Understanding the Irrational

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I

Part one of this essay is a historical/contextual background. If you lack the time, you can safely skip ahead to part two without this affecting your further reading.

Background

First, a comment on terminology: I will be talking about delusion, psychosis and schizophrenia. The term "psychosis" was coined in the 1840s in German psychiatry, and as a clinical category it displaced the term "insanity" in the late19th century (Berrios 1987: 485). Historically "psychosis" has referred quite broadly to severe forms of mental disorders,[1] in ordinary speech still does, but it is almost absent in the classification manuals, putatively since it is difficult to define and since an exact diagnosis (such as schizophrenia) is more informative).[2] However, the term psychosis is widely used in clinical practice, especially for disorders that cannot be given more precise diagnoses. Further, the adjectival form of psychotic is in general use, for example in the terms "psychotic symptom" (such as delusions, hallucinations and excitement), and "antipsychotic drug" (drug that controls these symptoms), as well as in the general categorization of "psychotic disorders" (Gelder *et al*: 61). So "psychosis" refers to a mental disorder which is difficult to define. Delusion, on the other hand, is a psychotic symptom, historically *the* psychotic symptom (Berrios 1991: 6). And at leat since the Delusion has a long history of being regarded as a false belief, held with strong conviction – but this has been much criticised (I will get back to this).

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[1] "At the beginning of the 19th century 'insanity' had a clinical, and a legal, meaning and was almost coterminous with madness and named conditions later known as 'psychosis'. As a concept it encompassed all manner of delusional states accompanied by personality and behavioural disorganisation" (Berrios 1987: 485).

[2] It should be noted that the definitions of "schizophrenia" or "delusion" are not much easier to settle. It is also argued that "psychosis" is a primitive concept in psychiatry that despite the definitional difficulties cannot be done away with (cf. Heinimaa 2000:43).

Psychoses and delusions are diagnostically associated with schizophrenia, one of the "psychotic disorders" of the DSMIV-R.[3] The term "schizophrenia" has been around since the beginning of the 20th century[4] (taking over the old classification of dementia praecox). In the language of DSMIV-R it is characterized by delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech and behaviour, and so called negative symptoms: restrictions in the range and intensity of emotional expression, in the fluency and productivity of thought and speech, and in the initiation of goal-directed behaviour, or more concretely: apathy, lack of drive, slowness, social withdrawal (Gelder *et al*: 246). It should be noted that schizophrenia is not to be confused with what was formerly known as multiple personality disorder (now dissociative identity disorder). The confusion stems from the fact that schizophrenia is often called split personality: The name schizophrenia is Greek for "split brain", the idea being that the schizophrenic person's thoughts, emotions, and physical reactions are split off from each other, so that the emotional reaction to a thought, or the physical response to an emotion, is completely inappropriate or bizarre. (Hacking: 9)

Schizophrenia: two strands

Schizophrenia has, then, in many ways come to represent the hallmark of irrationality, or of insanity. Or at least, it can be said to be the psychiatric illness par excellence (Berrios *et al*:112). And the traditional view of insanity is that it entails a mistaken view of reality. This view has been prevalent since the mid-seventeenth century, although it was not unfamiliar to earlier authors: as early as 1586 the British physician Timothy Bright had

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[3] DSMIV-R is (the revised fourth edition of) the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, authorized by the American Psychiatric Association. It sets the standard for diagnosis in North America, and is widely used in Europe as well, despite there being another classification manual, the International Classification of Diseases (ICD10), published by the World Health Organization. Apart with schizophrenia, the psychotic disorders of the DSMIV-R are: schizophreniform disorder, schizoaffective disorder, delusional disorder, brief psychotic disorder, shared psychotic disorder, psychotic disorder due to a general medical condition, substance induced psychotic disorder, and psychotic disorder not otherwise specified (American Psychiatric Association: 297).

[4] The term is accredited to Bleuler, a German psychiatrist, and the book he published in 1911, but originates from a collective effort at Burghölzli Hospital a few years earlier (Berrios *et al*: 132).

defined madness as the false report of one's senses to one's mind. And John Locke describes "the madmen" thus: "they do not appear to me to have lost their faculty of reasoning, but having joined together some ideas very wrongly, they mistake them for truths; and they err as men do that argue right from wrong principles." This view of insanity was predominant in Europe throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, along with British empiricism (Mojtabai: 5, Berrios 1991: 9).[5]

Criticisms were, however, voiced early on against this view of delusions. There is a critique from as early as 1798, by the Scottish psychiatrist Sir Alexander Crichton, who questioned the term 'erroneous' in reference to delusions and hallucinations:

> The expression diseased perceptions or notions is here to be preferred to that of false or erroneous perceptions which is employed by other authors, first because the ideas in all kinds of delirium whatever, arise from a diseased state of the brain, or nerves, or both ... and secondly because the word erroneous does not describe anything peculiar to delirium; for every man, however sane or wise he may be, has some erroneous notions in which he firmly believes.... (quoted in Mojtabai: 6)

These two views of delusion were to prevail side by side throughout the nineteenth century.

