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Why we are not all novelists

Shaun Gallagher

University of Wollongong, shaung@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

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Keywords

we, why, not, novelists, all

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Why We Are Not All Novelists

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Abstract In this chapter I consider one of the necessary conditions for being a novelist, the ability to open up and sustain a fictional world. My approach will draw from psychopathology, phenomenology and neuroscience. Using the phenomenological concept of “multiple realities,” I argue that the novelist is in some ways like and in some ways unlike someone who experiences delusions insofar as the novelist can enter into a sustained engagement with an alternative reality. I suggest, however, that, compared with the delusional subject, the novelist has better control of the mechanisms that allow for this sustained engagement.

Keywords Multiple realities • Delusions • Capgras • Creativity • Novelist

The title of this paper derives from a *Times Literary Supplement* essay by Daniel Dennett (1988).¹ This was the original essay in which Dennett outlined his concept of narrative self as abstract center of narrative gravity. According to Dennett, we cannot help but spin narratives about ourselves—some of them fictional. Quite obviously, however, in another sense, we are not all *novelists* in the way that Henry James, Jane Austen, or Franz Kafka are novelists. These novelists have a talent for

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¹The published title of Dennett’s essay is “Why everyone is a novelist.” The essay is cited by many authors as “Why we are all novelists,” including Dennett himself (e.g., Dennett 1989). The essay also appears as “The self as the center of narrative gravity” (Dennett 1991).

S. Gallagher (✉)

University of Memphis, Memphis, TN, USA

Faculty of Law, Humanities, and the Arts, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia
e-mail: s.gallagher@memphis.edu

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spinning stories that seemingly involves an ability to imagine a sustained scenario and to portray characters in an invented world. In this paper, I consider one of the necessary but not sufficient conditions for being a novelist (and possibly other kinds of creative artists), connected with an idea of creativity that involves the ability to open up and sustain a fictional world. My approach will draw from psychology, phenomenology and neuroscience. It will also involve an extended detour through psychopathology.

1 Two Experiments from Stanford

Let me start by considering a now classic experiment—the Stanford Prison Experiment (Zimbardo 1973). In this experiment, 24 male students played the roles of prisoners and guards in a mock prison at Stanford University to study the psychology of imprisonment. The planned 2-week experiment was cancelled after 6 days because an external visiting researcher was shocked at the behavior of the “guards” who were brutalizing and degrading the “prisoners.” She insisted it be stopped for ethical reasons. Indeed, five of the previously healthy student “prisoners” were suffering from extreme stress and pathological behavior; the others were in a “zombie-like” attitude entirely submissive to domineering guards. Despite their treatment, the participants stayed in the game and forgot they were free to leave. Even the research staff and experimenters (who went home in the evenings) went along with the guards’ behavior when at the experiment site.

A more recent experiment from Stanford is Natalie Phillips’ Jane Austen experiment (Thompson and Vedantam 2012). This is an ongoing cross-disciplinary fMRI study at Stanford. Subjects read a chapter of one of Austen’s novels employing one of two styles of attention: close reading (literary analysis) or pleasure reading. The results have shown that brain activity goes far beyond differences in “executive function” or attentional mechanisms. Absorbed or immersed reading of Jane Austen showed activation of areas across the entire brain—not just language areas and attention areas, but also “areas associated with physical activity and movement, parts of the brain we use to place ourselves spatially in the world, as though the readers were actually physically present in the story” (Natalie Phillips, cited in Thompson and Vedantam 2012). It seems that it’s not just the whole brain that is involved, but that changes in experiences of self and environment are involved.

In both of these Stanford University experiments, for better or for worse, the participants found themselves immersed in scenarios that are not commensurable with their everyday reality. In the case of reading a novel, one gets immersed in a world that opens up on the page. In the prison experiment, the participants seemed to get immersed in a reality that went beyond what they were really trying to do—they lost track of the fact that it was a psychology experiment and that they were doing science. How should we explain this?

