

The Logic of Zombies: An Experiential Account of Schizophrenia

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Several months into a seven-month episode of psychosis, I stood in Utah before the undulating rock of a canyon bathed in muted colors of peach, red, and rust. I could see that the canyon was beautiful. And I sighed, knowing I would soon feel deep satisfaction and contentment while contemplating nature's beauty. My heart rose in anticipation, but instead, I felt nothing, not one thing at all. I couldn't have cared less. And I was perplexed. I registered that the colors of the canyon were exquisitely melded into one another. "What was happening," I thought? I saw that the rock was twisted and carved by the forces of gravity and water. However, I had absolutely no emotional reaction to the marvel of the American Southwest. The deep cobalt-blue sky never said a word to me that day. In fact, wonder fled far away. The loneliness of the scene, just a rock wall and myself bordering a deep ravine that ran far away into the empty desert, stirred no melancholy in my heart. But I did marvel at my lack of aesthetic response, something I knew I usually felt keenly. In my opinion a lot of weird things had been happening to me for a while. This was just one more of the same. It was beginning to become disturbing. In fact, I had never heard of anhedonia, nor did I have any idea that perception might sever its tie to emotion. Instead, an unusual thought occurred to me, "Zombies don't feel pleasure either." I knew from horror movies that zombies moved on autopilot, their only drive being to eat the sweet fruit of someone else's brain. Who knows why such a peculiar image would occur to me out of the blue? Zombies were not something I usually spent a lot of time on. It's notable that despite the horror which occurred to me, I never once considered that I was sick. It was not me who was weird; it was the world. Everything had gone topsy-turvy but that was the fault of the world. I had no part in it except to respond. Even despite the ever-increasing terror and perplexity of my situation, I never once thought to reach out for help. I never contacted my loved ones or any of my friends. In fact, I had cast them aside because I thought I was a deep-state spy. Instead, I continued to try to solve the puzzle of my new existence alone as I trudged back to my car with anxiety as my only friend. It was true to say that I was all alone with my thoughts, as frightening as they had become.

And then suddenly, as I left a supposedly stunning landscape behind, I made an uneasy syllogism. It went something like this: zombies didn't feel pleasure. I no longer felt pleasure either. Obviously therefore, I was in danger of becoming a zombie. It was a faulty piece of reasoning, but it felt logical to me in a way that was enlightening and dramatic. I could

still feel the deep satisfaction of systematic thinking if not the natural beauty of the earth. Though gravely ill, I continued to use my cognitive abilities to try to make sense of a new reality that had intruded on my mind. But though I reasoned, I didn't recognize that I was committing a serious error in judgement. In this, I made a common mistake of conflating the referents, something I wouldn't have done if sane or if possessed of any common sense. Yet don't pundits deliberately engage in this very piece of deduction when promoting their candidates? Candidate X is of tenuous virtue. Criminals are not virtuous. Therefore, Candidate X is a criminal. Don't vote for them. What was most broken in me was not my reasoning capacity, however poorly it operated. But what is well established is that the boundaries in my thinking between fiction and reality had shattered completely. My brain continued to operate logically, if in a faulty way, but my premises were nonsensical. What starts this decay in the brain? This loosening of associations where I tied together the imaginary and the real as if the two were made of the same property? If sane, it would have been obviously clear to me that zombies and people weren't similar in any way except in an imaginary world. But here what broke in me was the comprehension that some things were make-believe, while others were real. Strangely I still didn't believe in ghosts, goblins, or ghouls. I knew they were storybook villains. I knew it without having to say so, without even needing to examine the proposition. But with this one piece of deduction, I automatically accepted that zombies existed (and I might soon be one of them) although I had never seen one outside of the movies.

How can this be? I can hardly understand it today. How could I have believed and uncritically accepted that I was in danger of becoming a blood-thirsty, drooling monster? Strangely I received this rationalization wholeheartedly, and it influenced my behavior going forward. I was so scared I locked myself in my car and drove as fast as I could, heading toward the East Coast, fleeing whatever malignant creature was trying to destroy me and my life as an independent, capable person. Of course, I didn't want to become a zombie. I just wanted to go back to graduate school. But you don't see many zombies with cap and gown or a PhD in hand. And graduate school was in California, not in West Virginia where I found myself a few days later. I was literally a few thousand miles away from my university and a million miles away from effective critical reasoning.