The German philosopher and psychiatrist Karl Jaspers introduced the three defining characteristics of delusion in modern psychiatry in 1913: "erroneousness", "firm conviction" and "imperviousness to contrary evidence". But Jaspers distinguished between over-valued, or "delusion-like ideas" and "delusions proper". The latter arises from an un-understandable morbid process. It is according to Jaspers only in external characteristics that delusions appeared as "erroneous ideas, firmly held and incorrigible" – in delusions proper it is the patient's whole context of experience that is different. His world is different, it is a world with its own rules of meaning not understandable to

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[5] This should not conceal the fact that until the end of the 18th century, insanity was considered by most as an all-or-nothing affair. This holistic approach was somewhat concealed by the Lockean intellectualistic definition of madness. "Thus, in real life, the insane was considered as having 'fully lost his reason' and when he showed some improvement there were no conceptual tools to differentiate between 'improvement', 'remission' and 'cure'." (Berrios *et al*: 121)

normal individuals. The influence of the latter idea, however, has been limited to existential and phenomenological psychiatry,[6] whereas the idea of delusion as error has continued to dominate the mainstream psychiatric thought. And as Mojtabai notes, what Jaspers calls "external characteristics" were adopted by modern psychiatry as defining characteristics of delusion (Mojtabaj: 8). This can be seen in the DSMIV-R, where delusion is defined as consisting of "erroneous beliefs that usually involve a misinterpretation of perceptions or experiences" (American Psychiatric Association: 299).

1) correctability

To regard delusion as an error has two aspects: either it can be viewed (as in Locke) as mistaken premises from which one correctly infers the false conclusion – then it is emphasized how the delusional thinking is rational, although incorrect (Chadwick and Lowe: 555). In line with this cognitive therapy is recommended (together with medication) in order to reason with the deluded patients, to make them question their beliefs and consequently modify them or give them up. In this picture there is nothing incomprehensible about delusions. The second alternative is to see the error as a mistake in the reasoning process, in the inference itself (Gelder *et al:* 9). This also suggests a kind of understandability of delusions, as they are described as "abnormalities of well-understood psychological mechanisms" (Bentall *et al*: 332), affecting only a limited part of the person. Here cognitive therapy is also seen as a way to encourage patients to reflect on evidence that either support or refute their understanding of themselves (Bentall *et al*: 338). In both types of error-view, the deluded person is seen as understandable, and therefore correctable.[7]

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[6] Existential and phenomenological psychiatry are inspired by the corresponding philosophical traditions. At least the word "phenomenology" is quite common in the psychiatric literature, as Sadler writes, "usually referring to the clinical-descriptive and experiential dimensions of psychopathology. Here, 'phenomenology' refers to, variously, a philosophical method, an ideological position, an attitude, and a tradition, mostly occupying the field of philosophy" (Sadler:1454).

[7] I would argue that it is often not possible to make a clear distinction between the content and the form of an argument, following e.g. Quine: rather the structure of thought in many case reveals what the content is – But that doesn't, I think, affect the present

The arguments against viewing delusion as error – since the 19th century: as erroneous belief (Berrios 1991:7) – has focused partly on the fact that it doesn't capture what is problematic about delusions, that it is a "poor metaphor", that it is misleading or simply wrong (Mojtabai: 12, Sass 1994: 4)[8]. It could also be argued that this view of delusion as an error gives a misleading picture not only of delusions, but of non-delusional thinking: that it expresses a kind of overconfidence in the reasoning process of the sane. (See Chrichton above: "every man, however sane or wise he may be, has some erroneous notions in which he firmly believes…") This overconfidence in our rationality is quite common in philosophy, as is seen for example in Martin Hollis conviction that the identification of any beliefs of the other (which is taken to be the requirement for understanding another person) requires a set of shared beliefs which are true and rational, consisting of "what a rational man cannot fail to believe in simple perceptual situations, organized by rules of coherent judgement, which a rational man cannot fail to subscribe to." (Hollis: 73-4) (And with a confidence only a philosopher could invoke: "I contend that there are tests for whether a belief is objectively rational.") This kind of view of rationality was forcibly argued against by Peter Winch in his classical essay "Understanding a Primitive Society", where he criticized Alasdair MacIntyre's assumption that we could identify the irrationality of foreign thinking (in this case of the Zande) by comparing it to our own, rational, thought. Winch pointed to how the European observer of alien practices, when trying to be objective, is often immersed in a sea of scientific notions and beliefs to which his observations are subordinated and which