2 The Phenomenology of Multiple Realities

What happens in these experiments is not merely cognitive; one way we might think about this is to refer to what the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz (1974) called “multiple realities” or “finite provinces of meaning,” following a suggestion made by William James (1890, II, pp. 291–306) about sub-universes or sub-worlds. Schutz described *paramount reality* as the reality of shared everyday meanings and practices that we normally engage in. This is the default everyday world where we work, earn our salary, socialize, enjoy family life, and so forth. But there are also multiple other, alternative “realities” that take us away from everyday or paramount reality. We find them by reading a novel, attending a theatrical play or the cinema, playing a videogame. In such cases, we escape into a different sort of reality that opens up on the page, on the stage, or on the screen.

Entering into such alternative realities involves not just an intellectual transition; the status of the self changes. The participants in the Stanford prison experiment were surprised by a complete change in their own behavior that was atypical and contrary to how they normally thought of themselves. In reading a novel, I may not have a role to play as myself; or I may modulate my self-narrative to fit an appropriate role within the alternative reality. I may identify with one or more of the characters presented in these different media. In dreams—or even daydreams or various fantasies—I may more actively play a part as myself, or as a modified variation of myself, but not one that I usually play in my everyday reality.

Pretend play in childhood may be a forerunner of what we experience in the transition to an alternative reality. Pretend play has traditionally been defined as “symbolic play” involving linguistic capabilities (Huttenlocher and Higgins 1978) and internal representational and intellectualist meta-representational capacities (Leslie 1987). It’s possible, however, to take a less intellectualistic or cognitivist and a more enactivist approach to pretend play.

Following a more enactive view, for example, Zuzanna Rucinska (2014) suggests that the ability to see playful affordances *in* objects (Currie 2004), combined with embodied actions, is sufficient for constituting some basic types of pretend play. Sensorimotor skills take over the role of *off-line* imaginative capacities; they provide support for *on-line* perceptual-imaginative capacities based on direct perception, where the seeing of affordances motivates action. For example, 18-month old infants, with presumably limited linguistic and conceptual capacities relative to adult cognition, are capable of basic object-substitution pretense, as in the example of pretending that a banana is a phone (e.g., Sainsbury 2009). It seems unlikely, however, that the infant is engaging in a manipulation of propositions, symbols, or offline representations in order to effect the pretense. In such pretend play, the infant literally manipulates the banana—grasps it and puts it to her ear. In doing so, specifically, *in the doing itself*, she treats the banana metaphorically. The metaphor at stake, however, is not sitting someplace in her head; it’s in her hand and in the movement that she makes with the banana. She constitutes the metaphor by her action. She, in effect, enacts the metaphor. This can happen,

as Mitchell (2002, p. 8) puts it, “within any medium—including bodily actions, gestures and sounds [...] and has considerable consequence, in that it allows organisms to *experience* something *as* something else—a doll as a baby, a stick as a horse [...] which is essential for pretence.”

Seeing or imagining an affordance is not a passive process; it involves a transformation—it involves *acting-as-if* or *seeing* something *as* something else. On the overly-intellectualist view, imaginative transformation is simply to “substitute one thought content for another,” thus, “accessing and controlling inputs (beliefs and desires) to the acts of imaginative projection that underpin pretence” (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, p. 140). This interpretation relies heavily on belief-like states and thinking processes to underpin such abilities. “In pretence one acts under a supposition, for example, that the box I am sitting in is a car; in suppositional mode one can also consider an idea, draw consequences from it, consider the evidence for it, and compare it with other ideas” (Currie 2004, p. 233). It’s not clear, however, that the infant is doing any of this when she literally grasps the banana as a phone or drives the box as a car.

The point is that entering an alternative reality is not just a matter of an intellectual change; and it is not just a matter of sensory-motor contingencies either. As Rucinska points out with respect to pretend play, affective and intersubjective dimensions are also involved. My actions or virtual actions are often different in these different realities than they are in everyday existence. I may experience existential changes involving a transformation of background familiarity, different involvements, feelings, and salencies, all adding up to different senses of reality (see Ratcliffe 2008).

