

Thought insertion and the ontology of thinking

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On what I will call the No Subject view, there is a sense in which one may be aware of a thought, conceived as an event in one's stream of consciousness, without being aware of oneself thinking something. Philosophical work on the delusion of thought insertion is one of the areas in which the No Subject view has been highly influential: the view has framed what, in the philosophy of mind, has become the standard interpretation of the delusion. Here I want to present a challenge to the No Subject view, developing from reflection on the ontology of thinking. I will also consider how, if the standard interpretation fails, we are to understand thought insertion. In particular, I will suggest that we should question the widespread assumption that understanding the delusion has to be a matter of making sense of it.

1. The No Subject view

The complaint that thoughts are being inserted into one's mind looks, at first sight, unintelligible. We do not ordinarily seem to conceive of thoughts as items that can be placed or put (or, as one patient put it, flashed) into minds or heads. So it is natural to think that we have no real understanding of the content of the delusion. Put bluntly, we don't really know what patients are talking about. This is a natural reaction, but, according to the dominant view, it is too hasty. On reflection, and drawing on philosophical discussions of the ownership of thoughts, we can articulate intelligible truth conditions for patients' statements. That is not say, of course, that patients are right to attribute the thoughts they experience as alien to others (as they usually, though not invariably, do: see Henriksen et al 2019). They *are* right about two things, though. They are talking about mental events they correctly identify as thoughts. And they are right, furthermore, that there is a sense in which

the question of the 'ownership' of a thought is not settled by one's awareness that the thought takes place in one's own mind. Here are three statements from articles that promote this sort of interpretation (the first quote is from the paper that pioneered the interpretation, the second from an influential article that helped to disseminate it, the third from one of the many recent contributions in which the interpretation is taken for granted¹):

The patient (..) reports that an alien thought occurs in her mind, but insists that it is not she who thinks the thought. (Stephens and Graham 1994, 7)

The schizophrenic seems to find himself with first-person knowledge of a token thought which was formed by someone else. (Campbell 1999, 620)

How could anyone really think that thoughts woven into their stream of consciousness belonged to someone else? (Parrot 2017, 40)

There may be a subtle difference of opinion as regards the condition that needs to be satisfied for 'a thought' to be fully *one's own thought*. Stephens and Graham take this to be a matter of oneself 'thinking' the thought. For Campbell, the critical question is who 'forms' (or 'generates') the thought. Parrot's formulation seems to be neutral on how to specify the full-ownership-conferring relation. Still, it seems to be agreed on all hands that it is possible to be aware of 'a thought' without being aware of the thought's owner, in a sense of 'ownership' that is to be distinguished from ownership of the mind in which 'the thought occurs'. Let's call this the No Subject view.

In recent work on thought insertion, the No Subject view has often been uncritically assumed, as if it were so much common sense. One source of the view's popularity, I think, is a certain analysis of the familiar phenomenon of unwelcome or intrusive or

¹ See also e.g. Peacocke 2008, Bortolotti & Broome 2009, Pickard 2010, Martin & Pacherie 2013, Sousa & Swiney 2013, Sollberger 2014, Pedrini 2015, Seeger 2015, Gallagher 2015, Fernandez 2010. (The last contribution differs from the standard view in taking thought insertion to be about belief states rather than thoughts conceived as events.)

disturbing thoughts. As Harry Frankfurt wrote in a discussion that inspired Stephens and Graham's interpretation of thought insertion, 'to some of the thoughts that occur in our minds, as to some of the events in our bodies, we are mere passive bystanders' (59) The notion of an impersonal or 'subjectless' awareness of a 'thought' may seem to capture precisely the 'spectatorial' character of our relation to certain thoughts — thoughts with which we may not, as Frankfurt puts it, 'identify' ourselves. If this is right, then the No Subject really may *be* so much common sense. Its credentials can be established by reflection on cases of 'ordinary alienation', quite independently of its potential to shed light on a bizarre delusion such as thought insertion.