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overview. It is also possible that the difference pointed to here would be better described as a difference between empiricist and rationalist views on delusion: the empiricist takes the delusion to be an effect of trying to (rationally) cope with bizarre perceptions, whereas for the rationalist the cause of the delusion is more internal to the subject (Cf. Cambell: 89).

[8] For example, it might be unclear in what sense a claim that cannot be disproved is false (when someone is convinced that their thoughts are controlled by aliens, for example). And it is possible that delusions are true: "A delusion of jealousy, for instance, may be recognized by its typical characteristics without our needing to know whether the person has genuine ground for his jealousy or not. The delusion does not cease to be a delusion although the spouse of the patient is in fact unfaithful – sometimes only as a result of the delusion" (Jaspers quoted in Spitzer: 379).

they explain (Winch 1964: 313). Much more could of course be said about the idea of a "purely objective" view of reality, and the thinking of the "rational man". Here I will simply point out that there are obvious problems with this view, and it is worth noting that the context-dependedness of what we believe seems to be more common in the psychiatric than in the philosophical literature. (E.g. in *Oxford Textbook of Psychiatry* it is stated that: "A delusion is a belief that is firmly held on inadequate grounds, is not affected by rational argument or evidence to the contrary, *and is not a conventional belief that the person might be expected to hold given his educational and cultural background.*" Gelder *et al*: 9, my italics.)[9]

2) incomprehensibility

Jaspers' view of delusions proper, it seems, were quite different. As noted, delusion is not taken by Jaspers to be a character trait or an isolated event in a person's life. The psychotic person's *world* is different. He is therefore incomprehensible to others: we have no recourse to rational persuasion, to try to change his thinking, since we cannot understand what it is that he is thinking, what he means with his words. The incomprehensibility, or rather, the un-understandability of the schizophrenic condition is also stressed by the Finnish psychiatrist Markus Heinimaa, who in a number of articles has tried to show how the incomprehensibility is a fundamental and necessary feature of psychosis. Heinimaa here refers to the later Wittgenstein, and argues that incomprehensibility is a part of "the grammar of delusion", incomprehensibility is implied by the concept itself (Heinimaa 2000, 2002).

Similarly, Rupert Read uses Wittgenstein in order to show that there is no such thing as understanding the words, actions and experiences of the schizophrenic. Connecting the discussion of mental illness with that of nonsense – leaning on Cora Diamond's and James Conant's reading of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* – he argues that the language of the

[9] The DSMIV-R is perhaps a bit less clear on this point: "Although bizarre delusions are considered to be especially characteristic of Schizophrenia, "bizarness" may be difficult to judge, especially across different cultures. Delusions are deemed bizarre if they are clearly implausible and not understandable and do not derive from ordinary life experiences" (American Psychiatric Association: 299-300).

schizophrenic patient cannot be described as having a real content. The psychotic patient can seem to have something to say, but just like in the case of the solipsist, this is only an illusion of sense, an illusion of something that we could gain access to. There is, according to Read, no such thing as "understanding logically alien thought" (and therefore, no understanding of psychotic thought), since what is logically alien cannot properly been called thinking at all – only plain nonsense: "There is in the end nothing there for us to understand, not even a 'world'. (There is only a mass of contradictions, which is as much – and as little – as to say: nothing.)" (Read 2001: 469.)

What I want to discuss here is the notion of understanding in relation to mental illness, and I think parallels can be drawn to how that concept is used in relation to other cultures. I will want to contest the "wittgensteinian"[10] view of Heinimaa and Read – without therefore defending a cognitivist position – with the help of other readers of Wittgenstein such as Lars Hertzberg and Peter Winch. My aim is to elucidate the multifarious uses of the concept of understanding, and point to the ethical aspects rather than the purely cognitive.