The “realities” and the rules that apply within them are not necessarily commensurable with each other. From the perspective of everyday reality, “I didn’t really slay a dragon; rather, I was playing a game.” There are normally clear transitions as I move from one reality to another. The theater, for example, is a kind of doorway into a different reality. At some level, when I enter into a virtual world, I keep track of that fact from the perspective of everyday reality. I know at some level, for example, that I am playing a game. I can distance myself from the various roles that I might play or fantasize about. In this respect, immersion in the alternative reality may be by degree—typically, it’s relatively easy for me to enter or leave it. One possible exception to this ease of transition from one reality to another can be found in cases of delusion.

3 Delusions

In working out how we transition from one reality to another, the case of delusion offers some important clues. Here I need to make a long detour through a discussion of delusion before I can get back to the issue of why it is that we are not all novelists.

The understanding of delusions in fields of psychiatry, psychology, and philosophy of mind has been formed by orthodox conceptions of cognition; in this

regard, delusions are understood in terms of various things going wrong inside the head of the subject. Many theorists explain delusions in terms of representational/computational conceptions of the mind and brain, and they are clinically characterized in terms of belief-desire (folk) psychology. In the influential [DSM 4](#), delusion is defined as: “a false belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly sustained despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary. The belief is not one ordinarily accepted by other members of the person’s culture or subculture.”²

Some accounts of delusions are top-down or rationalist ([Campbell 2001](#)); such approaches retain an overly-intellectualized view of delusions as problems with self-referential theory of mind or self-narrative (e.g., [Graham and Stephens 1994](#); [Stephens and Graham 2000](#)). In discussing delusions of control and thought insertion, for example, [Graham and Stephens](#), following [Dennett and Flanagan](#), refer to “our proclivity for constructing self-referential narratives.” The fact that we are all novelists, in [Dennett’s](#) sense, allows us to explain our behavior retrospectively. “Such explanations amount to a sort of theory of the person’s agency or intentional psychology” (1994, p. 101). Subjects typically make sense of their actions retrospectively in the context of a set of consistent beliefs and desires.

[Normally] the subject’s sense of agency regarding her thoughts [. . .] depends on her belief that these mental episodes are expressions of her intentional states. That is, whether the subject regards an episode of thinking occurring in her psychological history as something she does, as her mental action, depends on whether she finds its occurrence explicable in terms of her theory or story of her own underlying intentional states. ([Graham and Stephens 1994](#), p. 102).

Delusions, in this view, involve *inferential mistakes* that first show up at the attributional level where we make judgments about agency. “On our account, what is critical is that the subject find her thoughts inexplicable in terms of beliefs about her intentional states” ([Graham and Stephens 1994](#), p. 105).

Other accounts of delusions are bottom-up or empiricist ([Hohwy and Rosenberg 2005](#); [Gallagher 2004](#)). On this view, problems with the sense of agency in regard to delusions of control would show up initially at the level of first-order experience, that is, in our pre-reflective experience or feeling rather than judgment of agency. Such anomalous experience would likely be due to disruptions in neuronal processes that correlate with the pre-reflective sense of agency for action, and have been

²There is some improvement in defining delusion in [DSM-5](#), insofar as there is no mention of “false belief,” but it is still cast in terms of belief and the notion of veracity is still present: “Delusions are fixed beliefs that are not amenable to change in light of conflicting evidence. [. . .] Delusions are deemed bizarre if they are clearly implausible and not understandable to same-culture peers and do not derive from ordinary life experiences. [. . .] The distinction between a delusion and a strongly held idea is sometimes difficult to make and depends in part on the degree of conviction with which the belief is held despite clear or reasonable contradictory evidence regarding its veracity.”

explained in terms of sensory-motor comparator (Frith 1992) or filtering (Langland-Hassan 2008) models. Retrospective *attributions* or judgments of agency, rather than originating the problem, would be reports (possibly veridical reports) of this first-order *experience*.

