Delusional Atmosphere and the Sense of Unreality

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Introduction
Recent approaches to delusions in philosophy and the cognitive sciences generally construe them as propositional attitudes that arise due to a combination of anomalous perceptual contents and cognitive disturbances. For example, Stone and Young (1997) claim that certain delusional beliefs are explanations of affectless and thus strange perceptual experiences, which are arrived at and maintained due to reasoning biases. Davies, Coltheart, Langdon and Breen (2001) offer a slightly different explanation, according to which the delusional content is integral to perception. The belief is then generated in the same way as most other beliefs, via the unquestioning acceptance of perceptual content as veridical. So, in their view, the problem stems not from faulty reasoning but from a failure to veto certain anomalous perceptual contents. An alternative approach is proposed by Campbell (2001), who suggests that the delusional belief causes the associated perception, rather than vice versa. However, what his ‘rationalist’ account continues to share with perception-first or ‘empiricist’ accounts is a commitment to explaining delusions in terms of causal relationships between perceptual and belief contents. The emphasis of most recent discussions is upon monothematic, circumscribed delusions, with the Capgras delusion (the belief that a familiar has been replaced by an impostor) receiving most attention, followed by the Cotard delusion (the belief that one is dead or has ceased to exist). However, there is a tendency to think of delusions more generally in terms of propositional attitudes and associated perceptual contents.

What might Jaspers have said about these various models of delusion formation? This remark from his General Psychopathology gives us an indication: “It is a pity to waste time on torturous, meaningless argument or on imaginary models, however much they clamour for attention” (GP, p.22).¹ I suspect this might well have been his reaction (although my own view is that such an appraisal is too harsh). He would have

¹ In this chapter, I will be referring throughout to the English translation of the seventh German edition of General Psychopathology (Jaspers, 1963), abbreviated to GP.
been similarly downbeat about orthodox conceptions of delusion in psychiatry, which are epitomised by the oft-quoted DSM definition to the effect that delusions are mistaken beliefs arising from faulty inferences (DSM-IV-TR, p.821). As Jaspers puts it:

To say simply that a delusion is a mistaken idea which is firmly held by the patient and which cannot be corrected gives only a superficial and incorrect answer to the problem. Definition will not dispose of the matter. (GP, p.93)

What is the problem? For one thing, Jaspers emphasises the need to adopt a kind of empathetic attitude in order to appreciate psychopathological phenomena. It would, in his view, be a mistake to rely exclusively upon a detached, impersonal, objective standpoint towards the delusional person or her delusions: “The process is not only one of simple observation, like reading off a measurement, but the exercise of a self-involving vision in which the psyche itself is glimpsed” (GP, p.21). For Jaspers, the best sources we have for this kind of empathetic / phenomenological understanding are patient descriptions offered in the context of interaction, where there is the possibility of clarification through dialogue. One might respond that objective, impersonal approaches to delusions do not prohibit a complementary empathetic appreciation; the two are compatible. Jaspers would not deny that. Indeed, as we will see, he concedes that empathetic understanding [Verstehen] ultimately fails when it comes to certain kinds of delusion, leaving us with only an impersonal, medical construal to go on. But this does not imply that empathy is unnecessary in such cases, as we only discover the limits of empathy by adopting an empathetic approach in the first place.2

However, Jaspers’ principal complaint is that, if we adopt a phenomenological approach, we come to appreciate that conceiving of delusions principally in terms of beliefs is not so much incorrect as beside the point; there is a failure to engage with what is most fundamental to them. Various authors have challenged the view that delusions are beliefs. For example, Berrios (1991) goes so far as to suggest that they

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2 Phenomenology is not to be identified with empathy, as it is also pursued in the first-person. However, in the second-person case, Jaspers regards empathetic understanding as synonymous with phenomenological understanding. I thus treat the two as interchangeable for current purposes.
are empty speech acts, and Currie and Jureidini (2001) propose that they are not beliefs but ‘mistaken imaginings’. Others, who continue to maintain that delusions are beliefs, have stressed the need for more permissive or nuanced conceptions of belief (Bayne and Pacherie, 2005; Bortolotti, 2005). Jaspers has a different concern though, and would regard the question of whether or not delusions are beliefs as something of a distraction too. What is missing, he suggests, is an adequate understanding of the nature and role of perceptual changes that are largely responsible for the alleged ‘beliefs’. There is a tendency to think of these in terms of perceptual contents of one kind or another (although there is disagreement regarding the kinds of properties that perceptual content incorporates). However, Jaspers draws attention to another aspect of perceptual experience – the elusive ‘atmosphere’ that pervades it. He suggests that delusions originate in an all-enveloping change to the ‘form’ of experience (‘form’ being the manner in which things are encountered by us - as ‘perceived’, ‘judged’, ‘felt’ and so on), rather than localised, anomalous perceptual contents (GP, pp.58-9). Specific delusional contents are symptomatic of this more general shift in ‘mood’ or ‘atmosphere’. Thus, to make particular perceptual and/or belief contents one’s exclusive focus is to abstract them from a phenomenological context outside of which they cannot be properly grasped and to neglect the core, underlying phenomenon. If this is right, we need not conclude that content-based approaches to delusion in philosophy, cognitive neuropsychology and elsewhere are completely misguided. Nevertheless, given that they are founded upon an inadequate conception (or no conception at all) of an aspect of experience that is central to delusion, they surely require both revision and a change of emphasis.

