

Schizophrenia and Illogical Thinking

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When I was psychotic, I believed incredible things based on the most flimsy evidence. At the time I believed I was being super rational, and I tried to engage in careful reality testing whenever I could. Because surprising and unexpected events kept occurring to me, I was careful to examine the incidents for reliability. I prided myself on my ability to read reality and I checked and rechecked my conclusions so I could be sure what it all meant. Over several months, I drew up explanations for my new experiences derived from delusions and the physical manifestations of psychosis like a prominent tingling in my head that troubled me. By the seventh and last month of that terrible episode, I had developed a completely original world view that came in large part from my belief that I had deductively put together parts to make a whole. Like reading a book and determining a theme from its components, I believed wholeheartedly that my world view was logically sound and as rational as anything I had ever judged.

My first break with reality provides a helpful example of the sort of reality testing in which I was engaged. At the time, I was in graduate school and there was a man I was sure was meant for me. He left for a year of study abroad and I was heartsick. The day he left, I vividly remember going to my small apartment near campus and breaking into sobs. I was unable to stop crying. Honestly, I was heaving with despair. This was curious. It seemed excessive even to me, but I couldn't stop. And I really couldn't comprehend why I was crying so hard. It was certainly out of proportion with how I felt. However, just then, a thought occurred to me, "I would be so bereft that I would go insane with grief. This would show him how much he meant to me".

And this is exactly what happened. I went from tipping toward insanity to flat out psychosis in just a few minutes. Just after this unusual consideration, I heard the radio playing a rock song called Breaking the Girl by the band

the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Suddenly it was more than obvious to me that this song referred directly to me and that the radio DJs were trying to communicate by playing music that spoke specifically to my internal experience. I thought about what was happening. I put together one deduction after another: it went something like this, I was sobbing (a little hysterically); the radio played a song that seemed to correspond exactly with my feelings; therefore, the music was unequivocally meant to speak to me. The DJs were sympathetic to my plight and grief. I wasn't surprised. This seemed like a perfectly clear and rational deduction. An easy to comprehend syllogism. In psychiatry I think this is called delusions of reference and in philosophy pointing to a false cause.

I studied history, so why be concerned with faulty reasoning? I only wondered why I hadn't realized that the radio spoke intimately so much earlier. In that one moment I went absolutely, floridly insane. But I was certain I was logical. More logical than I had ever been in my life. It seemed entirely legitimate that I should be the receiver of communication from a famous radio station with hundreds of thousands of followers. It never occurred to me that there was nothing special about me to warrant such particular favor, as well as entertaining communication from a, previously unknown to me, technology that mimicked telepathy. Of course the radio spoke to people and most of all it spoke to me. I was so interesting I would want to speak to me too. So, I was grandiose as well as delusional. And I called this reasoning. I was sure it was logical. If something seemed to correspond with how I felt it must be related to me. People who study medieval and early modern history call this type of thinking "sympathetic magic". I called it being sensible.

Wikipedia defines sympathetic magic as "based on the idea that one can influence something based on its relationship or resemblance to another thing". People reasoned like this in the Middle Ages and well into the

early modern period in Western history. We know it's the province of magic in ancient times, as well as some hold-overs like horoscopes and astrology readers today. In early Russia, those who planted the recently introduced New World potatoes saw its fruit grow beneath the ground. Therefore, they assumed potatoes were part of the devil's regime whose kingdom existed beneath the earth. No one wanted anything to do with the devil. So the nutritious potatoes went uneaten for at least 200 years.

I reasoned in exactly the same way. When experiences seemed to correspond to each other I drew rational, or really irrational, conclusions. My mother and stepfather heard from friends I was acting in an unstable manner at the end of one of my years in graduate school. Concerned they flew out to my campus to see me and get me help. But it was too late; I was already psychotic and combative towards my friends and loved ones. By this time, I reasoned that my mother was a fraud. She was a stranger who had raised me as a medical experiment for the government. I was exceedingly angry with her. Although I received my parents cordially, I was suspicious and frightened of them. I put up a front. Surmising by then that all people could read my mind, I was walking just ahead of my mother on a sidewalk. In my head I insulted her in a shockingly nasty manner, something I would never even say let alone think. At that exact moment, my mom tripped a little on the sidewalk. I believed she did this in response to my insult. I reasoned she was hurt and dismayed that I knew the real truth about her. This correspondence between my thoughts and my mother's stride on the sidewalk convinced me I was correct in assuming mind reading was a legitimate activity. Now I knew that all people could hear my thoughts, especially if they were nearby my person. It seemed a direct relation between thought and action, an equivalence that existed only in my head. I engaged in reasoning based on the type of thinking displayed in sympathetic magic.

Although I was not sane, I believed I was carefully testing reality in its capacity for truth. I wasn't sure everyone could read my mind until I understood my mother's false step confirmed my belief. I had a proposition: people could read my mind; my mother tripped; she did so in relation to my internal criticism; therefore, she could hear my thoughts. It was self-evident to me, a conclusion that was directly apprehended, a clear, and distinct idea. And in learning from these sorts of relations, I drew up a whole world view that influenced my behavior and thoughts and finally led me to break completely from my family and friends while I entertained delusions. In fact,

so strong were my delusions that they took prominence over considerations of love and even my own safety. It broke my heart to end all my relationships. Some were never reestablished again. But like a belief in magic, I was committed to an unseen but keenly felt reality that superseded all relationships. The hidden world was so much more powerful than experienced reality.

So powerful was this combination of correspondence thinking and illogical logic, that I was convinced an evil dictator had fantastic power over the natural world. Late in my psychotic episode, I began a road trip to save the world. As I mentioned, I was grandiose. At one stage, I was hiding in a small motel in the wild badlands of Utah. One morning I woke up to a small earthquake. Using the logic at which I was becoming expert, I reflected that I was being sought throughout the country by a dictator more evil and ruthless than any we had known outside of fiction. I knew he was looking for me just as Hitler would seek to assassinate a spy who threatened his rule. I thought I was that spy. Tying the earthquake together with my recognition that the US was a dangerous place for me, I concluded that minions of the evil dictator had power over nature. They had enough power to create earthquakes that sought to make me panic and make fatal mistakes in the battle of good against evil. Thinking in magical ways, my logic was ruptured, but I had no idea. I honestly thought I had good cause to tie an earthquake to my behavior. I remember how my conclusions about what was true became tied to obvious errors in logic and thinking. Yet these errors, so apparent to us, seemed the height of reason and as obvious as deducing that the sun rises in the sky in the dawn because you can see its form and light. I never once questioned my beliefs. I only checked and rechecked my conclusions to be certain I understood experience as I never had in my life.

If objects, emotions, or thoughts appeared similar to me, then I thought that proved a relationship. I thought, like sympathetic magic practitioners, that similarity was evidence of influence. And so I reasoned I could affect others to make my will come true or others could impact me in dangerous ways. So, magic may come in all forms and continue to influence us in novel and sometimes horrible ways. I don't know much about logic and the mistakes we make in reasoning. Yet I know that I engaged in them while psychotic at the same time as I congratulated myself on my supposedly brilliant reasoning and reality testing that helped shed light on what I thought was a whole brave new world unfolding before me.