Nevertheless, there are grounds for suspicion about the No Subject view. One is that its advocates are notably cagey about what is involved in being aware, impersonally, of a 'thought'. Campbell speaks of thoughts as things we 'encounter in consciousness'. (1999, 615) But how is that metaphor to be cashed out? Furthermore, formulations of the No Subject view can seem to equivocate on the term 'thought'. Thoughts are being treated in the same breath as mental events and as the objects or contents of such events. Is this merely carelessness or is it indicative of something more serious? And there is a question whether the No Subject view may not falsify the phenomenology of what I called ordinary alienation. Consider the first sentences of a recent publication entitled *Overcoming Unwanted Intrusive Thoughts. A CTB-based Guide for Getting Over Frightening, Obsessive, or Disturbing Thoughts*:

Have you ever stood on the edge of a train platform, minding your own business, and then, suddenly out of the blue, had the brief thought, *I could jump off and die!* Or have you been struck by the passing thought, *Hey, I could push that guy onto the tracks!* (Winston & Seif 2017, 1)

On the No Subject view, 'encountering' such thoughts may involve no awareness of who is their thinker. Since tokens of the first person refer to whoever is using them, one should, as a consequence, be uncertain as to *who* is thought to be able to jump

off (or push). Having such thoughts would be akin to hearing a voice while being uncertain as to who is speaking. That seems implausible. While the thoughts in question can be disturbing, it is not uncertainty over the reference of 'I' that creates anxiety (quite the reverse).

My first aim in what follows is to substantiate these worries. The No Subject view, I argue, not only misrepresents our ordinary conception of thoughts and thinking (making it unwise to rely on the view in interpreting patients' statements); there are reasons to doubt its coherence. I also wish to suggest that closer attention to the ontology of thinking can provide a more helpful perspective on alienation, both of the 'ordinary' variety and the pathological kind manifested by the delusion of thought insertion.

2. Equivocal thoughts

Start with two distinctions common in philosophical discussions of thoughts and thinking. (I am drawing in particular on Zeno Vendler's *Res Cogitans*.²) First, we need a distinction between the activity of thinking about something and the sorts of events that tend to occur as part of that activity. The former is arguably not an event — something that occurs or happens at a particular time — but a process, unfolding over a period of time. Correlatively, thinking about something does not fall within the ontological category of particulars. 'Olive is thinking about her summer holiday' does not entail the existence of an event of Olive's thinking about her holiday. (For one thing, Olive's activity may be ongoing.) However, engaging in the activity of thinking about something is typically, and perhaps necessarily, bound up with the occurrence of attendant events. As part of her activity, it occurred to Olive that Cornwall could be wet in August, and she reluctantly concluded that Switzerland was not an option. These facts seem to entail the existence of particular events, for example it's occurring to Olive that Cornwall can be wet in August. Following Vendler, we might call such events 'mental acts'. This brings us to the second distinction we need: between a mental act and its object or content. The same

² Vendler 1972. See also O'Shaughnessy 2000, ch. 6 and pp. 324-5.

proposition — that it can be wet in Cornwall in August — can be the object of different kinds of mental acts, and the object of mental acts on the part of different thinkers. It is something Nasya conjectured, Victor discovered, and that occurred to Olive and Yousif.

Where do *thoughts* fit into this schema? There are clearly two candidates: we might call 'thoughts' the objects of such events as form part of the process of thinking; or the events themselves. I briefly go over the case for each candidate in turn.

- (a) It is surely natural to conceive of thoughts as *things we think*, in a sense of 'think' that is something of an umbrella term for different kinds of mental acts: Nasya, Victor and Olive all may be said, in their different ways, to think the thought that Cornwall can be wet in August. To think something, in that distinctive sense, is not the same as engaging in the activity of thinking *about* something. Nor does it entail believing what one thinks.³ Thinking a thought can be quite non-committal. It might be a matter, for example, of mooted a proposition for further consideration. (More on this below.) I will not try to settle the large question here of what thoughts, conceived as things we think, are. But I want to mention two key features the answer would need to accommodate. First, thoughts can be true or false.⁴ Second, they are can be shared. For example, thoughts can be expressed by the use of speech. As Vendler observes, '(i)t does not take mind-reading to acquaint oneself with somebody else's thought; ordinary reading or listening is enough.' (Vendler 1972, 36-7) And of course different thinkers may, quite independently of each other, happen to think the same thought.

³ There is a common use of 'think', of course, that does have this implication. As Ryle observed, 'it is a vexatious fact about the English language that we use the verb 'to think' both for the beliefs and opinions that a man has, and for the pondering and reflecting that a man does (..)' (1971, 392)

⁴ A wider use of the term would allow that thoughts can be reported not just by the use of 'that' clauses following a verb of some mental act, but also by the use of oratio recta. For example, a schizophrenic patient reported the thought: 'Kill God!' In this broader sense, thoughts may include not just propositions — things that can be true or false —, but commands, questions, imprecations etc. Still, the second feature holds: the same thought, in this broad sense, can be the object of many thinkers' mental acts of directing, asking or cursing.