In what follows, I begin by outlining Jaspers’ account of ‘delusional atmosphere’ or ‘delusional mood’, focusing upon the ‘sense of unreality’ that is central to it. Then I critically discuss his well-known claim that certain ‘primary delusions’ or ‘delusions proper’ cannot be understood phenomenologically. I reject that view and instead sketch how we might build upon Jaspers’ insights by developing a clearer, more detailed phenomenological analysis of delusional atmosphere, thus further illuminating how certain delusional beliefs arise. However, I concede that this task poses a particular challenge for empathy, and suggest that a distinctive kind of empathy is required in order to overcome it. I call this ‘radical empathy’. I conclude by considering how we might relate a phenomenological approach along these lines to
non-phenomenological research on delusions, and tentatively suggest that recent neurobiological work on ‘predictive coding’ might offer a complementary way of explaining them. I do not claim (or seek) to naturalise the phenomenology through neurobiology, but I do at least maintain that there is potential for fruitful commerce between the two.

Delusional Atmosphere

Jaspers distinguishes what he calls “delusion proper” from “delusion-like ideas”. The latter, he says, emerge in understandable ways from experience, whereas the former originate in what he describes as a “transformation in our total awareness of reality” (GP, p.95). According to Jaspers, the delusional belief (the focus of most accounts of delusions proper) is a “secondary” judgement that arises in the context of a more “primary” delusional experience; it is a content-specific symptom of a non-specific shift in the person’s relationship with the world. He refers to the experience as “delusional atmosphere” or “delusional mood”, and describes it as follows:

Patients feel uncanny and that there is something suspicious afoot. Everything gets a new meaning. The environment is somehow different – not to a gross degree – perception is unaltered in itself but there is some change which envelops everything with a subtle, pervasive and strangely uncertain light. A living-room which formerly was felt as neutral or friendly now becomes dominated by some indefinable atmosphere. Something seems in the air which the patient cannot account for, a distrustful, uncomfortable, uncanny tension invades him. (GP, p.98)

His claim is not simply that a delusional atmosphere causes delusional beliefs to arise. Rather, primary delusions only become intelligible possibilities in the context of a shift in the overall structure of experience. By analogy, a checkmate situation would not be intelligible outside of a chess game. Thus, in order to understand the delusion, one has to understand the experience in which it is embedded. The problem, according to Jaspers, is that empathetic understanding reaches its limit somewhere along the way.

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3 Radden (2011, xv) suggests that “delusions” are a “heterogeneous assemblage” and that accounts such as Jaspers’, which involve a “bulwark of central cases”, are therefore problematic. I agree with that view and will suggest that what Jaspers calls “delusional atmosphere” is itself heterogeneous in character.
Delusional atmosphere involves some sort of perceptual change. However, it is not a change in one or more circumscribed perceptual contents, and its precise nature is difficult to convey. As Jaspers says, things are “somehow” different, in a way that is “indefinable”. In fact, it is seemingly paradoxical, insofar as “perception is unaltered”. If one somehow managed to compile a complete inventory of perceived properties before and after the relevant experiential change, everything would be much the same; red things would still be red, squares would still be square, and so on. What has changed then? Central to delusional atmosphere is an aspect of experience that is seldom acknowledged, let alone described – what we might call the ‘sense of reality’: “the experience within which delusion takes place is that of experiencing and thinking that something is real” (GP, p.93). Having a sense of reality is not a matter of taking however many things to be real. Instead, it comprises a sense of *what it is to be real or unreal*. One might suggest that this amounts to no more than taking various propositions to be true or untrue, in other words to having beliefs. However, Jaspers recognises that a sense of reality is not exclusive to attitudes of belief; it is also integral to perceptual experience. When we perceive something, our perception incorporates not just a sense of ‘what it is’ but also a sense ‘that it is’. It appears as ‘there’, ‘present’, ‘part of the same world as the perceiver’. Delusion proper, he maintains, originates in an alteration of this ordinarily taken-for-granted sense of things as ‘there’, where nothing presents itself in that way anymore.

A sense of perceptual presence does not add up to a sense of reality; we can have a belief about what is the case without the relevant state of affairs being perceptually present at the time. However, Jaspers claims that the kind of conviction required for belief is parasitic upon a more fundamental experience of reality. If the experienced world were drained of the sense that things ‘are’, one’s judgements and assertions regarding what is the case would lack conviction. We can, Jaspers says, think up as many definitions of ‘reality’ as we want, but our thoughts about reality will never add up to a grasp of reality. What is needed is “something more that this purely logical concept of reality; there is also the reality we experience” (GP, pp.93-4). If we follow this line of thought, the position we end up with is more elaborate than the view that perceptual experience incorporates a changeable sense of things as ‘real’, upon which belief depends. There is more to a sense of reality than taking things to be
perceptually present and having beliefs. A sense of what it is to be ‘not there’ depends upon a sense of what it is to be ‘there’. More generally, a sense of what it is to be ‘not real’ depends upon a sense of what it is to be ‘real’. So other kinds of intentional state, such as imagining, remembering, anticipating, doubting, and so forth (all of which incorporate a sense of these distinctions) equally depend upon the experienced sense of reality. When that sense of reality is altered, their form is altered along with it (Ratcliffe, 2008; in press). Delusional atmosphere is thus an all-encompassing change in the shape of experience and thought.