Neither top-down accounts nor bottom-up accounts, however, on their own, are able to explain all aspects of delusions. *Top-down/rationalist accounts* refer to problems with framework beliefs or propositions (Campbell 2001) or, as we've seen, faulty introspective attribution (Graham and Stephens 1994). Some aspects of delusions remain puzzling, however. (1) The mechanism problem: top-down accounts fail to give a good explanation of how or why things go wrong on the neuronal level—if they did, the explanation would become bottom-up or hybrid. (2) The consistency problem: not all of the subject's beliefs (even those governed by a problematic framework belief) are delusional. Why are attributions or judgments so selective? For example, one finds inconsistencies in the case of Capgras delusion where a subject may claim that his wife is an imposter but fail to wonder what happened to his "real" wife. (3) The double bookkeeping problem: patients don't always act on their delusional beliefs. If delusions are beliefs (albeit false and fixed), folk psychology predicts that they will be acted upon.

Likewise, *bottom-up/empiricist accounts*, where delusions are not considered false beliefs but primarily anomalous experiences, are unable to explain a number of problems. These accounts fail to solve: (1) The poverty of experience problem: anomalous or alien experiences are not sufficient to explain the floridly complex and extravagant delusions that are sometimes found in advanced schizophrenia. (2) The specificity problem: despite the putative neural dysfunction (a broken mechanism of some kind), not all of the subject's experiences are delusional, and there is some commonality of theme among the delusional ones. For example, some actions are experienced as controlled, but not all actions; and some familiar people seem to be imposters while others do not. If neural dysfunction is only occasional, however, then delusions should be arbitrary, but they're more consistent than that.

Still other accounts are hybrid, combining elements of top-down and bottom-up explanations (e.g., Garety et al. 2001; Kapur 2003). These may be two-factor accounts where a first factor (some neuronal problem) causes an anomalous experience, and a second factor, e.g., retrospective attribution confounds the experience and takes it to the more extravagant extremes. This may get around the poverty of experience problem. But two factor approaches tend to be either more top-down (the delusion originates in the retrospective attribution) or more bottom-up (the experience itself is delusional), and they respectively run into one or more of the leftover problems mentioned above.

Notice, however, that on all of these accounts, delusions are still "in the head"—delusions are either the result of something going wrong at a cognitive or metacognitive, or introspective level—in *the mind*—or something going wrong at a neuronal or neurotransmitter level—in *the brain*—generating aberrant experience—in *the mind*. Of course, it seems right to say that delusions are "in the head" since they do not reflect the world as it objectively exists and they clearly involve some brain dysfunction. But the fact that not all problems can be resolved by these

explanations suggests that something important may be missing in these approaches. Here's one way of putting it: rationalist and empiricist models feature "a bodiless subject with no incarnated *habitus* in its phylogenetic past, with no roots in the social community in which it has grown [and in which the] emotional component is relegated to a secondary place, a mere accompaniment, without a constitutional role" (Varela and Depraz 2004, p. 156; 2005, p. 64).

The orthodox approaches to cognition that inform our understanding of delusion have been challenged by embodied, enactive, externalist theories, with roots in the phenomenological tradition. On these alternative conceptions, the experiencing subject is *in-the-world* (Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty)—the subject is not, first and foremost, an intellectual creature who perceives the world objectively and then formulates her beliefs about this and accordingly acts upon those beliefs. Rather, the experiencing subject is primarily an embodied pragmatic agent who finds herself already physically, affectively, and socially situated in a world that is defined as a set of practical involvements. This phenomenological approach is reflected in Karl Jaspers' view of delusion.

To say simply that a delusion is a mistaken idea [or belief] which is firmly held by the patient and which cannot be corrected gives only a superficial and incorrect answer to the problem [...] All experience of reality [...] has a root in the practice of living [...] Delusion proper [...] implies a transformation in our total awareness of reality (Jaspers 1913/1963, pp. 93–94).