(b) We can distinguish two routes to the notion of 'occurrent thoughts', thoughts conceived as mental events 'woven into the stream of consciousness'. It might be said that the notion captures ordinary usage. And it might be said that we need the notion to articulate the phenomenology of what Frankfurt calls 'mental passivity'. Re ordinary usage: thoughts are said to cross our minds, to arrest our attention, or to strike us out of the blue etc; and a natural way to interpret these and related constructions, so one might argue, is that they reflect a conception of thoughts as events. Re mental passivity: suppose Frankfurt is right that to some of our thoughts 'we are mere passive bystanders'. If we are spectators, there must be something for us to spectate, viz. (one might argue): events that happen in our minds.

I will later raise some misgivings about (b), but for now, let's assume that the notion of an 'occurrent thought' captures part of our ordinary thinking about thoughts. My question is whether the No Subject view is right that being aware of the occurrence of a thought may leave one in the dark as to who (if anyone) is doing the thinking. I start from this observation: one commonality among diverse formulations of the No Subject view is that they equivocate between a conception of thoughts as mental events and a conception of thoughts as things we think. After some illustrative examples, I spell out the charge of equivocation, and then offer a diagnosis.

Here is Frankfurt: 'It is not incoherent, despite the air of paradox, to say that a thought that occurs in my mind may or may not be something that *I think*.' (Frankfurt 1988, 59) Here are Stephens and Graham: 'The patient (...) reports that an alien thought occurs in her mind, but insists that it is not she who thinks the thought.' (Stephens and Graham 1994, 7) And here is Parfit: Descartes (in the context of the Second Meditation, in which, Parfit maintains, he should not have claimed to be aware of the existence of a thinker) 'could have claimed instead: "This is a thought, therefore at least one thought is being thought".' (Parfit 1984, 224-5) In the first two passages, an *occurrent thought* is said to be something someone may *think*. The third passage is at least suggestive of such a reading, on the natural assumption that the thought mentioned in the conclusion ('at least one thought is

being thought') is supposed to be the selfsame thought referred to in the premise ('this thought' — where 'this' is presumably intended as a sort of introspective demonstrative, referring to a concurrent mental event).

'Thoughts' are expected to do double duty in these passages. They are things that happen, and they are the things we think (or at least *may* think) when such things happen. It should then be intelligible to speak of Olive thinking the event that happened when she started to ponder her holiday. Indeed, 'thoughts' would be peculiarly self-reflexive: when a thought occurs, what is being thought is that very (occurrent) thought. That cannot be right: the object of Olive's occurrent thought is *that Cornwall can be wet in August* — something that is not an event. The problem, then, may be put this way: people do not think events.⁵ The objects or contents of the mental acts we perform as part of the process of thinking about something are not things that happen.⁶

Can we formulate the No Subject view in a way that is free of equivocation? Here is a start: we might say that in being aware of an occurrent thought woven into one's stream of consciousness, one is aware of an event that involves the thinking (in the umbrella sense) of a thought. For example, one may be aware of the event of affirming or conjecturing or mooting or realizing that Cornwall can be wet in August. Note, though, that by introducing the *object* of an occurrent thought we simultaneously seem to introduce its *subject*: the event of affirming (etc) something is the event of *someone* affirming something. For one thing, such acts are moves in the game of giving and asking for reasons. They invite specific 'reason-seeking' questions, questions addressed to the subject of the mental act. For example, someone's act of mooting that p might be greeted with the query: why do you take

⁵ This is intended to echo a remark of Jennifer Hornsby's: 'people do not do events.' Her point was that 'actions', as the word is ordinarily used in English, are things we do, and that philosophers therefore need to be careful to distinguish actions in the ordinary sense — 'things we do' — from actions conceived in the way that has become standard in the philosophy of action: as events. In her example, one thing Anna did was *write the word 'blue'*. As Hornsby points out, 'such a thing as *write the word blue* (..) is repeatable; it is not a particular.' (Hornsby 1999, 623-4)

⁶ The notion of a 'token thought' encourages the idea that occurrent thoughts relate to things we think in the way in which a particular event relates to a type it instantiates. But things we think are not even *types of events*.

that p to be a relevant observation? This would seem to put paid to the idea of a wholly impersonal articulation of our awareness of occurrent thoughts. For example, it would seem to impugn Parfit's claim that 'we could fully describe our thoughts without claiming that they have thinkers' (1984, 224) Still, there may seem to be room for a more modest brand of the No Subject view. The suggestion may be this: one can be aware (in the way in which we are aware of the sorts of events implicated in the activity of thinking about a particular matter) of someone's affirming or mooting something, without being aware that it is oneself who is affirming/mooting it.