One might be tempted to simply dismiss Jaspers’ view that perceptual experience incorporates a sense of reality, on the basis that it doesn’t reveal itself to first-person phenomenological reflection. Jaspers would acknowledge that most of us are oblivious to the sense of reality most of the time. It is so constant, so engrained, that it is overlooked and only reveals itself when it wavers. So it is not something that we first come to understand and only later apply to psychopathology. Rather, the relevant phenomenological achievement is made salient to us is in a second-person way, through permutations of the sense of reality reported by patients. It should be added that delusional atmosphere is not the only form of ‘unreality’ experience, as illustrated by various first-person accounts of ‘derealisation’ (GP, p.63). However, it is not entirely clear from Jaspers’ discussion how delusional atmosphere differs from other forms of unreality experience: is the difference one of intensity or are there also qualitative differences? Even so, he at least makes clear that certain delusional beliefs are symptomatic of *some kind of shift* in the structure of experience and, with it, the sense of reality. And this is why an emphasis upon specific belief contents is misplaced - such contents need be understood as originating in the context of a non-localised change in form. Indeed, Jaspers goes so far as to say that the content of the belief may well be largely “accidental” in some instances (GP, p.99).

What kinds of delusion are accommodated by Jaspers’ approach? Presumably, it applies to various delusions that occur in schizophrenia, some of which are elaborate and polythematic. But does it apply equally to the circumscribed, monothematic delusions that have been a focus of recent attention in philosophy and elsewhere? One problem is that delusions such as the Capgras and Cotard delusions are individuated by their contents. These contents are surely not epiphenomenal, given the frequency
of their occurrence. However, Jaspers’ account emphasises form and treats content as superficial at best. Thus, even if delusional atmosphere is necessary for the formation of monothematic delusions, it is surely not sufficient, as some additional factor is needed to account for the specificity of the belief. Even so, it is arguable that delusional atmosphere has some role to play here. It has been noted that monothematic delusions are not just associated with specific changes in perceptual content. In addition, there is often a change in the perceptual feel of everything. For example, as well as maintaining that an alleged impostor looks somehow different, a Capgras patient might complain of a more pervasive perceptual change, where “everything looks strange” and things “look painted or not natural” (Ellis and Young, 1990, p.240).

Something else that monothematic delusions share with other kinds of delusion is a resistance to change. As Jaspers observes, the delusional person will maintain the belief “in the face of all other experiences to the contrary and against all argument” (GP, p.104). He indicates that this too can be accounted for in terms of delusional atmosphere. Beliefs usually originate against the backdrop of a shared, social world. The sense of belonging to a public world, in which one occupies a contingent perspective, is integral to the sense of reality. Furthermore, an associated receptiveness to social norms and to the influence of other people plays a vital role in the formation and regulation of beliefs. It is this public world to which the status “incorrigible” ordinarily attaches. But, with the onset of delusional atmosphere, “socially accepted reality totters, people become adrift”, and reality “becomes reduced to an immediate and shifting present” (GP, p.104). So delusional atmosphere involves at least partial loss of a consensus reality, and thus erosion of a distinction between what is ‘part of the public world’ and what is ‘imagined by me’. Following this loss, a sense of stubborn conviction that attaches to many normal beliefs might remain, but it is no longer anchored to a public world, to a realm where beliefs can be questioned, debated, revised and abandoned. Delusional beliefs are thus formed without the constraining influence of that world, and are also insulated from interpersonal negotiation. The position Jaspers gestures towards here bears some resemblance to

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4 See Ratcliffe (2008, Chapters 5 and 6) for an account of how changes to the overall form of experience might dispose one towards specific belief contents, such as ‘I am dead’ or ‘my spouse has been replaced by a robot’.
Wittgenstein’s view that our beliefs rest upon a bedrock of ‘hinge’ propositions that are accepted as certain, which Campbell has appealed to in order to argue that some delusions are ‘hinge’ or ‘framework’ propositions (Wittgenstein, 1975; Campbell, 2001). The similarities are even more evident if it is accepted that what Wittgenstein calls a hinge ‘proposition’ is not really a proposition at all, but something habitual and non-conceptual in nature (Rhodes and Gipps, 2008).

**Delusions and Unintelligibility**

So far, I have outlined Jaspers’ view that delusional beliefs are embedded in a global change in the structure of experience, and emphasised that a sense of unreality is central to it. But how can ‘delusional atmosphere’ (and thus the nature of those delusional beliefs that arise within it) be further understood? Many have remarked that it is extremely difficult to describe. As Jaspers says, “description always proceeds by metaphor”. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that “it is impossible to express the experiences directly” (*GP*, p.62). He is surely right that people struggle to communicate such experiences. To quote Sass (1992, p.46), “even the most articulate schizophrenics are usually reduced to helplessly repeating the same, horribly inadequate phrase: everything is strange, or everything is somehow different”. However, that people have difficulty expressing something does not imply that its expression is impossible. Furthermore, even if the experience is not (or even cannot) be understood in the first-person, it might be possible for a phenomenologically sensitive interpreter to shed further light upon it. Jaspers instead maintains that the “primary experiences” underlying delusions proper are beyond the reach of phenomenological understanding:

If we try to get some closer understanding of these primary experiences of delusion, we soon find we cannot really appreciate these quite alien modes of experience. They remain largely incomprehensible, unreal and beyond our understanding. (*GP*, p.98)

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5 Also complementary is Sass’s analysis, according to which certain delusional utterances originate in forms of experience that involves loss of a public reality and thus a quasi-solipsistic predicament (e.g. Sass, 1994). It is also helpful, in my view, to consider the role sometimes played by a loss of ‘trust’, where trust is construed as a habitual background to experience and thought, rather than in terms of propositional attitudes (Bernstein, 2011). An all-pervasive breakdown of trust in oneself, the surrounding world and – principally - other people would amount to loss of a public reality that ordinarily operates as a backdrop to the formation and maintenance of beliefs. It would thus be a profound shift in how one finds oneself in the world (Earnshaw, 2011).

6 “Understanding” [*Verstehen*] is synonymous here with empathetic/phenomenological appreciation.
However, he does not make sufficiently clear where the limits lie. There cannot be a total embargo on phenomenological understanding here, as Jaspers himself offers a description of delusional atmosphere that incorporates some degree of empathetic insight. Furthermore, he indicates that the transition from atmosphere to belief is something we can make sense of. Delusional atmosphere incorporates a pervasive and unpleasant feeling of uncertainty. Those afflicted with it search for some “fixed point”, any fixed point, to which they can “cling”, and the delusional belief is the outcome of that search. Jaspers adds that this is akin to something we all do on occasion: “Whenever we find ourselves depressed, fearful or at a loss, the sudden clear consciousness of something, whether true or false, immediately has a soothing effect” (GP, p.98). Even so, he insists that primary delusions can only be grasped non-phenomenologically, in terms of a disease process:

Delusions proper are the vague crystallisations of blurred delusional experiences and diffuse, perplexing self-references which cannot be sufficiently understood in terms of the personality or the situation; they are much more the symptoms of a disease process that can be identified by the presence of other symptoms as well. (GP, p.107)

So it is not the transition from the experience to the belief that resists characterisation but the experience itself. And, insofar as we cannot understand delusions empathetically without understanding the core experiences that underlie them, delusions cannot be empathised with. However, Jaspers’ account suffers from a lack of clarity over what it is to “emerge comprehensively from other psychic events” (GP, pp.106-7). Just what are the limits of phenomenological comprehension? Surely, it is not restricted to the domain of rational or non-rational inferences from perceived or misperceived states of affairs, given that Jaspers himself stresses – on apparently phenomenological grounds – the limitations of thinking about delusions in such a way. And what is the nature of the alleged limit; is it something specific to human psychology or are there grounds for making a stronger claim to the effect that no empathising consciousness of any kind could ever comprehend the relevant phenomenon?  

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7 See Henriksen (in press) for a recent discussion of incomprehensibility in schizophrenia.
Regardless of where Jaspers might draw the line, I want to suggest that further phenomenological understanding of delusional atmosphere is possible. Nevertheless, it should also be acknowledged that the kinds of experiential transformation Jaspers addresses are somehow qualitatively different from and much harder to empathise with than more mundane phenomenological differences between people. As Rhodes and Gipps (2008, p.299) observe, there is a “vertiginous feeling” that we have; we are confronted with something that “puts a strain on the foundations of our comprehension of the world”. Why is this? The problem is not specific to delusional atmosphere. It applies to any experiential change that involves a shift not just in mental state contents but in a way of ‘finding oneself in the world’ that such contents presuppose. Although the relevant aspect of experience is seldom recognised, it is a consistent theme in the phenomenological tradition.\footnote{Most of the work I am thinking of appeared after the publication of the first edition of Jaspers’ \textit{General Psychopathology} in 1913. So I am not suggesting that Jaspers should have taken it into account. Rather, I am exploring how his insights might be further clarified and elaborated in the light of subsequent thought.} For instance, Husserl (e.g. 1973, 1989) addresses a sense of the world’s existence that is presupposed by our various experiences and thoughts. That both parties share the same ‘world’, in this sense of the term, is something that empathetic understanding ordinarily overlooks; the possibility of difference at that level is not even entertained. Instead, the world is taken for granted as a shared backdrop, as something that \textit{we} belong to. For Husserl and others, this presupposed phenomenological achievement does not take the form of a belief with the content ‘the world exists’; it is comprised of a bodily, non-conceptual, habitual sense of practical dwelling, which \textit{-} in the usual case \textit{--} is taken as certain (Ratcliffe, forthcoming). This ‘world’ is also a central theme in phenomenological psychopathology. Many anomalous experiences are claimed to involve changes in how we find ourselves in the world (and thus in the form of all experience and thought), rather than more superficial phenomenological changes that occur against an intact backdrop of belonging.\footnote{For some recent statements, see, for example, Sass (2003), Stanghellini (2004), Rhodes and Gipps (2008) and Fuchs (in press).} It is this difference, I suggest, that accounts for why delusional atmosphere is both qualitatively different from and also more difficult to understand than more familiar kinds of experience. Outside of the phenomenological tradition, the relevant aspect of experience is seldom acknowledged, let alone characterised, and so alterations in its structure are both hard
to comprehend and easy to misinterpret in terms of more specific perceptual or thought contents.

