatever Ron is inferring to is not right. She tries to explain the issue, and by any reasonable standard does so well, demonstrating some basic principles for him; however, he refuses to revise his commitments. She accordingly attributes the commitments he makes to him but withholds attributing his entitlement to them, and so she takes him to be delusional.

Ben, however, encounters Ron and finds what he has to say compelling and interesting. Ron may very well make a good impression from time to time, and perhaps Ben is a bit too modest or shy to challenge the vaguely scientific claims Ron makes. At some point, Ben might start actually acknowledging some of Ron's commitments rather than just attributing them. Now imagine that Alice and Ben are actually acquainted and they strike up a conversation about Ron. As usual, Alice will be keeping a card for Ben (and vice versa). As Ben begins repeating some of Ron's claims, Alice will invariably press him for his entitlement. When Ben defers to Ron (who is not there), Alice may take the opportunity to explain why she does not take Ron to be adequate for entitling deferrals. She can explain what she tried to explain to Ron. Assuming Ben still has his wits about him, he ought to give up his appeals to Ron and give up his acknowledgments along with them. Alice will take Ben to be normal, and continue to consider Ron deluded.

But what if Alice never finds an opportunity to talk to Ben? And imagine further that Ben, being so intrigued by Ron's ideas, decides to read his book, and he starts visiting Ron's church services and engaging with others that are also interested in Ron's ideas. While he may have acknowledged only some of Ron's claims to begin with, we can wager that he acknowledges just about all of them now. As Ben becomes more involved in Ron's new church, Ron continues to produce further commitments relating to the church's doctrine. Suppose that his newest claim is that his privileged perspective extends beyond matters strictly concerned with the church – from now on, what he says must be right with respect to just about everything. And what is more, anyone trying to undercut him must not be trusted, given, after all, that he really does have the privileged perspective he purports to have. Ben has acknowledged practically all of the church doctrine to this point, so there is no reason for him not to

acknowledge this most recent extension either. If Alice runs into Ben at this point and happens to notice Ben sounds a lot like that guy Ron she met some time ago, she might inquire into Ben's commitments, asking for his entitlements. Ben would of course defer to Ron. Only this time, he will not be so prepared to give up his appeals to him or his acknowledgments of those commitments.

Given that Alice already took Ron's commitments to be delusional, from her perspective, Ben inherited delusional commitments when he acknowledged them and claimed entitlement in the form of a deferral. That is not particularly unusual or problematic on its own. It becomes unusual and problematic when Ben refuses to give them up. Alice can approach Ben the same way she approached Ron and try to explain to him why the principles of the church cannot be right, but Ben will no longer find Alice's explanations material. It is a shift in perspective that Alice cannot reasonably get around, and so even though her explanations are not just material but even decisive from her perspective, they simply are not from his. As far as Alice is able to tell, Ben is deluded.

And it goes without saying that Ben might not be alone. There could be other people like Ben who find themselves deferring to Ron in the same way. Claire, Dan, Edgar and others may have all joined the church and started following its practices – one of which is precisely to defer to Ron on all sorts of matters. Now from Claire's perspective, a fellow churchgoer, Ben certainly is not deluded. If Ben makes some assertions and, upon being pressed for entitlement by Claire, Ben defers to Ron, Claire will not find anything wrong with that. And if she checks with Ron and it turns out to be the case that he said whatever Ben is claiming to have heard from him, all the better. Claire will acknowledge it too. Exchanges between Ron, Claire, and Ben will always go through as if they were standard. They may even go so far as to reinforce each other's engagement in the community precisely because there will be other members who take that entitlement as good and so are cooperative relative to one another in their doings – say in preparing services, participating in rituals, etc. The community may even introduce sanctions for falling out of line or questioning practices. They may in this way form an economy of these specific commitments. Obviously, nothing about this imagined community is particularly appealing from our perspective, but the point is that it can be coherently described within the inferentialist framework.[8] That is, we can describe a community of faulted individuals harboring delusional commitments just as well as we can describe a community of discerning and rational individuals, and we can even see how such a community could form.