There is a sense, of course, in which that sort of awareness is utterly commonplace. In listening to someone, or in reading an article, we are aware that someone is affirming or mooting various propositions. Suppose that, unbeknownst to one, the speaker or writer is none other than oneself. This is not quite what the No Subject view needs, however. The problem is that the awareness one enjoys in such a case is simply the experience of listening or reading, rather than an experience we would naturally describe as an awareness of an occurrent thought. One may well be aware of an act of affirming or mooting here, but not *in the way* in which we are aware of such acts when they occur as part of our activity of thinking about something. What we would need, to make sense of the modest variant of the No Subject view, is a case in which

- (i) one is aware of the occurrence and content of an act of (e.g.) affirming or mooting something;
- (ii) one's awareness is not a matter of observation: that is, it's not by looking or listening or in some other way attending to someone's overt performance of the act that one knows *what* is being affirmed or mooted; for in such a case, one's experience would be that of hearing or seeing or in some other way observing someone thinking something, rather than an experience of an 'occurrent thought';
- (iii) one is not aware of *oneself* performing the act.

Can these conditions be jointly satisfied? The problem I see here develops from an observation about the propriety of the question ‘How do you know?’ We would ordinarily regard the question as off-key in response to *first-person* self-ascriptions of acts of thinking (as we would in response to first-person self-ascriptions of attitudes or intentional actions). But we would take it that any other attributions of acts of thinking are in principle open to that question. This gives rise to a dilemma for the No Subject view. If the putative awareness of a mental act is a case of knowledge that is immune to the request for an account of how one knows, then it must be first-person awareness of oneself (e.g.) mooting or affirming something — in violation of condition (iii). If one’s knowledge of the mental act *is* subject to the demand for a source, one’s awareness must play a certain epistemic role: it must be a matter of observing and so finding out that someone is mooting or affirming something. It would need to involve something like an act of perceptual (or quasi-perceptual) attention, enabling one to detect the occurrence of the mental act. There would be room for questions such as these: ‘Are you sure you got the content of the mental act right? Are you confident it is an act of affirmation rather than merely a case of mooting something?’ In other words, one’s awareness would be an experience of (in some way) observing what someone is thinking — in violation of condition (ii). Phrases such as ‘introspectively encountering a thought’ conceal this issue. They encourage the assumption that one can be aware of an act of thinking *in the way* in which we are ordinarily aware of our own acts of thinking, without being aware of oneself as the subject of the act. The trouble is that by subtracting the first-person content of the awareness, we are turning the awareness into an experience, not of a ‘thought’, but of observing someone thinking, akin to the experience we have when we listen to each other’s speech acts.

To summarize, the ‘thoughts’ that figure in the No Subject tradition seem to be a mongrel: they are supposed to be things that are *thinkable* but also *happen*. When we disentangle these elements, we can see that there is substantive challenge confronting the No Subject view, a challenge that — possibly as a result of the tendency to equivocate on ‘thoughts’ — has not received the attention it would deserve. What is not clear is that we can provide a coherent articulation of the idea

that one can be aware of the occurrence of mental act in the way in which we are ordinarily aware of our own mental acts, without being aware of (oneself) thinking something.⁷ The challenge has an immediate bearing on the standard interpretation of thought insertion. If we cannot make sense of the assumption that 'thoughts' can be introspectively 'encountered' (in a way that involves no awareness of oneself as their thinker) we can hardly expect to make rational sense of the delusion, relying on that assumption.

There is more to be said about the challenge, but at this point I want to turn to another, more basic question raised by the standard interpretation. Should we interpret the 'thoughts' patients complain of as (in the philosophers' jargon) 'occurrent' or 'token' thoughts? I want to make a case for a negative answer. The negative answer, however, will be part of a positive proposal. Drawing on work by Josef Parnas and his colleagues, I will suggest that the delusion is best understood as the end point of a pathological process of self-alienation, a central aspect of which is the progressive 'reification' of thoughts (= things we think).

3. Thoughts and thinkings

The category of events has been a cornerstone of post-Davidsonian philosophy of mind. But it is worth reminding ourselves that Davidson, for one, did not assume that there are idiomatic English expressions to pick out the sorts of events he was interested in. For instance, Davidson's illustrative list of mental events (in the first sentence of his eponymous essay) starts with 'perceivings' and 'rememberings'. That seems a sensible choice of terminology. 'Perceptions' and 'memories', for example, would have been inapt. Now suppose we wish to add to Davidson's list a term referring to such events as occurred in Olive's and Nasya' stream of consciousness.

⁷ One complication is that thinking about something may involve imagining conversations. Could there be cases in which it is indeterminate whether imagining someone telling one 'Cornwall can be wet in August' amounts to mooted a proposition as part of one's activity of thinking about something or *merely* to an imagined conversation about the weather? I suppose there may be such cases (say, in a state of reverie) — but they will not be clear-cut examples of being aware of a thought without being aware of thinking.

