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Beliefs, Delusions, and Dry-Functionalism

Abstract: Kengo Miyazono, in his work *Delusions and Beliefs*, defends a teleo-functional account of delusions. In my contribution to this symposium, I question one of Miyazono's motivations for appealing to teleo-functionalism over its main rival, dry-functionalism.

Miyazono suggests that teleo-functionalism, unlike dry-functionalism, can account for the compatibility of the theses (i) that delusions are genuine doxastic states (doxasticism about delusions) and (ii) that delusions do not perform the typical causal roles of beliefs (the causal difference thesis). I argue, however, that there are also ways for dry-functionalism to account for this compatibility.

If what I have to say is correct, then Miyazono is perhaps too hasty – at least in one important respect – to opt for teleo-functionalism over dry-functionalism. Dry-functionalism has an equally good chance of satisfying some of Miyazono's explanatory goals.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of Kengo Miyazono's (2018) *Delusions and Beliefs* is to defend a doxastic account of delusions that allows us to understand delusions as malfunctioning beliefs (the 'malfunctioning belief hypothesis' [p. 4]).¹ To achieve this, Miyazono appeals to a teleo-functional account of belief, which he suggests can also be applied to delusions. Since teleo-functionalism (in general) provides an intuitive way of explaining when a functional item is either properly functioning or malfunctioning, the hope is that a teleo-functional account of delusions can likewise give us a plausible way of understanding delusions *as* a class of malfunctioning beliefs.

Miyazono's book makes a valuable contribution to the literature on beliefs and delusions. As well as offering a clear and concise application of teleo-functionalism to delusions, it can also serve as an accessible introduction for anyone interested in doing further research into the relationship between the science and metaphysics of beliefs, delusions, and functions. Miyazono does an excellent job of surveying the current literature and of bringing this information together to develop his preferred theory.

With that said, I want to take this opportunity to question one of Miyazono's motivations for appealing to teleo-functionalism over what he deems to be its main rival: dry-functionalism.

To be clear, I agree with Miyazono about the following two theses, which are important for my discussion:

DD. Doxasticism about delusions: that delusions are genuine beliefs (p. 20).

CDT. The causal difference thesis: that many delusions do not occupy the typical causal roles of ordinary beliefs (p. 20).

¹ All page and section references are to Miyazono (2018) unless otherwise stated.

In addition to his primary motivation of explaining the malfunctioning belief hypothesis, Miyazono wants to offer an account of DD that also allows for CDT (see his Chapter 2). As Miyazono notes, on the surface, DD and CDT are ‘a seemingly incoherent pair of ideas’ (p. 20). Yet – and in this I continue to agree with Miyazono – it is preferable, for various reasons, to have an account of delusions that allows for the compatibility of DD and CDT (following Miyazono, I will refer to this view as *compatibilism*).

What I disagree with Miyazono about is how to account for compatibilism. In particular, I disagree that DD and CDT together motivate a teleo-functional reading of delusions (and, for that matter, of beliefs) over and above a dry-functionalist reading. It is wrong of Miyazono to say that: ‘Unlike dry-functionalism, teleo-functionalism makes room for compatibilism...’ (p. 20). I will argue that dry-functionalism can, in fact, also make room for compatibilism.²

2. DRY-FUNCTIONALISM & BELIEF’S CAUSAL ROLES

The basic idea behind dry-functionalism, generally speaking, is that particular functional items (whether biological items, artefacts, or whatever) can be characterised according to their actual causal roles. For instance, we might say that a kettle is an item that can boil water, and that an item that cannot boil water is not a kettle.³ When applied to doxastic states, the implication is that such states are defined, likewise, according to certain causal roles that are typical of beliefs. In other words, a doxastic state’s causal roles are essential to its doxastic status.

² For the remainder of this discussion, I put aside Miyazono’s primary aim of explaining the malfunctioning belief hypothesis (that is, the thesis that delusions are malfunctioning beliefs). This might appear to leave my discussion somewhat incomplete, since the ability of teleo-functionalism to explain delusions as malfunctioning beliefs could be seen as a deciding factor (over and above the theory’s ability to explain compatibilism) in whether we opt for teleo-functionalism over dry-functionalism (for a seminal defence of teleo-functionalism, see Millikan 1984 and 1989; for a recent defence, see Sullivan-Bissett 2016). Nonetheless, this discussion should still have value, given that (i) the of problem compatibilism is interesting in its own right, and (ii) there are at least some independent reasons to suspect that teleo-functionalism might not be as successful at explaining malfunctions as it is often said to be (e.g. see Davies 2001).