On this view, the "world" (or reality) is not an objectively defined physical place, but consists of, in some respects, a set of affordances (Gibson) and emotional saliences that we relate to. What would an account of delusion look like on approaches that suggest that delusions are generated in a system that includes brain, body, and (physical, social and cultural) environment—the idea that a delusional subject is existentially *in-the-world*—in a world with specific kinds of affordances, and emotional saliences? Could such an account solve some of the leftover problems that remained unresolved in the standard approaches?

4 Delusion as an Alternative Reality

I've argued (2009) that the concept of multiple realities, as found in Schutz (1974), may give us a better account of delusions. I've proposed this not as a causal explanation of delusions but as a more adequate characterization that would provide a framework for any such explanation. The idea is that one might enter into a *delusional* reality just as one might enter into a dream reality, a fictional reality, or a virtual reality. Like other multiple realities, some delusional realities are *more or less* cut off from one's everyday reality; they may be incommensurable with the normal rules of reason that govern one's everyday normal lifeworld, and they may offer a different set of affordances and saliences.

Consider a description offered by Renee in *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl* (Sechehaye 1968).

[A jug appeared] not as something to hold water and milk, a chair not as something to sit in—but as having lost their names, their functions and meanings; they became ‘things’ and began to take on life, to exist. (cited by Sass 1992, p. 118).

This signals a change in affordances offered by things in her environment. If I am truly engaged in an alternative reality (even a delusional reality), it is not simply or primarily that I adopt an alternative set of beliefs or values. Rather, I may enter into it *body and soul*, or to some varying lesser degree. Objects may have different affordances—jugs, chairs, bananas, cardboard boxes—offer different possibilities in pretend or delusional realities. The delusional world has a certain “presence” and salience that makes it more than a belief or a product of an intellectual exercise. I am *in-the-world* of the play, the film, the game, etc., *to some degree*, perhaps maintaining some anchor or some free-floating or vague awareness that this is just a play, or film, or game; and perhaps to a higher degree (and sometimes fully), I am *in-the-world* of delusion.

Unlike other multiple realities, the delusional reality may be “firmly sustained [and] is not one ordinarily accepted by other members of the person’s culture or subculture” (DSM-4). Even if it is firmly sustained, this may vary in degree—more or less comprehensive or pervasive, more or less “firmly sustained”—so in some cases the subject may interact with others or objects in everyday reality in a close to normal way. For example, in some rare cases of Capgras Delusion, there is sometimes a rare doubling of objects. A person may complain that the tools in his tool chest are not his, but replacements. But this may have no practical effect—he will still work with the tools as if they were his (Ellis 1996; Dreyfus 1987; Kafka 1989). Likewise, a Capgras patient may complain that his wife is an imposter when he sees her, but has no problem talking with her on the phone. In some cases of delusion, then, the deluded subject may live according to this double bookkeeping—one foot in the delusional world, one foot in everyday, paramount reality. In extreme cases, however, the delusional reality rather than everyday reality becomes paramount.

In these two regards—that is, in offering alternative affordances and in being a matter of degree—delusional realities may be similar to other alternative realities. In other regards, they may be different. Realities created in theater, film, novels, and games are socially constructed realities, they are *for others*, and by definition are understandable to many people. In contrast, delusions are more like dreams; they are in some regards idiosyncratic, or as Louis Sass (1994, 2004) puts it, “quasi-solipsistic.” The delusional subject “inhabits a world radically alien to that of common sense” (Sass 1992). Alternative realities, including delusions, however, may share certain themes. Feeling controlled by others or seeing others as imposters, and so forth, are themes that may have their origin in a particular culture or e.g. in literary works.

If delusion involves entering into a delusional reality, this has implications for the notion of veridicality as well. To think of delusion as a mistaken belief, for example,

is not just to remain too cognitive; it may also target the wrong world. The delusion may not be about “external” or everyday reality, but may be tied to an alternative reality, in the same way that events that take place in a play are tied to a fictional reality. If I believe that Hamlet killed Polonius, this is clearly not a false belief about the objective world, but a true belief about the fictional world. The delusional subject is not intellectually mistaken (deluded) about the everyday world; he’s living in a delusional world.