However, changes in the form of experience are, in my view, not quite as exotic as Jaspers’ account might suggest. The sense of ‘finding oneself in the world’ shifts in a range of different and often subtle ways, not just in psychiatric illness but throughout the course of everyday life. Many of these shifts also incorporate alterations in the sense of reality (as one would expect if phenomenologists such as Husserl are right to maintain that a sense of the world’s existence is inextricable from a sense of practical belonging). I refer to the many variants of our sense of reality and belonging as ‘existential feelings’, examples of which include the following:

People sometimes talk of feeling alive, dead, distant, detached, dislodged, estranged, isolated, otherworldly, indifferent to everything, overwhelmed, suffocated, cut off, lost, disconnected, out of sorts, not oneself, out of touch with things, out of it, not quite with it, separate, in harmony with things, at peace with things or part of things. There are references to feelings of unreality, heightened existence, surreality, familiarity, unfamiliarity, strangeness, isolation, emptiness, belonging, being at home in the world, being at one with things, significance, insignificance, and the list goes on. People also sometimes report that ‘things just don’t feel right’, ‘I’m not with it today’, ‘I just feel a bit removed from it all at the moment’, ‘I feel out of it’ or ‘it feels strange’. (Ratcliffe, 2008, p.68)

More elaborate descriptions of existential feeling often feature in literature, and they are also a common theme in first-person accounts of psychiatric illness. Delusional atmosphere, I suggest, is a kind of existential feeling or - more likely - several subtly different kinds. If we accept that less extreme changes in the form of experience are fairly widespread, such phenomena are perhaps not so far removed from everyday experience as they might seem. Of course, supplying a name, and adding that something may not be so unfamiliar after all, does not amount to a better understanding of what the relevant experiences consist of or how they differ from each other. However, I will now suggest that we can further refine our understanding of delusional atmosphere by turning to the phenomenology of possibility.
The Phenomenology of Possibility

Existential feelings in general are difficult to describe (even if it is accepted that some of them are fairly commonplace). As discussed, one problem is that they involve shifts in a sense of reality and belonging that is seldom an explicit object of reflection or discussion. A further problem is that everything can appear much the same as before and yet profoundly different, as illustrated by Jaspers’ description of delusional atmosphere. I have suggested elsewhere that the nature of this difference can be understood once we acknowledge the phenomenological role of possibility (e.g. Ratcliffe, 2008; in press; forthcoming). An important theme in Husserl’s work (e.g. 1973, 1989), later developed in a largely complementary way by Merleau-Ponty (1962), is the ‘horizontal’ structure of experience. In brief, when we see an entity, such as a cup, Husserl maintains that we not only see what actually appears to us at the time. We perceive an object of a certain type, rather than a two-dimensional image that is subsequently inferred to be the appearance of such an object. Husserl proposes that this phenomenological achievement is to be accounted for in terms of possibilities. The object appears as something that I might walk around in order to reveal a hidden side, and also as something that is accessible to some or all of the other senses. In addition, it appears as something that is actually or potentially available to other people. These various kinds of possibility together form a structured system, which Husserl calls the entity’s ‘horizon’.

Elaborating on Husserl’s approach (in ways that I think he would have endorsed), I want to maintain that experience incorporates practical as well as perceptual possibilities, for oneself as well as for others, some of which take the form of potential activities and others potential happenings. These possibilities present themselves as significant in various different ways. Something might appear as ‘useable’ in some context of practical activity or perhaps, more specifically, as ‘something to be grasped right now’. A potential activity might appear urgent, non-urgent, difficult, effortless, pleasant, unpleasant, relevant to some future goal or ongoing project, and so on. Experience incorporates many other kinds of significant possibility too, including possibilities that include other people in various ways. According to Husserl, the various possibilities that the world offers are inextricable from our bodily phenomenology. Bodily constraints, capacities and dispositions are implicated in whether or not something is perceivable and equally, I suggest, in
whether and how it might be practically significant. It is through our bodies that we experience the various kinds of possibility offered by the world. Jaspers likewise maintains that perception of the world is inextricable from our bodily phenomenology. The body, he says, is a “background for consciousness” (GP, p.88).

If something along roughly these lines is accepted, we can begin to further interpret phenomena such as delusional atmosphere. Of course, a change in the possibilities that one experiences could amount only to a localised difference in the content of perception. A cup would look different if it no longer appeared as ‘something to be picked up or seen from another angle’, but this would not amount to an all-enveloping transformation of the form of experience. However, I suggest that shifts in existential feeling, including delusional atmosphere, can be understood in terms of changes in the kinds of possibility that experience incorporates. Suppose that nothing presented itself as practically significant in any way, that one inhabited a realm from which that kind of possibility, rather than just some of its instances, was altogether absent. This would surely amount to a profound transformation of the sense of reality and belonging. Nothing would appear quite ‘there’, given that an appreciation of being able to act upon one’s environment in ways that have significant consequences is integral to a sense of being part of the world. There is plenty of testimony to suggest that experiential changes like this can indeed happen. Changes in the sense of reality can take many other forms too. Some involve the diminution or absence of ‘possibilities for others’, the result being erosion of the distinction between one’s own perspective and a shared public world. And there are various other kinds of alteration in the shape of interpersonal possibilities. For example, people might cease to offer possibilities such as support and communion, and instead appear only in the guise of threat (Ratcliffe, 2008).