³ For the classic defence of dry-functionalism, see Cummins (1975).

The problem for dry-functionalism, when it comes to explaining the compatibility of DD and CDT, is that for an attitude to count as a belief (or a doxastic state more broadly), it *must* be able to perform the causal roles that are essential to beliefs. If it doesn't, then the attitude simply cannot be a belief. However, as CDT states, delusions typically do *not* perform the same causal roles as other beliefs. The implication is that, from the perspective of dry-functionalism, compatibilism cannot be true: either DD is false (and delusions are not really beliefs) or CDT is false (and delusions do not, in fact, have different causal roles than beliefs).

In contrast, on a teleo-functional reading of doxastic states, the defining characteristics of doxastic states are historical. Roughly, they depend upon whether an attitude has 'the right kind of evolutionary history' (p. 36). So, if delusions have the right kind of history, it doesn't matter whether they presently perform the same causal roles as beliefs, we can still include them as a kind of belief. All that matters is that they evolved in the right kind of way. Here the implication is that teleo-functionalism allows us to be compatibilists about DD and CDT in a way that dry-functionalism does not—or so the story goes (see Miyazono, Chapter 2).

The issue I want to raise, then, is whether a version of dry-functionalism can, in fact, do the required work. For the reasons just discussed, and as Miyazono states, it is generally accepted that it cannot, such that to maintain dry-functionalism requires the rejection of compatibilism. For instance, one direction that the dry-functionalists might take is to downplay the apparent causal differences between beliefs and delusions, thus rejecting CDT. Miyazono outlines this kind of strategy in some detail, which he calls

a 'Bortolotti-style argument against CDT' (p. 26); but he ultimately rejects such attempts (§2.3.1).⁴

Nevertheless, regardless of the potential success of such accounts, denying DD or CDT would not be a form of compatibilism. If the dry-functionalists wish to be compatibilists, they must adopt a different approach. What I want to suggest is that, rather than downplaying the causal differences between beliefs and delusions, the dry-functionalists should emphasise any causal similarities that remain *despite* their apparent differences. To explain: it is no part of CDT (nor has it been established) that *all* of delusion's causal roles are different from those of ordinary beliefs. While there certainly are many apparent causal differences between beliefs and delusions (such as delusions not being responsive to evidence, and not always being action guiding in the expected way, etc.), it is possible for this to be true *and* for there still to be a characteristic causal role of doxastic states that is shared between both beliefs and delusions. That is, a characteristic causal role that is both necessary and sufficient for establishing both beliefs and delusions as doxastic states.

From this perspective, we can already say that, in principle, the logical space exists for a dry-functionalist account of compatibilism. And this will remain the case unless it is shown that there simply cannot be *any* characteristic causal roles that both beliefs and delusions share. In this light, the task that the dry-functionalists are left with is identifying such causal roles. Instead of defining doxastic states according to all (or even most) of the typical causal roles of beliefs, what the dry-functionalists must do is find a *minimal* set of causal conditions that exclude the causal roles that beliefs and delusions do not, as per CDT, share; but that still include some causal roles that can be used to define doxastic states in general. The

⁴ Miyazono calls this strategy 'Bortolotti-style' due to its resemblance to Bortolotti's arguments concerning the extent to which beliefs and delusions differ in their rationality (see Bortolotti 2009; 2012).

question this leaves, of course, is what this set of causal conditions could be.

Now, it is not my intention to develop a complete dry-functionalist theory of belief here (although I am working on a similar theory for different explanatory purposes elsewhere).⁵ My aim is primarily to suggest that Miyazono is too hasty – on this count, at least – when he opts for teleo-functionalism over dry-functionalism as a way of explaining compatibilism. I will, however, make an effort to outline the general direction that I think dry-functionalism must take to account for compatibilism, before finally considering some preliminary objections.