5 Welcome to the Hotel California

My aim here has not been to offer a causal explanation of delusion; rather, I’ve intended to adjust the framework in which we might be able to find a proper explanatory account that could address some of the leftover problems that the overly cognitive, “in-the-head” explanations have been unable to solve. The multiple reality framework is nonetheless consistent with something like a hybrid account—it can integrate both top-down and bottom-up explanations, since it does not rule out explanatory contributions in terms of brain dysfunction or higher-order cognition. But this framework importantly includes other contributories—including embodied, affective, environmental, social and cultural factors. The concept of a delusional reality on this account is defined across all of these factors. Elsewhere, I’ve tried to show how this framework has sufficient resources to address the various leftover problems outlined above (Gallagher 2009). Here, however, I will focus on only one of these problems—the mechanism problem—and show how solving this problem may get us closer to an account of why we are not all novelists.

One might easily raise an objection against the alternative multiple realities framework: As a broad, phenomenologically inspired framing hypothesis, this proposal has not identified any particular causal mechanisms that would explain how delusions come about. Even if one could resort to a bottom-up account to explain the strange or alien aspects of anomalous experience as due to neural dysfunctions, this doesn’t give us a specific mechanism to account for the transition into a delusional reality. Here, I want to give a twofold reply. First, if being in a delusional reality is more than being in a particular belief state and is more than simply experiencing an anomalous perception, the full mechanism may not be reducible to just neural dysfunction—brain states will be linked to broader changes in embodied comportment and emotional experience within a physical, social, and culturally contextualized environment. This actually suggests a *multiple-factor* account of delusions (where factors are spread across behavior, brain, body, experience, and physical, social, cultural environments). Second, having said that, as one part of the explanation, there is in fact a more specific brain mechanism that can help to account for transitions into delusional realities.

Let’s consider, for example, a multiple factor account of Capgras Delusion. In Capgras, as we noted, a subject takes some familiar person or persons (or more rarely, a set of objects) to be imposters (or replacements). For example, a patient

may think his wife (but not his children or other people) is an imposter, or a robot, or somehow taken over by alien invaders (Coltheart and Davies 2000; Passer and Warnock 1991; Young 2000). What we know is that in Capgras, there is an anomalous experience in face recognition caused by a neural dysfunction that slows processing in the face recognition area of the brain. The wife's face is recognized, but, for the subject, something doesn't feel right. To explain why this happens in regard to the person's wife but not in regard to other familiar people, one may need to appeal to personal circumstances that involve intersubjective affect or emotion, and the effects such affects can have on brain processes, leading to disruptions in the dynamics of intersubjectivity and of familiar social affordances. But why should this lead to a sense that the other is an imposter? Why imposter? Or robot? Or body snatcher? These are concepts that we easily have from pretend play, film or literature, or more general cultural sources (Wise 2012). In different cultures and at different times, Capgras may manifest differently. Such cultural resources, however, provide a kind of support for the delusion. Normally, when there is no support for an alternative reality, the conflict, discrepancy, or difference between everyday reality and the alternative reality is resolved in favor of paramount, default, everyday reality. This makes the following question critical. Why does the subject stay with or in the delusional reality—why does that reality sustain itself?

Here we can offer a causal model (in functional terms) that has to be taken as part of the multiple factors account. Two functions in our cognitive system normally work together: (1) The first has to do with maintaining coherence (or reducing conflict). We may think of this sometimes as a reality testing. To be immersed in a game, for example, we may need to suspend disbelief about the reality of the avatars we encounter in the game environment and, at the same time, suspend belief about being nowhere other than our living room. (2) The second is a form of executive control that reverts the system to everyday reality. At the end of the game, we end up back in our living room. It turns out that there are neural mechanisms in a fronto-parietal network that correlate with these functions (Egner and Raz 2008). Conflict monitoring involves activation in dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC); executive control involves the lateral pre-frontal cortex (IPFC).