Adopting Davidson's policy, we might label them thinkings. Or should we say that, in this case, a more idiomatic alternative is at hand: thoughts?

Straight off, the evidence for an affirmative answer to that question may seem overwhelming. Recall the examples of intrusive thoughts I quoted earlier: have you ever had the 'brief/passing thought .. '? And recall Frankfurt's point: there are 'thoughts that strike us unexpectedly out of the blue; and thoughts that run willy-nilly through our heads.' (Frankfurt 1988, 59) Again, consider an example of Anscombe's: 'The thought: "it is my duty" kept hammering away in my mind until I said to myself "I can do no other" and so signed.' (Anscombe 1957, 11) And think of the myriad adjectives we naturally reach for in characterizing our own and others' thoughts: tormenting, soothing, untimely, predictable, and so on. Is it not obvious that we must be talking about mental events here: in particular, about their temporal profile ('brief'), their phenomenology ('kept hammering away') and our cognitive relation to them (striking 'expectedly out of the blue')?

I want to argue that it is not obvious. There is, first of all, strong counterevidence. The thought: 'it is my duty' is something that can be true or false, as is the thought: 'I could push that guy onto the tracks!' If there is a completely general characteristic of thoughts, as we ordinarily conceive them, it is that they can be identified by the use of a that-clause or scare quotes. (Sometimes only the latter will do: see note 4 above.) If that is right, then thoughts, as ordinarily conceived, are not mental events but the objects or contents of certain mental events. Having, or being struck by, a thought is a matter of thinking something. 'I had the passing thought: "I could push that guy onto the tracks"' is equivalent to 'I found myself suddenly (and perhaps casually) thinking: "I could push that guy onto the tracks."' You may qualify the thought as 'passing' but you nevertheless take it to be something that you think — and that others may think as well. (In fact, if the guide from which the quote is taken is reliable, most of us have done so at some point.)

Furthermore, on closer inspection, the case for construing thoughts as events looks weak. True, we speak of thoughts striking us. But is it *events* that strike us? Surely

not: the sorts of things that — literally — strike us ('hit forcibly') are persisting objects; paradigmatically: people. The same may be said of 'hammering away' ('work hard and persistently'). This encourages a general, parsimonious hypothesis: we consistently conceive of thoughts as things we think (not as events), but there is a tendency to bring out salient features of our mental lives — in particular, of the kinds of mental acts involved in thinking — by projecting them on to the things we think. We might label this a matter of 'reifying' thoughts: we treat them metaphorically as things that have duration and causal powers, for example. Unexpectedly finding oneself thinking something becomes 'being struck by a passing thought' or a 'thought crossing one's mind'. Being disturbed or repelled by one's thinking certain things is a matter of experiencing 'intrusive' thoughts.

This last example touches on what Frankfurt calls 'mental passivity'. On his analysis, 'occurrent thoughts' are internal to our experience in such cases: we find ourselves confronted by 'a thought' without having a sense of thinking something. Here is an alternative account. We can be surprised, puzzled and disturbed by things we think, giving us a sense of being, in Frankfurt's phrase, 'passive bystanders' to our thinking. Still, what we find surprising or puzzling is something we do, viz. thinking — e.g. affirming or mooting — some thought. Such acts can be spontaneous and unbidden. They may not be embedded in an intentional activity of thinking about something (though they *may* be embedded in an involuntary such activity, in the sense of 'involuntary' in which you may involuntarily imagine a tune you can't get out of your system). One reason for preferring this analysis to Frankfurt's is that sufferers from intrusive thoughts often find the experience distressing precisely because they find *themselves* thinking these thoughts. Connectedly, when intrusive thoughts involve tokens of the first person (as they often do) usually the subject unhesitatingly takes the thought to be about themselves. That suggests that an awareness of thinking the thought is part of the experience. Frankfurt makes much of what he sees as an analogy between thoughts and bodily movements: a thought occurring in my mind, he suggests, need not be something *I think*, just as an 'event occurring in my body may or may not be something that *I do*.' (1988, 60) It is debatable whether events occurring in my body are *ever* something that I do (see above, note 5), but in any

case, the analogy is surely forced. There simply is no equivalent, in the case of thoughts, of being proprioceptively or visually aware of a spasmodic twitch.⁸

I have raised doubts about two assumptions that underpin the standard interpretation of thought insertion. In the last section, I challenged the intelligibility of a 'subjectless' awareness of an 'occurrent thought'. In this section, I have questioned the very idea of an 'occurrent thought'. If we abandon these assumptions, it becomes difficult to sustain a distinction that has routinely been made in the literature on thought insertion between two senses of ownership: a minimal sense in which a thought is my thought simply in virtue of occurring in my mind vs a richer sense in which a thought is my thought only if it meets a further condition, such as my thinking (Stephens and Graham) or 'generating' (Campbell) the thought. If thoughts are things we think, rather than mental events of which we may be introspectively aware, then presumably *my* thoughts are things I think. It would then seem as puzzling as ever what patients might have in mind when they talk about thoughts that are not theirs. I want to end by approaching this issue from a different perspective, one that gives a vital role to the psychological and temporal context of the delusion.