II

Read's argument, that there is no such thing as understanding the words, actions and

[10] Here I have associated Read and Heinimaa with the phenomenological tradition, as a contrast to the "cognitivist" approach. And as it happens, Sass describes Read's approach as a "neo-Jaspersian doctrine of incomprehensibility" (Sass 2003: 129), even if Read seems to distance himself from Jaspers through saying that "there is in the end nothing there for us to understand, not even a 'world'"(Read 2001: 469). It is perhaps interesting to note that there is quite a different way of using Wittgenstein in the discussion of schizophrenic thought, through a comparison of delusions with the framework-propositions of *On Certainty*. The analogy is that the schizophrenic cannot justify the delusions since they are taken to be more certain than any fact that could led support to them: "The kind of status that we ordinarily assign to propositions like 'The world has existed for quite a long time' . . . is assigned by the deluded subject to propositions like 'I am dead' or 'My neighbour has been replaced by an impostor'. That is, they are treated as the background assumptions needed for there to be any testing of the correctness of propositions at all" (Cambell: 96). This approach certainly seems to have more in common with the cognitivist approach of seeing the schizophrenic as understandable. (Or perhaps this simple division breaks down at this point.)

experiences of the severely mentally ill, is derived from his reading of Wittgenstein's view of nonsense. I am not going to contest this particular view of Wittgenstein, as much as try to show why I think it isn't directly applicable to understanding the thoughts of a schizophrenic. I agree with Read that logic is constitutive of thinking and speaking (to quote Wittgenstein: "Logic, it may be said, shows us what we understand by 'proposition' and by 'language'." (RFM, Cerbone: 304). This is, then, a denial of the idea of a language or a culture that is illogical, or somehow less logical than our western society (the idea embedded in the classical notion of "primitive peoples"). It is also a denial of the possibility of cultures with a "different logic", a culture with rules of logic that contradict ours.[11] This is also to say that whatever is not logical (whatever is "logically alien") is not a thought that we just fail to grasp, but rather cannot be a thought at all. It is to deny the possibility of a "psycho-logic" or a "pathologic" as Read calls it (Read 2001: 467), which is taken to be the same as saying: "This stack of words, uttered by the psychotic, does not express a thought." But I am not sure that the last bit follows: just because we deny the "logically alien" thought, do we have to deny the schizophrenic any kind of claim to sense? With this I am not saying that a psychotic person often speaks nonsense – so do the rest of us. What I want to question is the rigidity of the claim. Is the "alien logic" – and therefore nonsense – really the right allegory for schizophrenic thought?

And how is understanding related to this? Read takes for granted that the schizophrenic embodies the closest thing we can think of as alien logic, which means that it is nonsense, which means that it is utterly incomprehensible. It is not uncommon to connect the idea of total incomprehensibility, or nonsense, to insanity: Frege famously asked himself what we would say of "beings whose laws of thought flatly contradicted ours and therefore led to contrary results even in practice", and his answer would be: "we have here a hitherto unknown form of madness" (Frege: 14). I take it that he means that he wouldn't know how to understand anything they said or did. But as Cerbone notes, Wittgenstein comments this remark by Frege by saying: "he never said what this 'insanity' would

[11] This, I think is well argued for by Quine (1986: 81-82). See also the exposition of Frege, Wittgenstein and Quine in Cerbone.

really be like" (Cerbone: 303). This comment makes us look at Frege's remark more closely, and realize that it doesn't really make sense to speak of insanity in this connection: is it really mad people are we imagining – let alone a whole society of them? Most of us have met or at least come across descriptions of insane people. But I am doubtful whether any of us has come across a person who in his thoughts and in practice contradicts the laws of logic. (The point Cerbone wants to make, I take it, is that the idea of a logical alien is in itself a confusion.)

Why then take the "severely mentally ill", the "schizophrenic" to represent logically alien thought? Perhaps we can blame Louis Sass, the main target of Read's criticism, for this. Instead of seeing schizophrenia as a cognitive deficit, a lack of rationality, Sass argues (with the help of Wittgenstein's understanding of solipsism) that schizophrenic patients exhibit a "hyper-rationality" similar to the theoretical inclinations of a solipsist philosopher. Schizophrenia is thus depicted as a kind of disease of the intellect, "generated from within rationality itself rather than by the loss of it" (Sass 1994: 12). This renders the schizophrenic's thoughts in some sense rational, when according to Read we should see this as mere nonsense[12] – just like solipsism. Part of the disagreement between Sass and Read, then, is connected to their differing views on Wittgenstein and solipsism – on whether solipsism is a distinctive philosophical position, or sheer nonsense without any positive content. Since Sass does not share Read's "austere" view of Wittgenstein on nonsense, he can claim that the analogy gives us some understanding of the schizophrenic frame of mind. Because of this analogy, Read comes to connect the question of nonsense, and of "logically alien thought", with that of understanding a schizophrenic person.