The dACC “functions, in part, to signal the occurrence of conflicts in information processing, thereby triggering complementary adjustments in cognitive control” (Botnivich et al. 2004, p. 539; see van Veen and Carter 2002). fMRI studies of highly susceptible subjects under hypnosis, for example, show that there is a decoupling between dACC activation (conflict monitoring) and activation in IPFC (executive control) (Egner et al. 2005; Oakley and Halligan 2009).

These mechanisms, and their proper functioning, provide part of a causal explanation of why we are able to transition from one reality to another. Specifically, a transition into an alternative reality involves a temporary decoupling of conflict monitoring and executive control (which may involve reduced activation in dACC or IPFC). This would be a normal function that allows us to enter and exit alternative realities (from pretend play to immersion in a novel). In the case of delusion, however, the decoupling mechanism dysfunctions—it gets stuck in the *on* position—or the dynamic connection between these two brain areas fail. This failure

of conflict monitoring or of controlled return to default reality constitutes the broken mechanism that can explain the persistence of delusion. In the extreme, this could be called the “Hotel California” (HC) dysfunction—making a slight adjustment to the lyrics of the famous Eagles song: “you can check *in* any time you like, but you can never leave.”

The HC dysfunction works as part of a multiple factor explanation of delusion. For example, Capgras Delusion involves a particular *pattern* of dysfunction and normal function.

- (1) Some personal affective circumstance triggers a dysfunction in the face recognition area and leads to an anomalous experience in regard to a specific person (bottom up).
- (2) A (normal) importation from cultural/literary sources of concepts of imposter, robot, alien kidnapping, etc. (in different culture, we would likely see different manifestations).
- (3) The HC dysfunction: a decoupling of conflict monitoring and executive control leading to (some degree of) immersion in the alternative reality.

A similar scheme of factors can explain other delusions.³

6 Why Everyone Is Not a Novelist

A novelist like Jane Austen, Franz Kafka, or Henry James (and possibly other kinds of creative artists) must have an ability to create, enter into, and sustain an alternative world, and this ability may involve a higher degree of immersion than we experience in just reading a novel, enjoying the theater, or engaging in pretend play, and so on. All of these things require a decoupling of conflict monitoring and executive control functions—an ability to transition into an alternative reality and stay there for some time—but also an ability to re-connect and use executive control to come back to the default, everyday reality. Novelists and artists are not necessarily delusional, but it seems likely that one necessary condition that allows for creativity in such cases is the ability for sustained immersion in an alternative reality. This capacity builds on a normal functioning that allows for a voluntarily decoupling of executive control from conflict monitoring, providing an ability to imagine an alternative reality and to stay in it for a while. This may also be a matter of degree.

³For example, thought insertion may involve (1) a neurological dysfunction (in the insula) leading to loss of sense of agency; (2) a cultural concept of telepathy or parapsychology or religious communication, suggesting that someone else is inserting the thought; (3) the HC dysfunction. Cotard delusion: (1) limbic system dysfunction generating a feeling of body alienation; (2) cultural concepts of zombies or afterlife; (3) the HC dysfunction. Even non-schizophrenic delusions such as Somatoparaphrenia (delusional misidentification of body parts) may involve multiple factors: (1) stroke damage to parietal cortex and/or orbital frontal area; (2) possibly a regressive narrative that would explain why the limb seemingly belongs to someone else; (3) the HC dysfunction.