What does interest me, however, is that despite insanity my cognitive capacity remained foundationally intact. I didn't babble incomprehensibly; I was not catatonic; I held normal conversations with people I met on the road. Instead, what might have appeared nonsensical to an outsider, came with what I felt was rigorous deductive thought. Although I did accept and engage in intellectual absurdity, I still possessed some type of rational capacity. In fact, I honestly believed I was fact-checking or assessing reality as astutely as I had ever done. I congratulated myself on rational thinking. I thought I was thinking more clearly than I had ever done and I patted myself on the back for it. In fact, I was calculating in a more detailed way than I had ever done before. That was probably the paranoia. I imagined a complex world of mind reading, political turmoil, dangerous criminals, and an existential threat for not only me but my country as well. Would zombies take over the world? In my head they just might. But no movie stars rode to my rescue.

For strangely, just because I considered it, I accepted that zombies were real creatures. I could no longer experience an aesthetic response to beauty of any kind. The only other being I knew of who shared this weird un-quality was no longer a make-believe monster. How could I accept that zombies existed and that I was engaged in my own private horror movie? It is astonishing. I was convinced zombies shuffled down the streets of the US and threatened to consume my soul. Yet I never felt anywhere I stayed was haunted. I never believed in the reality of ghosts. They remained solidly fictitious in my mind. The dichotomy of this surprises me.

Instead, other strange thoughts percolated in my brain. Someone was beaming thoughts into my head. An evil, demonic individual could use these thoughts to undermine the very substance of my physical body. It was a nightmare I dove into as if into a cold pool. Although the shock of it was terrible, I never questioned my logic or conclusions. When unusual assumptions came to me, I tried to examine them critically. And though I turned over my ideas for flaws, suddenly, zombies seemed more real to me than assenting to the proposition that my mother was my real parent (which I no longer believed). I had created a logically functioning and solidly reasoned world in my head that took several months to take shape. It was composed of high-tech innovations best described by science fiction; of villains who rivalled the world's worst tyrants for cruelty and ambition; and of unexpected twists that came to me regularly like my supposed discovery of fiendishness in my brain.

But fiction and imagination peopled my reality with strange and crazy ideas. Logical premises continued to come to me, but they were based on illogical probabilities. Still, though I came to many more conclusions like this, for the life of me, I couldn't draw logical inferences from external phenomena. If a leaf fell, instead of deciding that autumn was on the way, I believed it verified a thought that had just occurred to me. "People are

reading your mind and talking to you through the radio," I thought. And just then a leaf fell from a branch above me. This was enough for me to conclude that my reflection had been verified, and that the radio had much of value to communicate. So common sense gave way to paranoia and illogical thinking.

How did I ever come up with such an atypical understanding of reality, such as people were reading my mind or that the radio spoke to me alone of all the billions of people in the world? No one suggested it to me. I had never read about it in the paper. I had never started in fear of zombies in the dark. These thoughts came to me as if in a flash of light and when verified by my so-called reality testing (where a falling leaf stood in for truth), my thoughts were confirmed. In response to a falling leaf, I walked around day to day with a Walkman tuned to my favorite radio station because now I knew that people could read my mind and respond to me in kind. In this way I thought I received special orders as a spy, and I tried to protect myself from an enemy who could destroy my very soul. Many of the premises of my inferences were faulty. All my attempts to verify my conclusions were inane. Yet my brain continued to function as if logic mattered decisively and as if reason were the primary ground of my thinking. Reason was engaged fitfully but still deductively. And yet, it was all nonsense. But not in a way that was nonsense to me.

It seems what changed in me the most was that the boundary between fiction and the real world crumbled and broke into pieces. If I considered zombies, for some mysterious reason I accepted them uncritically as true. Some monsters were real; some remained fictitious. Who can tell me why? My whole life as I saw it had been based on a lie, and evil entities pursued me to torture me. Interestingly, these supposed insights came with emotional reverberations. They felt as if I had just experienced the satisfaction of solving a particularly difficult logical or mathematical proposition. Although I had anhedonia, when an idea or concept came to me, it was like a light shining in the darkness of schizophrenia. These conclusions seemed more real than any reality I had ever experienced. They hit me like a brick. They seemed to come from heaven with brightness all around them. In response, I put ideas together over the course of many months, reasoning from one unusual experience to the next. And in some ways because their reception in my mind was so dramatic, I wonder if I accepted the truth of them without credulity. My ideas were nonsensical: yet not to me. And in me, I believe they were made up of the building blocks of reason trying vainly to continue functioning when my premises were more ludicrous and worse than any horror movie's allure for a teenage boy. So it may be that in schizophrenia reason continues long past when it really works. Though it appears so legitimate and real to the participant, it's all but nonsense to everyone else. So, reason moves without reason. So, logic becomes a vehicle of fiction and irrationality blowing through the mind.



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