4. Thought insertion without 'occurrent thoughts'

A useful starting point is a diatribe Josef Parnas and his colleagues have recently launched against (as they see it) philosophers of mind dabbling in psychopathology. A major problem with recent work on thought insertion, they contend, is that much of it is conducted by authors who lack 'any comprehensive familiarity with clinical psychopathology' and rely 'only on a few examples that are constantly recycled in the literature.' (Henriksen, Parnas & Zahavi 2019, 4) Partly as a result of this, there is a tendency to distort the delusion by 'decontextualizing' it. We can distinguish two aspects of the context that, according to Henriksen et al, goes missing when philosophers of mind construct theories of thought insertion. First, schizophrenic

⁸ The closest we seem to get to this would be the experience of seeming to hear a voice in one's head. But hallucinating is not the same thing as thinking. Note that the standard interpretation does not say that patients mistake an auditory experience of someone expressing a thought for the occurrence of a 'thought' in their mind.

delusions are manifestations of a global 'reorganization' or 'transformation' of consciousness (Parnas & Sass 2001, 101), characterized by such things as a 'diminished presence of the world', 'solipsism', and an 'altered experiential framework'. It is only by relating a delusion to the 'Gestalt' in which it is 'embedded' that we can begin to understand it. Call this the psychological context. Second, thought insertion is described as an 'end phenomenon': roughly, the delusion marks the end of the line of a process of 'increasing self-alienation', starting long before the onset of psychosis.⁹ Only in the light of the preceding stages of the process is it possible to understand the delusion. Call this the temporal context.

Let's set aside for a moment the question of *why* patients believe what they do, and focus on the question of *what* it is they believe. Attention to the temporal context of the delusion provides a distinctive and I think illuminating perspective on this question. There is much evidence that a concern with ownership of thoughts *predates* the formation of the delusion. During the prodromal phase of schizophrenia patients often describe their state of mind in terms that are closely related to the delusion they (typically) go on to develop but that do not evoke the same kind of bafflement. One key difference is that, at this stage, the disconcerting characterization of their state of mind occurs within the scope of an 'as if ...' operator. They might say, for example, 'my thinking felt strange, as if it didn't have to be any longer I myself who was thinking' or 'it seems to me as if it is not me who generates these ideas'.¹⁰ Now, one way to interpret the difference between such 'as if' beliefs and the subsequent delusion would be as different kinds of responses to patients' evidence, in a broad sense of 'evidence'. For example, we might say that there is an abnormal phenomenology of thinking, of a kind that can rationalize — can make seem plausible — the denial of ownership of 'thoughts'. The idea would be that during the prodromal phase, patients describe that experience by reference to the claim it rationalizes, without *making* that claim. Post-psychosis, they make it.

⁹ Henriksen, Parnas & Zahavi 2019, 6. They attribute the term 'end phenomenon' to Klosterkötter 1988.

¹⁰ Klosterkötter 1988, 110-11 (my translation); Parnas & Sass 2001, 106.

That 'evidential' interpretation is not mandatory, however. Consider this flowery description of a sun-set: 'it looks as if the sun is sinking into the sea'. To get the idea here we do not need to think there is evidence that the sun will sink into the sea, or even to understand what would constitute such evidence. The statement is quite unlike 'it looks as if it is going to rain', used as a way of registering the presence of evidence that rain is imminent. We might say that the scene is described by likening the sun to something that can (be seen to) sink into the sea.¹¹ Parnas and Sass characterize patients' 'as if' statements as 'metaphorical'. (Parnas and Sass 2004, 109) A good example of what they have in mind is one patient's statement that he felt 'as if' his interlocutor somehow 'invaded him' (*ibid*). It is of course not easy to say what is involved in understanding such a statement, but it seems clear that to understand it we do not need to grasp what it would mean to be (literally) invaded by an interlocutor, or to recognize the patient's experience as something that would provide intelligible evidence for such a claim.