It is also worth noticing that just as Ron, Ben, Claire, and the others will see each other as normal, sensible people following what they take to be good entitlements and inferences, they will not see Alice that way. Where Alice sees Ron along with Ben, Claire, and the others as deluded, the deluded ones ought to accordingly see Alice as the deluded one. After all, they can present her with what they take to be solid and compelling evidence: the word of Ron. Obviously, she will almost certainly reject it and obstinately continue rejecting it no matter how they appeal to Ron's authority or his teachings. Given that seemingly incomprehensible,

[8] Note that Brandom does explicitly argue against there being any privileged perspective of the sort claimed by Ron (1994, ch. 8), but that does not change the fact that one can be described within his framework without issue.

sustained rejection, they ought to take her as deluded. This traces an interesting distinction where delusional commitments and entitlements are concerned between those within a given community and those without. For every individual without the community that judges its members to be delusional, the members within that community are likely to judge their assessor as delusional themselves. The essentially perspective-oriented characterization of individuals translates to those perspectives being mirrored in whole communities, and those perspectives are not necessarily compatible between communities let alone even reconcilable. Granted, and perhaps this goes without saying, the application of the notion of delusion in this context requires more than a mere difference in perspectives, and more than there simply being an irreconcilable difference; there needs to be a serious and sustained confrontation and further judgement on the matter of entitlement, as described above.

This framework applied to a set of individuals and involving commitments perceived as delusional allows us to generalize the individual case to a community and to effectively account for problematic agglomerations like cults, fringe and conspiracy theory communities, and other similar groups (see, e.g., Keeley 1999; cf. Richardson 1993), where we can find the sorts of radical disconnects and incorrigibility that could very well qualify as involving delusional commitments. It goes without saying that our sketch above rather clearly suggests itself as a cult of some sort, illustrating the plausibility of the generalization. That in itself is an interesting application of both the concept at issue and the framework facilitating it, particularly given the growing prevalence of these groups in recent years (see, e.g., Basit 2021; Thomas and Zhang 2020) and their rather unique character. Approaching them through an inferentialist lens as well as being able to interpret them through the narrower context of delusions in individuals offers an interesting perspective on how we can see delusions in a broader context facilitated by a rather unexpected application of a framework generally reserved for discussions of foundational issues in language.

In closing, a few general remarks are in order concerning the outlook of the proposal beyond what is discussed above. Given the theoretical tools Brandom built into his system, there is a good deal of room for developing it further, exploring complications ignored above, and making its limitations more precise. Among the further developments, we may consider different types of delusions, account for hallucinations with *de dicto* and *de re* ascriptions (Brandom 1994, ch. 8), develop an extension for lying, explore the possibility of deluded liars, and consider whether a stronger distinction between irrational beliefs and delusions is called for and whether it is not already present in the notion of resistance to revision developed above. Among the complications, the proposal is also tied to the fact that a particular scorekeeper's assessment of delusion is not just a matter of their perspective on what is and what is not good evidence and entitlement in their eyes but also how good they are at presenting that evidence (and how they judge their own presentation of that evidence). Though seemingly minor, it introduces what may be a significant fold and additional layer of complexity to the account which may reveal further nuance. Among the limitations, we may point out the *prima facie* inapplicability of its construal of delusions to disagreements in taste (Kölbel 2004; Dreier 2009), as they largely avoid issues of inference and entitlement, which is presumably a good thing. Though each of these points are of interest here, addressing them would require

significant additions to the text that would only be tangentially related to the core ideas pertaining to delusions, and so they have been left aside to be worked out in detail elsewhere.

Conclusion

As stated at the outset, delusion is a difficult phenomenon to define. The approach taken with inferentialism is a characterization that appeals to assessments based upon deontic attitudes and statuses rather than any particular set of causes or a clumsy, folk understanding of truth and belief. It accordingly applies just as well to individuals that suffer from brain damage as it does to individuals that are of sound mind but that find themselves in a particular kind of community. Its characterization of delusions in the context of communities is novel in its own right, providing an account that extends to and accommodates the sense in which cults and fringe theory communities are typically considered collectively deluded, and may even be relied upon to sketch how they form and spread. Its capacity to account for mundane cases together with its extension to communities is an interesting advantage uniquely afforded by this particular way of understanding the phenomenon.

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