My suggestion is that, for the dry-functionalists to succeed, they should focus on the causal roles that both beliefs and delusions play in deliberation *from the first-person perspective*. One common interpretation of doxastic deliberation is that, in deliberation, we necessarily ‘aim’ our beliefs at the truth, in either a teleological or normative sense.⁶ If this is correct, what it tells us is that, when we reflect on a doxastic state that we presently hold, we are caused to deliberate *in a particular way* about whether to hold that attitude. We do so with the ‘aim’ of continuing to hold our beliefs only if they are true. Now, this same condition can plausibly be extended to include delusions. When a person holds the delusion that *p*, it is quite plausible that they deliberate on it in the same way as they would an ordinary belief *from their own perspective*. When, for whatever reason, they reflect on their delusion, they ‘aim’ to hold it only if it is true; and, from their perspective, they continue to determine that it is, and thus continue to hold it.

If this is correct, then it would allow for a kind of first-personal characterisation of doxastic states. What makes an attitude a doxastic

⁵ Atkinson, C. J. MS. Belief, Epistemology, and Evolution.

⁶ I put ‘aim’ in quotations because I want to remain non-committal on how to interpret this ‘aim’. For the teleological sense, see Velleman (2000); for the normative sense, see Shah (2003).

state is how we, personally, are caused to deliberate on that attitude when the conditions are such that we bring it into conscious deliberation. And it is quite intuitive to suppose that for delusional subjects, when they deliberate on their delusions, they do so from their perspective in much the same way as non-delusional subjects deliberate on their beliefs. There is a difference, of course, insofar as delusional subjects are unable to complete their deliberations successfully (i.e. they are unable to determine that their delusion is false); but the way that they deliberate (i.e. with the 'aim' of truth) can remain the same for both beliefs and delusions, regardless of whether that 'aim' is successfully satisfied. This kind of account would, at least, provide one potential route for the dry-functionalists to take in order to account for the compatibility of DD and CDT.

3. POTENTIAL OBJECTIONS

At this point, I also want to address three potential objections that might be raised against this kind of account.

Objection 1. The first objection is that one of the causal differences commonly cited between beliefs and delusions is precisely that delusions often *do not* behave like beliefs in deliberation. They do not, in particular, respond to evidence in the same way as beliefs – despite overwhelming evidence against their delusions, delusional subjects typically still remain committed to them. Indeed, this is one of the reasons for accepting CDT in the first place. Thus, contrary to what I have said, we might say that delusions are not, in fact, regulated by anything like a truth-'aim'.

This objection, however, misses the point. It is only from the third-person perspective that we assess that delusions do not respond to evidence in the proper way. But, as per my proposal, what makes something a doxastic state might not be to do with how the attitude is regulated; it might instead be to do with how the attitude causes the holder of that attitude to deliberate on it from their own

perspective (that is, when other conditions are also met, such as the desire to deliberate). On this view, delusions still share a causal role with beliefs, insofar as they can motivate the same kind of deliberation as ordinary beliefs. And this remains the case even though the actual regulation of delusions (which is a *separate* causal matter) can differ from that of ordinary beliefs.

What this position amounts to, then, is a shift for the dry-functionalist from a focus on the causal roles that are typically cited as essential to beliefs (such as their evidential relations), to a narrower focus on certain causal roles that are not under threat from the differences that give rise to CDT. This is what I meant earlier when I stated that the dry-functionalists must search for a 'minimal' set of causal conditions to characterise doxastic states.

Objection 2. The second kind of difficulty that might be raised against such a dry-functionalist account is that, in searching for a minimal set of causal conditions, conflicts are always going to arise concerning *which* specific causal role(s) are essential to doxastic states. This is a common problem that arises in Aristotelian ontology (for instance, what characterises the notion of humankind? Are we featherless bipeds, rational creatures, political creatures, or creatures of play?).⁷ And the same issue easily extends to discussions of the concept of belief. Why focus, for instance, on how we deliberate on beliefs as a defining characteristic (as I have suggested), rather than, say, how beliefs are regulated or on how beliefs motivate other kinds of behaviour?