In the case of the novelist, as in the very clear case of the child engaged in pretend play, I want to suggest that this immersion is not just an intellectual accomplishment. To the extent that the proper functioning of the frontal executive control is involved, we can note that this is connected with automatic, unconscious processes that inhibit motor activation across all aspects of cognition (McBride et al. 2012). When we willingly enter into an alternative reality, however, we do not want to be continually distracted by constant reminders from the conflict-monitoring alarm system telling us that the fictional world we are enjoying is not real (Wise 2012). So we should expect ongoing activation in IPFC doing inhibitory work for all of the other areas and not so much in the conflict monitoring area—dACC. If activation in the dACC area for conflict monitoring is in some sense allowing entry into an alternative reality, it may also be allowing various affective, motor, and embodied processes to be activated and then, to various degrees, inhibited by the IPFC. Accordingly, it is no surprise that in studies like Natalie Phillips's Jane Austen experiments at Stanford, readers immersed in the alternative reality of the novel will show activation in sensory, motor, and emotion areas (and not just language or attention areas). In an alternative reality, I can get excited and emotional, or remain cool under pressure; I may adopt a certain physical posture, in some cases I may act virtually (inhibiting physical movement of my body). I may engage in such action explicitly as in pretend play or theatrical acting. Sometimes, as I come back out of such realities, everyday reality can seem oddly unreal in relation to what I have been doing. Full existential engagement in a fictional world requires the ability to temporarily suspend disbelief—and to some degree, to decouple the executive control processes from the conflict monitoring processes.

Both the Stanford prison experiment and the Jane Austen experiment suggest that this decoupling process is more complex than just the functioning of a brain mechanism. To differentiate between the immersed reader, the Stanford prison participants, the novelist and the delusional subject, two things, which we have already discussed, are critical. First, there are differences of degree, where we may expect the immersed reader to be more easily called back to everyday reality, in contrast to the delusional subject, the Stanford prison participant, or perhaps the novelist. Second, that these differences in degree are not reducible to the mere function or dysfunction of brain mechanisms is clear because these differences can be modulated by the amount of support that the alternative reality gets from culture, social practices, and, importantly, other people. The Stanford prison experiment developed into something close to a mass delusion, not because of some initial dysfunction in each individual's brain, but precisely because of the ongoing support for the alternative reality provided by the other participants. The readers of Jane Austen, as they are immersed in their reading, have only Jane Austen and her characters to support the alternative reality of the novel. Although the novelist may find intersubjective support for her writing, understood as a particular social practice, and although she usually intends the fiction to be for others (her readers), and may take her audience into consideration, the actual creation of the fictional reality may involve something closer to a quasi-solipsistic process. In this regard,

the novelist is somewhere between the immersed reader and the delusional subject as she enters into the alternative reality without intersubjective support.⁴

I conclude by mentioning one other study. Nelson and Rawlings (2010) have shown that there is a strong overlap of schizotypal experience and the phenomenology of the creative process in a significant sample of creative artists. Schizotypal experience does not involve schizophrenic delusion, but Nelson and Rawlings do suggest that their findings are consistent with the idea that

schizotypy is associated with central features of “flow”-type experience, including distinct shift in phenomenological experience, deep absorption, focus on present experience, and sense of pleasure. The neurologically based construct of latent inhibition may be a mechanism that facilitates entry into flow-type states for schizotypal individuals. This may occur by reduced latent inhibition providing a “fresh” awareness and therefore a greater absorption in present experience, thus leading to flow-type states (2010, p. 388).

Latent inhibition, which is also a characteristic of the schizophrenia spectrum, involves attenuated attention to stimuli upon repeated exposure and an openness to seeing things anew, or to experiencing stimuli with a fresh awareness. The subject may be less anchored to the default experience of reality, a less intense pull-back to default reality and the possibility of higher absorption in seeing things anew, allowing for ease in transitioning into and sustaining alternative realities.

To the question of why we are not all novelists, then, I propose a testable hypothesis: one *necessary (but not sufficient)* condition for being a novelist or a creative artist, compared with non-novelists/artists, is an enhanced ability for creating/entering into multiple realities and staying there longer and more consistently, and without intersubjective support—an ability, however, that remains short of dysfunction or delusion. Certainly there are other necessary conditions involved. One might think of someone with an extraordinary talent for description or for psychological character development. If that person did not have the ability to persist in the world of the novel, however, they might have to settle for writing short stories.

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⁴Some novelists seek out intersubjective support for the process of creating the world of the novel. They do a lot of research and may consult others in constructing elements of that world. In some cases, this, and not just their lonely efforts may help to sustain the alternative reality they are creating.

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