Sass analogy, I think it goes almost without saying, is a purely intellectual exercise. It

[12] In Read's words: "The nature of schizophrenic language and experience is by this comparison arguably rendered surprisingly comprehensible. Sass's would-be Wittgensteinian 'hermeneutical description' of schizophrenia facilitates our understanding of why Schreber *et al.* think and act in the ways they do, and of how those ways have a certain logic, even a kind of scientificity, rather than being the expression of a mere primitivity or deficit." (Read 2001: 451)

concentrates on certain aspects of schizophrenia only, and is, as Sass explains, a "thought-experiment": "not an essentialistic set of claims but an exploratory attempt to see just how many aspects of schizophrenic-type pathology can be understood on the solipsistic reading" (Sass 1994: 16/ Sass 2003: 129). It is clearly an intellectualization of the schizophrenic, as Read notes, "it places the interpreter as chiefly thinker in relation to the interpreted person" (Read 2001: 456). But, it is only an analogy, not to be carried too far. On the other hand, in his criticism of Sass, Read shows no hesitation in equating schizophrenic thought with nonsense, which would be quite correct (given his view of solipsism) if solipsism and schizophrenia actually were equivalent – but as it is, Sass never argues that schizophrenic thought is exhausted by his analogy to solipsism. And here is perhaps where my criticism of Read comes in: his view of the schizophrenic, taken as analogous to a philosophical temptation, becomes highly theoretical and intellectualistic. I want to claim that our relationship with a set of arguments is quite different from our relationship to a person, and so too is perhaps what we are saying when we invoke the nonsense-category in the two cases. I will try to show that much more can be said about understanding the severely mentally, than that "there is nothing there to understand".

What I think is crucial here is to elucidate what "understanding another person" comes to. I hope I can come closer to this goal by continuing my discussion on Read, Sass and schizophrenic thought. I think it is helpful for my purposes that Read uses in his criticism of Sass include those of "understanding other cultures."

Understanding Azande and understanding schizophrenics

One part of Read's criticism is inspired by Winch's discussion of the Azande. Read takes Winch to be someone who successfully presents the thought of an "alien" without imposing on it, without interpreting it in terms other than its own. Doing this is ok, according to Read, "if its character is such that one can come to *describe* it accurately, in important part through understanding it as practitioners themselves understand it: *then* one can present it (without falsifying it)." To follow Winch's method, would, Read states, be to let the experiences "speak for themselves", rather than try to interpret them in one

way or another. My question here is: Is this what Winch does as regards the Azande? Does he present their thoughts only in terms that they use and gives a description of them that they would readily accept? I would say that quite clearly he doesn't. As a matter of fact, Winch takes it to be important to point to phenomena in *our* society that might help us recognize ourselves in Zande thought. He makes references to religious life (Winch 1964: 320), at one point he compares interpreting the answers given by the Zande poison oracle with interpreting dreams, at yet another he compares the status of the revelation of the oracle to that of an unfulfilled hypothetical (Winch 1964: 312.). Winch also discusses an example brought forward by MacIntyre: "According to Spencer and Gillen some aborigines carry about a stick or a stone which is treated as if it is or embodies the soul of the individual who carries it. If the stick or stone is lost, the individual who anoints himself as the dead are anointed." To this MacIntyre exclaims that "Does the concept of 'carrying one's soul about with one' make sense? Of course we can redescribe what the aborigines are doing and transform it into sense, and perhaps Spencer and Gillen (…) misdescribe what occurs. But if their reports are not erroneous, we confront a blank wall here, so far as meaning is concerned, although it is easy to give the rules for the use of the concept". (MacIntyre quoted in Winch 1964: 322) To this Winch replies "It does not seem to me so hard to see sense in the practice, even from the little we are told about it here". And he continues to draw parallels to how a lover may treat the picture or a lock of hair of a beloved, or the wedding ring, the loss of which cause people to feel so much guilt because it symbolizes their relationship. These are not attempt merely to give "accurate descriptions" of Zande life and thought in what could be called "their terms", but to find points of contact between their lives and ours through pointing out the different ways life can be meaningful to us and that we tend to forget when we theorize about these kinds of matters.[13]

So Winch was certainly not opposed to finding analogies between our lives and the "alien" one, analogies that the people described would not immediately recognize. How