To this difficulty, I can only say that it is a very broad issue that takes us far beyond the modest attempt in this paper to offer a potential alternative to Miyazono's teleo-functional way of accounting for

⁷ Thanks to an anonymous referee for this journal for raising this example.

compatibilism. Whether we are analysing *belief, knowledge, personal identity*, or the nature of *being*, this kind of issue can potentially arise.

Perhaps the only solution, when deciding which theory to adopt, is to focus on the theoretical virtues and vices of each. In this particular case, what I am suggesting is that dry-functionalism has the theoretical potential to account for compatibilism, in contrast to Miyazono's claim that it cannot; and in this limited respect, I think the theory I have outlined can succeed, even though focusing on other potential features of doxastic states might, in other contexts, yield different theoretical advantages.

Objection 3. The third objection I want to address concerns the scientific respectability of the version of dry-functionalism I have proposed. It might be noted that one of the virtues of functionalism, in general, is that it has the ability to accommodate mental states into the framework of a broadly scientific worldview. This is because functions, whether interpreted teleologically or causally (or in some other way), are typically accessible from the third-person perspective. For example, from a teleological perspective, we might ask whether the (teleo-)function of hearts is to circulate blood. We can then determine whether this is their function by inquiring into the evolutionary history of hearts in a third-person (objective) way. This would include, in particular, looking at evidence concerning the evolutionary history of hearts. Or, from a dry-functionalist perspective, we might ask whether the (dry-)function of hearts is, again, to circulate blood. We would then, as with the previous case, determine this in a third-person (objective) way – this time, by inquiring into the physiology of hearts to determine the causal roles that hearts, as a matter of fact, play. The point is that, whichever kind of functionalism we prefer, one of the advantages is that functions are objectively accessible in a way that allows us to fit them into a scientifically respectable framework.

The view I have outlined, however, brings first-personal elements into the framework, thus adding a phenomenal (or subjective) element into the theory. Such a phenomenal element is not accessible from the third-person perspective, and is thus not scientifically respectable in the way that functionalism is intended to be. We might even ask whether the view I have proposed can be considered a version of functionalism at all.⁸

My reply to this concern is twofold. The first point I want to make is that, regardless of whether we use the term ‘dry-functionalism’ or some other term (such as ‘dry-causalism’), the underlying point I am making remains the same: we can appeal to the causal roles of doxastic states (independently of their evolutionary history) to do important explanatory work. In particular, for the case in question, we can appeal to how both beliefs and delusions (when other conditions are also met) *cause* us to deliberate on those attitudes; and we can do so in a way that allows us to characterise both attitudes as doxastic states and, at the same time, to account for compatibilism. Furthermore, this remains true regardless of whether part of the causal chain involves a phenomenal element.

And the second point I want to make is that, in a more general sense, we should not be too quick to dismiss theories that involve a phenomenal element as unscientific. Of course, there are many difficulties that arise when it comes to including phenomenal elements into a scientific framework (as the history of philosophy attests); but if we agree that phenomenal elements exist in the world (such as, for instance, the first-person experience of doxastic deliberation), then we shouldn’t be surprised if some of our scientific theories make reference to them. Indeed, unless we want to be eliminativists about phenomenal experience (which neither I, nor, it

⁸ Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising objections 2 and 3.

seems, Miyazono would want to be), then we should almost expect this to be the case when it comes to certain mental states.

In short, then, my response is to say ‘yes’, my proposal includes a phenomenal element; but ‘no’, this does not automatically exclude my theory from a broadly scientific framework. If we at least agree that first-person experiences are the result of physical processes, which include causal interactions, then there is nothing unscientific about characterising certain mental states in terms of the causal processes that underlie specific instances of first-person experiences; such as, for instance, the first-person experience of doxastic deliberation. And this is exactly what my theory suggests: doxastic states are those that cause us (this causation can be a physical process) to deliberate on them (this can also be a physical process) in a particular way from the first-person perspective.

4. CONCLUSION

Miyazono offers both an interesting and useful application of teleo-functionalism to delusions. However, if what I have said is correct, then at least one of his motivations for adopting teleo-functionalism over dry-functionalism is redundant. It is possible, in principle, for dry-functionalists to be compatibilists—they have the theoretical resources to account for the compatibility of DD and CDT.

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