It is important to add that the horizontal structure of experience is dynamic. As Husserl (e.g. 1973) emphasises, one anticipates the realisation of possibilities. When they are realised, further possibilities present themselves, and the process proceeds in a structured fashion. Anticipation, Husserl suggests, ordinarily takes the form of habitual certainty. As one walks across the road, it is taken as given that one’s foot will again find itself upon a hard, flat surface. As one opens the kitchen door in the context of routine activity, one presupposes that the room will appear much as it
always does. Against this backdrop of certainty, there are localised experiences of doubt and uncertainty. Hence significant possibilities are not always experienced as ‘merely possible’; they can also appear in the guise of different forms of anticipation - as certain, uncertain or doubtful, with certainty being the default mode. And what is anticipated may or may not be realised, the resultant experience involving fulfilment of expectation or surprise. Different kinds of significance can be attached to both anticipated and actualised possibilities. For example, anticipated novelty can take the form of excitement or dread, and a surprise can be nice or nasty. Certain changes in existential feeling can be understood in terms of global changes to this anticipation-fulfilment structure. For example, everything might present itself as contingent, changeable, unpredictable, in a way that could amount to a feeling of insecurity, of being lost, adrift. Alternatively, everything might present itself as surprising. Here, anticipation does not take the form of doubt or uncertainty. Instead, everything appears somehow contrary to what was anticipated. Again, this could take different forms. Everything might appear mysterious, intriguing and new. Alternatively, things might look odd in a disturbing, menacing way. We can thus begin to appreciate how everything might look ‘the same but different’. Actual properties of entities, such as colour and shape, may be unchanged. But the kinds of possibility that frame one’s experience and thought have changed and nothing presents itself as offering quite what it used to.

Such an approach further illustrates why an appreciation of existential feeling and, more specifically, delusional atmosphere demands a distinctive form of empathy. When we empathise with people in more mundane contexts, we tend to take for granted that both parties inhabit a common modal space. In other words, we assume that others have access to the same kinds of possibility that we do, regardless of how much their various experience and thought contents may differ from our own. What is required in order to empathise with different forms of world experience is a kind of empathy that acknowledges the presupposed world as a phenomenological achievement and also recognises its variability. One needs to suspend the assumption of a shared modal space in order to contemplate changes in the kinds of possibility that experience incorporates. So, rather than maintaining that delusions proper are incomprehensible, it is arguable that phenomenological understanding can progress further – to some extent at least – through a kind of “radical empathy” (Ratcliffe,
Others have similarly pointed out that empathy can proceed further once the shared world we habitually take as certain is recognised as a fragile phenomenological accomplishment. For example, Henriksen (in press) describes the empathetic project of attempting to “reconstruct the altered framework in schizophrenia” and understand its effect upon a person’s experiences and thoughts. Rhodes and Gipps (2008, p.299) adopt a similar approach, in maintaining that we can “pursue the imaginative exercise of temporarily suspending those certainties that constitute the bedrock of our reason itself, certainties that are implicitly challenged by the delusional belief”.

One might respond on behalf of Jaspers that this kind of empathy is simply impossible, but Jaspers does not consider its possibility. So it is tempting to simply assert that the onus of proof is upon the proponent of incomprehensibility. However, a positive case can also be made for it by pointing to all those instances where alterations in the form of experience have been described, in phenomenological psychopathology and elsewhere (Ratcliffe, 2008; in press). For instance, Sass (1992, 1994) and others have offered elaborate accounts of forms of experience that nurture the development of delusions, thus illuminating what Jaspers claimed to be incomprehensible. Even if one were to dismiss a specific phenomenological account as false or at least questionable, such accounts still serve to illustrate that this kind of enquiry is possible.

What, then, does ‘delusional atmosphere’ involve? My aim here has been to sketch an approach for further understanding it, rather than to offer a comprehensive characterisation. However, I will briefly mention three features that appear central to some or all instances of delusional atmosphere. First of all, as mentioned by Jaspers and developed in considerable detail by Sass (e.g. 1994), there can be a change in

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10 In order to empathise in this way, one need not have an explicit, articulate grasp of what one is doing. By implication, one need not construe it in terms of possibility. Indeed, I do not wish to maintain that it can only be articulated in those terms. This is just my own preferred way of conveying it.

11 However, Rhodes and Gipps (2008) do not make sufficiently clear the distinction between the form and content of experience. In appealing to Wittgensteinian hinge propositions, their account could refer equally to deeply entrenched experiential contents and to the experiential form that I have characterised as a possibility space.

12 As Sass and Parnas (2007, p.65) remark, “a phenomenological understanding of a disturbed overall mode of consciousness or lived-world may allow one to make sense out of seemingly bizarre actions and beliefs that might otherwise seem completely incomprehensible”.

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one’s sense of inhabiting a shared, public world, which involves loss of certain kinds of interpersonal possibility from experience. The line between ‘my experience’ and ‘how the world is’ becomes blurred, the result being a quasi-solipsistic predicament. As Sass observes, this is generally accompanied by practical disengagement and passivity. The world no longer solicits practical activity in the usual way, and one’s relationship with it becomes oddly voyeuristic. Yet objects are not entirely devoid of significance. Although they do not invite activity, they seem strange, somehow fascinating, perhaps horrifying. So there remains a kind of perceptual curiosity. Lopez-Ibor (1982) offers an account of this, according to which there is a diminished sense of agency and, with it, a loss of practical solicitation from the world. Instead of things appearing significant in relation to one’s own agency, a seemingly autonomous significance emanates from them, and everything therefore looks strangely different.