If we look at the content of patients' 'as if' descriptions of their thinking, taking into account the wider narratives of which they form part, we may note three themes, corresponding to the threefold distinction I made at the beginning of section 2: patients' reflections concern (a) the activity of thinking about something, (b) the things they think, and (c) the mental acts involved in thinking about something.

Re (a): the first example— 'my thinking felt strange, as if it didn't have to be any longer I myself who was thinking' — is preceded by a catalogue of impairments in the patient's ability to think about something: she had problems concentrating, there were frightening lapses of short term memory, disabling her from carrying out everyday activities; when thinking about something she would often experience a blank ('the thread was cut off') or would suddenly find herself thinking about unrelated matters. In addition to (in the words of the second patient) a lack of 'mastery' over the course of one's cogitations, there are other, harder-to-articulate alterations, summarized by Parnas et al under the heading of feeling 'distanced' from

¹¹ I borrow the example (and this gloss on it) from Martin 2010.

one's thinking. The first patient tries to capture these changes in the following terms: 'it was as if someone no longer thought himself, as if he were prevented from doing his own thinking'.¹²

Re (b): patients extend their concern with ownership to the objects of their thinking. For example: 'I had the impression that everything I think isn't necessarily my own ideas'.¹³

Re (c): I suggested earlier that we sometimes 'reify' thoughts (= the things we think), by treating them as object with causal powers, where this affords an indirect characterization of our mental acts (as in 'being struck by a passing thought'). Some of the patients' descriptions of their thinking are naturally understood in this way. Consider this phrase: 'it is as if it's not me who generates these thoughts'.¹⁴ Patients are surely not complaining here of a lack of originality in their thinking. Rather, they speak of thoughts as if they were objects with passive causal powers, capable of being 'generated'. Likening thoughts to things that can be 'generated' (and are not generated by oneself) may be a way of articulating what is strange about their thinking these thoughts, including the sense of lacking mastery and feeling 'distanced'.¹⁵

In the light of all this, let us return to the two kinds of reaction to reports of thought insertion I mentioned at the outset: sheer bafflement as to what patients might be talking about vs confidence that (armed with the No Subject view) it is possible to make sense of these beliefs. One thing that has emerged is that the two reactions are not exhaustive. Suppose we understand the delusion as developing from patients' prodromal 'as if' reflections. Specifically, suppose that, with the onset of

¹² 'Es war, wie wenn einer gar nicht mehr selber denkt, an seinem eigenen Denken gehindert wird.' (Klosterkötter 1988, 110)

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ 'Patients also often report that certain thoughts may feel as if they weren't generated by the patients themselves.' (Henriksen et al 2019, 6)

¹⁵ It is tempting to interpret the use of the phrase 'generating thoughts' in the recent philosophical literature (e.g. in Campbell 1999) as an import from schizophrenic patients' 'metaphorical' employment of the phrase.

psychosis, patients are disposed to take at face value propositions they previously used to articulate their state of mind in broadly metaphorical terms. This would enable us to comprehend what patients have in mind, without thinking of the delusion's content in terms that would invite a rationalizing explanation. A sense of the bizarre would be retained.¹⁶ (Compare our reaction to someone who *believes* that all the world's a stage.)

But can reflection on the delusion's context shed light on *why* patients believe what they do? Part of the reason work in the tradition of 'phenomenological psychopathology' (such as Parnas's and his colleagues') has had little impact on the philosophy of mind, I think, is that it can seem as if this work confines itself to making connections among symptoms and so placing them in their (psychological and temporal) contexts, without attempting a causal explanation of a delusion. Ultimately, the phenomenologists may seem to be committed to a view of schizophrenic delusions as 'incomprehensible', as not being open (in Jaspers' terms) to any form of 'genetic' psychological understanding. Correlatively, if we think some such understanding must surely be possible, it may seem as if there is really no serious alternative to a broadly rationalizing explanation, one that seeks to make sense of the delusion by reference to aspects of the patients' situation that can seem to provide evidence for it.

That diagnosis, I want to suggest, underestimates the resources of the phenomenological approach. Parnas' and his colleagues' work does provide materials for a certain kind of 'genetic' understanding of the delusion, viz. in two parts. The first part is an account of the prodromal 'as if' belief. This is not a delusion, let alone a bizarre one. We can surely make sense of the belief, as an attempt to articulate strange and distressing experiences. The attempt may of course itself be

¹⁶ For Parnas, that point is crucial. He draws a sharp distinction between two kinds of delusions. 'Empirical delusions' are stubborn, irrational beliefs that, however, have intelligible truth conditions and are informed by a sense of the relevant reasons. 'Bizarre' or 'autistic-schizophrenic delusions' are insulated from the space of reasons and their content is elusive; they present themselves as 'a subjective revelation that needs no evidence from the shared empirical world in order to become valid.' (Parnas 2004, 157) I discuss the distinction in more detail in Roessler 2013.