[13] "We shall hope for a description of the alien practices that creates some pattern that we can recognize; we shall also perhaps hope to find some analogies with practices characteristic of our own culture which will give us some landmarks with reference to which we can take our bearings" (Winch 1997: 197).

else could we come to see the point with or to understand something that at a first glance seems totally senseless or totally alien? What I am trying to say is that if we are to follow Winch, there is nothing in principle stopping us from doing the same with the schizophrenic. Consider for example a quote from Renée: *Autobiography of a schizophrenic girl*, which Read comments and makes a point similar to that of MacIntyre above, i.e., that Sass makes schizophrenia "hang together /make rational sense *more* than it in fact does". Renée writes:

> I [complained] bitterly that things were tricking me and [of] how I suffered because of it. As a matter of fact, these "things" weren't doing anything special; they didn't speak, nor attack me … It was their very presence that made me complain … When … I looked at a chair or a jug, I thought not of their use or function … but as having lost their names their functions and meaning; they became things and began to take on life, to exist.
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> This existence accounted for my great fear. In the unreal scene … suddenly "the thing" sprang up. The stone jar, decorated with blue flowers, was there facing me, defying me with its presence … To conquest my fear I looked away. My eyes met with the chair, then a table; they were alive, too, asserting their presence. I attempted to escape their hold by calling out their names. I said, "chair … it is a chair". But the words echoed hollowly deprived of all meaning: it had left the object … so much so that on the one hand it was a living mocking thing, on the other, a name, robbed of sense, an envelope emptied of content. Nor was I able to bring the two together, but stood there rooted before them, filled with fear and impotence.

Commenting on this passage Read notes that Renée undercuts any interpretation of her experience by saying: "And they, the doctors, too, thought I saw these things as humans whom I heard speak. But it was not that. *Their life consisted uniquely in the fact that they were there, in their existence itself*". (Read 2001: 462, Read's italics.) This makes any way of expressing her experience inadequate to Read: "Her confusion is irredeemable, irrevocable":

> For surely there isn't anything it can be for the life of objects to consist uniquely in their existence. This inchoate notion is surely stranger than anything in (say) Zande practices. One can and must look for context to ground one's understanding of something strange – but I defy anyone to find a context in Renée's text or life for this remark. By which I mean: a context which results in its being able to be made sense of. I don't see how there is anything left which we can hear her as succeeding in saying with those words … (Read 2001: 463)

Sass remarks that these kinds of experiences are quite commonly reported amongst schizophrenics, and that it may be what many patients refer to when they say that things came to seem "more real" or "less real" or "somehow strange". Sass goes on to connect this "world of unreality" (as Renée calls it) with descriptions that we find in literary accounts by surrealists and existentialists (for example Sartre's *Nausea*). (Sass 2003: 131) Even if we would want to reject such a comparison as problematic, I can see no immediate reason why we should therefore conclude that the passage says *nothing*. As a person who dreams a lot I can relate quite well to the description given by Renée as the content of a kind of nightmare where objects carry a significance that they normally don't have. "Being alive" is after all not merely a question of "talking"; there are live organisms that are similar to dead objects, but where the knowledge of their being alive can affect our attitude (we might not want to step on jellyfish when we learn that they are living beings, for example). Renée's experience of the chair and the table as alive could perhaps be likened to the Wittgenstein's thought experiment in §420 of the *Philosophical Investigations* where he asks us to imagine that the people around us are automata. We might be able to imagine this, says Wittgenstein, and he likens it to an aspect change – seeing the cross-pieces of a window as a swastika – which provokes an uncanny feeling. (This is of course not to say that we could imagine this as a practical attitude toward people: the only "practical" consequence might be the feeling provoked.) And that is perhaps why the experience is so filled with horror in the account of Renée – it is a question of an aspect change that is indeed uncanny. The significance of what she says, and the point where we can start to understand her, is in the fear and impotence she describes being faced with a change in her relation to the environment, a change that is evidently very difficult to express. And perhaps also, difficult for her to understand.