A third aspect that is central to many descriptions (including Jaspers’ own) is an all-enveloping sense of novelty or surprise. This, I suggest, is plausibly accounted for in terms of a structural change in the interplay between anticipation and fulfilment. Perhaps expectation of some kind remains, but one never has a sense of its fulfilment. Hence everything seems odd; there is a pervasive feeling of its being somehow contrary to how it should be. Something like this would happen if, for example, one still anticipated perceiving things as practically significant but lacked the ability to experience anything in that way. Here, experience would lack possibilities of kind $p$, but retain a sense of $q$, where $q$ is the possibility of $p$. In contrast, it could be that a certain form of anticipation is lacking, that one no longer anticipates possibilities of type $p$ but remains capable of experiencing their fulfilment. An account along such lines would be consistent with Lopez-Ibor’s view. For example, anticipated practical significance might be lacking, due to a diminished sense of being a locus of projects and agency. At the same time, things might still present themselves as significant. However, that significance would no longer be anchored to one’s pursuits in any way and so everything would look strange, perhaps unpleasantly so. I am not sure that we need to choose between these two scenarios. It could be that ‘delusional atmosphere’

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13 Sheets-Johnstone (2007) considers the phenomenological role of something like ‘surprise’ in many instances of schizophrenia. There is an interesting contrast here between the world of at least some schizophrenic people and the world of depression, as the latter involves no anticipation that anything could ever be relevantly different to one’s current predicament and no sense of novelty either (Ratcliffe, 2010).
is heterogeneous, and accommodates a wide range of subtly different changes in the form of experience. And it is worth noting that Jaspers does not restrict the term ‘atmosphere’ to ‘delusional atmosphere’. He acknowledges that there are other kinds of variation in this aspect of experience. For example, “just as the perceptual world may be experienced as something strange or dead, so it can be experienced as something entirely fresh and of overpowering beauty” (GP, p.63). However, there is a fine line between the uncomfortable, uncanny strangeness that he emphasises in the delusional case and a sense of the world as wonderfully mysterious, novel and profound, and it is arguable that both variants have ‘delusional forms’. In any case, the issue is – I suggest – amenable to further phenomenological investigation. Hence, in summary, Jaspers’ work provides us with a valuable starting point for a detailed, nuanced phenomenological study of changes in the overall form of experience, along with a treasure trove of first-person descriptions and insightful remarks. However, he gives up too early, having adopted a conception of empathy that is overly restrictive.

Belief
An issue that I have not yet addressed is whether the delusional ‘beliefs’ that crystallise out of delusional atmosphere are indeed beliefs. Granted, Jaspers maintains that they are secondary and that an over-emphasis upon belief distracts from the primary phenomenon. Even so, the question can still be asked. But, in my view, the conclusion Jaspers’ discussion points towards is that there cannot be a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. It is doubtful that a univocal notion of ‘belief’ is tenable, as least where changes in the form of experience are concerned. So it is not clear whether or not delusions are beliefs because it is not clear what the limits of the category ‘belief’ are. First of all, it is important to distinguish a sense of belonging to a world from specific belief contents. For example, if someone complains that he doubts the world’s existence, that belief could take the form of assenting to the proposition ‘it is possible that the world does not exist’. Alternatively, it could originate in a changed form of experience, where everything seems unreal to the extent that one’s habitual, practical confidence in the world’s existence can no longer be maintained (GP, pp.93-4). As Jaspers says of severe derealisation, “patients have to handle things to make sure they are really still there, have to convince themselves of the existence of the ground by stamping on it. (GP, p.63)
So the first thing to be decided is whether ‘belief’ applies to contents that one accepts in the context of an already given world and also changes in the form of experience, or just the former. A further complication is that a change in the overall shape of experience not only disposes one towards certain beliefs; it also alters the form of belief. The sense of conviction that attitudes of ‘belief’ incorporate is variable in structure. In the context of a world that seems unreal, all of one’s utterances lack the kind of conviction that is ordinarily associated with belief. And it is not clear whether these utterances amount to a different kind of belief or to an attitude other than belief. One might restrict ‘belief’ to more everyday instances of conviction. But it is arguable that everyday beliefs also involve various different kinds of conviction. My belief that I will die, when it takes the form of a profound and dreadful revelation, is quite different from my belief that I had porridge for breakfast this morning, even though I might be equally convinced of both (Ratcliffe and Booth, unpublished). Shifts in the sense of reality and belonging can affect the form (or forms) of belief in a range of ways. To quote Jaspers:

Belief in reality can range through all degrees, from a mere play with possibilities via a double reality – the empirical and the delusional – to unequivocal attitudes in which the delusional content reigns as the sole and absolute reality. (GP, p.106)

Talk of a ‘double reality’ is not intended simply to suggest that there is a halfway house between entertaining possibilities and being certain of something, where one oscillates between believing that $p$ and not believing that $p$. Instead, Jaspers is drawing attention to an altered form of experience where the person seems at the same time to believe that $p$ believe that not $p$. She inhabits a delusional reality where $p$ is the case, but she keeps one foot in consensus reality where $p$ is not the case. The phenomenology of this ‘double bookkeeping’ is further described by Sass (1994, p.3):