coloured by the patient's emerging schizophrenic state of mind. Perhaps only someone peculiarly susceptible to the general theme of being 'influenced', or being no longer one's familiar self, would tend to describe their experiences in terms such as (a) – (c). Alternatively, those themes may themselves be rationally intelligible in the light of patients' experience. In any case, it is the second part that moves beyond a sense-making explanation. And it is here that what I called the psychological context of the delusion — the state of consciousness in which it is 'embedded' — plays a distinctive non-rational role. Parnas and Sass speak of a 'delusional transformation', characterized by a fundamentally altered experience of self (a form of 'solipsism') and world (the construction of a 'delusional world'). As I suggested earlier, a relevant aspect of that 'transformation' may be that patients are now disposed to take at face value ideas that previously figured in the context of a metaphorical 'as if' description.¹⁷ How is this to be understood? An austere version of the two-part story might simply say that the disposition to do so is one facet of the cluster of tendencies that constitute the delusional state of consciousness. But there may be ways of rendering the disposition intelligible by reference to more basic elements of the cluster. If the schizophrenic 'transformation' of consciousness is marked by a 'subjectivization' of reality — a quasi-solipistic inability to distinguish the objective world from the way things strikes one (Parnas & Sass 2001, Parnas 2004, Henriksen 2013) — it may be unsurprising if patients fail to retain a grip on the metaphorical character of their prodromal musings under the heading of ownership.

These sketchy remarks suggest an alternative diagnosis of the disagreement between post-Heideggerian 'phenomenological psychopathology' (exemplified by the work of Parnas and his colleagues) and post-Davidsonian philosophy of mind (exemplified by the standard interpretation of thought insertion). It is not that the former confines itself to describing the delusion as part of a pattern, whereas the latter seeks a causal explanation. Rather, the key difference is that the causal

¹⁷ Another aspect is that patients often embellish things by attributing the thoughts of which they complain to specific individuals, or alleging that the thoughts are 'generated' by them. Klosterkötter refers to this as the phase of 'concretization', typically reflecting the patient's individual circumstances and experiences. See Klosterkötter 1988, 251.

explanation provided for by the former makes essential use of the notion of a state of consciousness — something that is altogether missing from the latter. In part, the disagreement here may reflect a more general dispute about the reality and explanatory value of 'states of consciousness'. One way to understand that dispute is this. In post-Davidsonian philosophy of mind, psychological explanations are taken to turn on causal relations among mental events or 'token' mental states. But suppose we think of such explanations as making essential reference to subjects' exercise of relevant capacities, say intellectual, perceptual or practical capacities. That would invite the thought that there is a difference between merely having a capacity and being in a state in which one is able to exercise it (in which the capacity is 'capacitated'). And it would make room for the thought that the availability of a 'rationalizing explanation' is not a basic given of human psychology but conditional on the satisfaction of an enabling condition: only if the subject is in a state of wakeful consciousness (rather than, say, in a state of sleep, drunkenness or insanity) can her actions and attitudes be explained, directly, by reference to the exercise of her rational capacities.¹⁸

5. Conclusion

By way of summary, let me distinguish three tendencies to 'reify' thoughts (things we think) that have figured in my discussion. A mild form of reification can be observed in some of the ways we ordinarily talk about our thinking. Thoughts are said to *act* on us in various ways: they cross our minds, arrest our attention etc., where this is used to bring out certain features of the mental acts involved in thinking the thoughts, say their spontaneity or their absorbing character. The tendency can also take a pathological form, implicated in several symptoms of schizophrenia. For example, patients sometimes 'describe their thoughts in physical terms, as if possessing an object-like spatial quality' or 'locate them spatially ("my thoughts feel mainly in the right side of the brain")'. (Parnas and Sass 2001, 107) Thought insertion is another example of this: patients treat thoughts as if they were

¹⁸ The most detailed discussion of the nature and explanatory value of states of consciousness is Brian O'Shaughnessy's *Consciousness and the World*. For an illuminating Aristotelian perspective on this, see Crowther 2018.

not the content of their thinking but something that could be 'generated', or even inserted into someone's mind. Yet another form of reification is in evidence in recent philosophical work on ownership of thoughts. Thoughts are conceived here as particulars we 'encounter' or introspectively 'access'. And we are supposed to be able to 'access' thoughts without having much of an idea as to *whose* thoughts they are. I have argued that this view is not supported by the first, mild form of reification, and that it offers no help in understanding the second, pathological form.¹⁹

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