So in what way is understandability connected to rationality? If Renée cannot understand herself, can we understand her? Read, leaning on Winch, claims that this is not the case. ("There cannot be a successful interpretation of serious schizophrenia, because there cannot be true self-understandings of people with schizophrenia there to be the basis for such interpretations" (Read 2001: 467).) But it seems to me that Winch would not agree

that we, "sane people" always have a clear understanding of ourselves. What he questions here is the idea that "*self-understanding* sets a sort of standard of what the understanding of human beings can or should be" (Winch 1997: 194-5) Read, on the other hand, has a rather more metaphysical picture of what understanding consist in, which becomes clear in his use of expressions such as "getting into the other's head" and "being" the other, as if these were paradigmatic cases of understanding the other (Read 2003: 118, 120). So when Read is interested in "understanding" as an intellectual operation, or as correctly depicting the experiential world of the other, Winch has in mind something more modest: the "practical 'being in tune' with others [which] lies at the very centre of our understanding of other human beings" (Winch 1997: 203).

I think here that Winch is right in saying that "the problems spring in large part from certain peculiarities of our notion of *understanding*" (Winch 1997: 202). Instead of mystifying the concept of understanding, maybe we should make a rather wittgensteinian move and look at how we use the concept?

Understanding in use

An informative investigation into the concept of understanding that focuses on different uses of the term is Lars Hertzberg's essay "The Limits of Understanding". Here Hertzberg describes two different kinds of concepts of understanding: one is thought of as an achievement related to a certain task, the ability to understand which is a mark of intelligence, insight or knowledge. Here understanding is attained through an activity, and is something that can be expressed through correct assertions or appropriate actions – it is therefore a hit-or-miss affair, one either has understood or hasn't. Whether one has understood something is also public in that it shows itself in my speech and actions, and I can be mistaken about having understood something: understanding cannot be equated with the thought or feeling of understanding. And understanding here stands in a neutral relation to what is understood, my understanding is unaffected by whether I like it or not (Hertzberg 2005: 2-3). This model fits understanding a mathematical equation, or understanding what is said in situations where there is a problem of some kind: if the language is in some sense difficult, or foreign, or the thought expressed is hard to follow

(listening to a philosophical presentation).

The second aspect of the concept of understanding is according to Hertzberg seen in the negative use of the term: in "I do not understand". This could be the reaction to evil. Hertzberg's example is the reaction of someone who hears that snipers in Sarajevo during the civil war killing children playing in the streets. To say "I cannot understand how someone can do something like that" is not here an expression of a failure on my part, something that I can try, but fail to accomplish. If someone else says that they can certainly understand the action, I might rather see them as in some sense failing. This is because my attitude towards the action isn't neutral – I find it abhorrent, and I can disagree with someone over whether it is an action that can be understood at all, and that disagreement will be moral. (Hertzberg 2005: 4-5) The same kind of stance can be taken in issues that concern cultural differences, when for example we say "I cannot understand that someone would kill their own daughter on account of a conception of honour".

Other cases of not understanding that Hertzberg mentions include not understanding certain activities ("I cannot understand people who like horror movies"), or sports, or music. In these cases too that which is expressed isn't neutral, it is often an expression of not *wanting* to understand. (Hertzberg 2005: 5-6) The latter case might not be called a moral stance in the same way as the former (though some people take on a moral, or at least moralistic tone in discussion of music, literature and movie preferences), but in both the reaction to evil, and to incomprehensible preferences, we can find a kind of rejection of the action itself, a not wanting to think about it in a certain light or in a certain way – in the former case we might think it morally wrong, in the latter case we might have more personal reasons for not wanting to understand. And in both cases the description of the issue depends on our stance towards it (as in the case of Zande witchcraft, what is accepted by the Zande and rejected by the European is not a "belief" describable as a set of propositions – from each view point what is at issue would look very different).

One of the characteristics of these latter uses of "understanding" is, as Hertzberg points out, that they seem to be concerned exclusively with human beings. This, I think is

important, and it brings us back to Winch's "practical being in tune with others".

Another example in this category that Hertzberg mentions is getting a letter which consists of grammatical sentences, but that do not form a unified whole. When hearing that the writer is psychotic we realize that one cannot expect to understand the letter. I think it is important for this example to get off the ground properly, that I first don't know who wrote the letter – or at least that I don't know that the person in question is ill: I am assuming that it should be written similarly as other letters I have received. In that case I become bewildered and confused by the content of it. But imagine that I have just started dating, and one day I receive a letter from the object of my attentions, written in the style of a literary experiment or perhaps as a modernist poem. This letter might, depending on my background and the writer's skills, make me equally perplexed and bewildered. Now, the characteristic of the case that of the schizophrenic is according to Hertzberg that: "The psychotic is not someone who has huge problems of communication: he is someone who suffers from the *delusion that he is in the process of communicating* something. He could not get out of his predicament by finding a good interpreter." (Hertzberg: 7) But, evidently, much the same could be said about the poet: It's not because he has problems communicating that he expresses himself in such a way, either. Now, imagine that I am working as a literary critic myself and quite knowledgeable of literary traditions and poetic expressions, but I realize when reading this particular piece that the author fails miserably – all I can say is that this person is not communicating anything at all, he is rather in the *delusion that he is in the process of communicating something*. But this reaction of incomprehension is not irrevocable: it is possible that I come to re-evaluate the poem. When I write his biography 50 years later on – the biography of a famous poet – and find his old letter stacked away in my desk, I might come to see it as the harbinger of the style that has come to dominate his writing later on. Perhaps I include it in an anthology of his poetry, and write an illuminating introduction. I understand the poem now. (And here I have left Read far behind – according to him we cannot understand "extreme modernist poetry" (Read 2003: 120). I