Many schizophrenic patients seem to experience their delusions and hallucinations as having a special quality or feel that sets these apart from their ‘real’ beliefs and perceptions, or from reality as experienced by the ‘normal’ person. Indeed, such patients often seem to have a surprising, and rather disconcerting, kind of insight into their own condition.
Jaspers also indicates that there are various other kinds of conviction. For example, certain compulsive beliefs involve believing that \( p \) while knowing \( p \) to be false; “a \textit{struggle} ensues between the conviction and knowing the opposite to be true” (\textit{GP}, pp.134-5). Hence believing something cannot simply be identified with taking it to be the case or knowing it to be true.\(^{14}\) The issue of whether or not the term ‘belief’ should be restricted to attitudes that arise in the context of certain forms of experience but not others (and, if so, which ones and why) has not been systematically addressed, let alone resolved. It is therefore unclear whether or not utterances and associated convictions that are symptomatic of experiential form \( x \) and those that are symptomatic of experiential form \( y \) should both count as beliefs. Thus, Jaspers’ account not only suggests that the question of whether or not delusions are beliefs is secondary. It also points (in my view, at least) towards the conclusion that the question has been formulated in too simplistic a way. In so doing, it illustrates how engagement with psychopathology has the potential to both complicate and illuminate philosophers’ conceptions of ‘belief’.

**Non-Phenomenological Understanding**

Phenomenology is only one aspect of Jaspers’ \textit{General Psychopathology}, and he acknowledges that phenomenological understanding alone does not add up to a comprehensive appreciation of the relevant phenomena. Indeed, he states that the phenomenological attitude is only “one point of view among many and holds a subordinate position at that” (\textit{GP}, p.48). The question thus arises as to whether and how we might relate his insights to current non-phenomenological work on delusions. A word of caution is needed here. Jaspers does not restrict a psychological understanding of meanings to the context of ‘phenomenological understanding’. Hence it would be wrong to construe his contrast between ‘phenomenological’ and ‘non-phenomenological’ solely in terms of a contrast between ‘phenomenological’ and ‘causal-mechanistic’.\(^{15}\) However, my concern here is more specifically with the latter. I have already made clear why Jaspers parts company with ‘perceptual content plus belief’ models: they fail to acknowledge the nature of delusional atmosphere and its driving role, and any non-phenomenological approach premised upon such models.

\(^{14}\) See Hunter (2011) for a detailed discussion of such ‘alienated beliefs’.

\(^{15}\) See Sass (this volume) for a good discussion of Jaspers on phenomenological and non-phenomenological understanding.
would equally fail to do so. There is, however, at least one neurobiological approach that is consistent with much of what Jaspers says: the ‘predictive coding’ approach.\footnote{Thanks to Andy Clark for pointing out to me the relevance of research on predictive coding.} The basic idea is that cognition is centrally concerned with successful prediction. At a non-phenomenological or ‘subpersonal’ level, the brain is sensitive to mismatches between what is expected and what actually occurs. In the event of a mismatch, an error signal is generated, which triggers processes that work to reduce or eliminate future mismatches. It has been suggested that at least some delusions arise due to a global misalignment between predictions and error signals. As a result, everything presents itself as different from what was expected, despite the absence of genuine conflict between expected and actual perceived properties. The phenomenological correlate of this is the mundane looking salient, in ways that are consistent with the all-enveloping sense of strangeness that features in delusional atmosphere. It has been suggested that delusional beliefs arise out of a need to somehow account for what has happened, again complementing Jaspers’ view. As Corlett et al. (2009, p.1) put it:

Prediction error theories of delusion formation suggest that under the influence of inappropriate prediction error signal, possibly as a consequence of dopamine dysregulation, events that are insignificant and merely coincident seem to demand attention, feel important and relate to each other in meaningful ways. Delusions ultimately arise as a means of explaining these odd experiences.

Corlett et al. maintain that a pervasive change in the appearance of things is associated with an unpleasant sense of uncertainty. There is a felt need to resolve that uncertainty by latching onto anything that might make sense of what has happened, thus re-establishing a degree of order and predictability: “a delusion represents an explanatory mechanism, an attempt to impose order on a disordered perceptual and cognitive world” (Corlett et al, 2010, p.348). Hence we have a non-phenomenological explanation that complements Jaspers’ view of delusions as tension-relievers that crystallise out of delusional atmosphere: “affectively charged uncertainty drives delusion formation, through establishment of predictive associations that, while maladaptive, represent attempts to render the world more predictable” (Corlett et al, 2010, p.353). Of course, there is much more to be said. The relevant disturbance might involve expected events failing to occur, unexpected events occurring or both.
Furthermore, a global failure of anticipation and a resultant sense of unexpectedness could take many different forms. Things might look strangely unfamiliar, somehow fascinating, utterly novel, threatening or horrifying. More fine-tuning and clarification is thus required at both the phenomenological and non-phenomenological levels. Nevertheless, the parallels between the two approaches at least point to the potential for mutual enrichment. For example, subtle phenomenological distinctions between variants of delusional atmosphere might help facilitate different versions of prediction error theory, while a non-phenomenological emphasis on prediction error might serve to corroborate phenomenological accounts that appeal to a global shift in the form of experience, involving changes in the anticipation-fulfilment relation.

References


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