will ignore this and stick to our actual uses of "understanding" instead.[14])

Back to the letter written by the schizophrenic: I would argue, especially if the psychotic person is someone I know, that it is possible for me to understand his letter too. I can understand it in so far as I might be able to see whether he is particularly worried about something, for example. And perhaps I can detect changes in his condition. Or perhaps, behind whatever bizarreness that an uninitiated reader stumbles on, I can clearly see a sign of affection. But I think it is probably important here that the extent that I can understand the letter is the extent to which I can understand the person behind it.

What I want to claim, then, is that rationality as well as understandability, do not just reside in the structure of thought or speech of the person speaking (or writing), or in his or her state of mind, but is rather a question of what kind of relationship I can establish to him/her, or to the written word. Most of the time understanding doesn't become an issue, we make interchanges with people at bus stops and shops every day without giving what they say and its rationality (or lack of rationality) a second thought. This doesn't show how understanding pervades our everyday interchanges with people, only that the question doesn't arise. (And I think much the same is true of our relationship to art: I am not sure what my response would be if someone asked me "did you understand it?" after a concert of, say, Beethoven.) For the question of understanding to present itself there needs to be a task of some kind, or a difficulty. And if on our daily trip between home and work someone breaks the pattern, acts in ways unpredictable and surprising, commands our attention or our interest and makes the question of understanding acute, chances are that person is from another culture – or mad. I would think that this clash with how we normally behave is a main reason for the intuitive ("grammatical") connection between incomprehensibility and madness.

"The tragedy of his illness lies not only in the anxiety he experiences and all the practical

[14] I am quite curious about what Read would say about understanding classical poetry, and what that understanding on his view amounts to. Not to mention music, visual art, etc.

difficulties it brings in train, but *in the incomprehensibility itself*", Hertzberg writes. (Hertzberg: 8) I agree with this, but only with the qualification of another aspect of these latter cases of understanding (where other human beings are in focus), one that Hertzberg omits: that understanding here, as opposed to the case of understanding a mathematical equation, is not an all-or-nothing affair. I can come to understand a person better and better, and I can learn to understand aspects of people that I really didn't think were possible. When it comes to people, I can *sort of* understand them in many different ways: I can see why someone likes to watch documentary soaps, or detective stories, even if I would never want to do that myself. Or, as Winch points out: "There is no reason why (…) we should not be able to gain as full an understanding of the Zande poison oracle as we might gain from a comparable description of, let us say, concert going in the western world. We may still feel, nevertheless, that there is something about the Zande practice that we do not, perhaps even that we never shall, understand." (Winch 1997:199) I can also learn to recognize that when a person speaks with a particular voice he is hearing, he is more agitated than if he speaks to another – and even if I don't understand his choice of words, I can know how I should respond. I do not see why we could not call this, too, understanding. (Read seems to be concerned about this position, what he calls a "half-way house between the claim to understand and the admittance of incomprehension".[15])

I think we can say, with Hertzberg, that the schizophrenic suffers from incomprehensibility. And this is perhaps the crucial difference between the solipsist and the schizophrenic, as well as the bad poet (and, of course, the unfamiliar culture): the schizophrenic *suffers*. But incomprehensibility is not a state, or a property of some person or utterance: incomprehensibility is the result of many factors that pertain to the relationship between people (or people and a text). We cannot be doomed to incomprehension any more than we can be doomed to be understood. However difficult it might be then (and I am not saying that it is not difficult) to understand a schizophrenic, it is certainly not ruled out by the nature of logic.

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[15] At the same time, though, he writes: "Insofar as someone claims, 'Here's how to understand x fully!', where x is a society (or a practice, or a person), one ought to be very wary" (Read 2001: 459).

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