

The Hidden Image: A Defense of Unconscious Imagining and Its Importance

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Introduction

The focus of this paper is neither as broad as unconscious mentality in general, nor as narrow as unconscious phantasies that serve as an outlet for forbidden desires. (I do, however, make some observations about both of these topics along the way.) I'm interested in cases in which the modality of unconscious states is sensory imagining rather than more purely cognitive believing or supposing; but I allow for a wide variety of ways in which such imagining functions.

I begin by describing some ordinary cases in which we might be tempted to suppose that unconscious imagining is going on. Then, in response to several different doubts about interpreting these cases as cases of unconscious imagining, I develop an account of what unconscious imagining involves, and when it is reasonable to suspect its occurrence. This account, in turn, sets the stage for a consideration of the importance of unconscious imagining for moral psychology, for "as if" experiences in aesthetics, and for perception more generally.

I

The case of the prying parent: A mother goes into her child's room and looks through the child's things while the child is away – pausing over items she has not seen before, paying special attention to hidden corners of a closet or drawer, carefully repositioning each item in the position she found it. As she searches the room she steps softly and keeps her face angled towards the door: her body is visibly tense. Her movements are not those of an officer investigating the scene of a crime so much as those of a stealthy burglar. She doesn't want anyone to know that she's going through her child's things in this way. Asked whether she *believes* that there is, or might be, someone else in the house she would certainly say no. Asked whether she is *imagining* that there is someone else in the house, or whether she is imagining herself as a burglar, she would probably say no. She would acknowledge, however, that she is *acting as if* there might be someone else in the house, and as if she were a burglar.

The case of the belligerent assistant: A college student finds a summer job as an office assistant, hired to help with filing, copying, and answering phone calls. The pay is reasonable and the setting pleasant. The office manager has a rather authoritative manner, however, and the student begins to bristle at the requests being made of him, however reasonable they may be. He responds with a stony face and delayed follow through: he takes pleasure in allowing undetected errors to stand. Reflecting on the situation, he thinks it is the way that the manager makes his request that bothers him, but he is unable

to articulate just what that way is. Asked whether he *believes* the manager is his father, he would certainly say no. Asked whether he *imagines* that the manager is his father, or that he is a child, he would probably say no. He would acknowledge, however, that he is *acting as if* the manager were his father and he were a child. (This is a clear case of what psychoanalysts would call “transference” – the more or less automatic transfer of expectations and responses regarding one person to another.)

The case of the upset survivor: A woman in a car crash has just witnessed the death of the person with whom she was traveling. She sits by the side of the road with her arms wrapped tightly around herself, rocking back and forth, eyes squeezed shut, speaking to no one. She does not *believe* that she is now in mortal danger. She is not aware of *imagining* anything apart from the insistent “replay” of the scene she has just witnessed. She would acknowledge, however, that she is *acting as if* she would otherwise fall apart.

In each of these cases, it seems appropriate to think that there is unconscious imagining going on. For the posit of unconscious imagining seems to offer the best explanation for the relevant behavior – able to account for more details in a more unified way than alternative explanations are able to do. Clearly there are aspects of the behavior of each of these people that is not explained by their conscious thoughts and intentions – the furtive movements of the prying mother who believes no one is at home, the student’s resistance to requests that he believes are entirely reasonable, and the self-clutching of the traumatized woman whose conscious thoughts are wholly occupied with external events. It is not so clear, however, that these behaviors are best explained by appeal to unconscious states with *representational content*, let alone unconscious *imaginings* with such contents.¹ Other possibilities include (a) explanations that appeal to evolutionary or social conditioning without invoking representational content at all, (b) explanations that appeal to unconscious thoughts or beliefs rather than imaginings, and (c) explanations that appeal to the imagery of a language or culture rather than the imagery of an individual person. It will be useful to pause over these alternatives and their shortcomings on the way towards developing a broader defense of the reality and importance of unconscious imagining.

The Conditioning Alternative

Often it is possible to explain the behavior of a person or animal by appeal to past conditioning – either the past of an individual or the past of a species. In either case one hypothesizes a pattern of stimulus-response reinforcement and inhibition that “re-wires” their physiology so as to produce, automatically, and *without recourse to internal representations*, the resultant behavior. When such explanations suffice, they are

¹ Whether *mental* contents must be representational, and whether representational contents must be *conceptual* are issues about which there is lively philosophical dispute. In what follows, I try to remain neutral with respect to these disputes; nothing I say precludes the possibility of non-representational mental contents or non-conceptual representations.

preferable to explanations that rely on internal representations because they are simpler – simpler insofar as they bypass the complexities that surround the notion of a representation of any sort but especially that of an internal representation (viewed by an internal subject?). Explanations that appeal to conditioning describe the way in which some neural pathways (and their behavior outcomes) can be reinforced while others are extinguished through repetitious correlations with positive versus negative sensations – without attributing any mental representation of what is happening or why.

In our first case – the case of a prying parent, an explanation that appealed to conditioning might suggest that the mother’s furtive behavior has been conditioned through rewards (positive feedback) for similar behavior in similar circumstances and/or through punishment (negative feedback) for non-furtive behavior in similar circumstances. According to such an account, she is not acting furtively because of unconscious beliefs or desires or imaginings – or, indeed, because of inner representations of any sort. Rather, she is simply exemplifying the sort of behavior that she has been “wired” for.

The biggest problem with this sort of explanation, in this sort of case, is the seeming impossibility of identifying either the relevant class of stimuli to which the person is responding or the relevant class of behavior which she is exhibiting without recourse to mental representations. It does not seem possible to identify a stimulus similarity between all rooms that are off-bounds versus rooms that are not, or a response similarity between behaviors that are watchful versus behaviors that are wary. These distinctions depend on the attribution of various background beliefs and desires – beliefs about ownership and occupation, beliefs about another person’s schedule, desires regarding detection, desires regarding the objects under investigation. Beliefs and desires, however, depend on mental representations of their objects. The prying parent is not simply conditioned to respond to a certain class of stimuli in a particular way; she is representing the situation to herself in a particular way and she is representing the possible consequences of her actions.²

Might explanations that rely on conditioning fare better in cases like that of the belligerent assistant? Delineating stimulus similarities between a father giving orders and a boss giving orders may be quite easy, as are the similarities between a child’s sullen responses and that of the assistant. The assistant’s responses extend beyond mere sullenness, though. He also takes pleasure in allowing mistakes to go undetected, for example, which seems to involve a strategy, not just conditioning – a strategy of revenge (however inappropriate that revenge may be). Strategic planning depends on mental representations, however; conditioning is not enough. Even if conditioning is responsible for a certain attitude of belligerence, spiteful actions depend on the ability to represent alternative courses of action and their consequences.

² I offer a fuller account of the limits of purely behaviorist explanations in my “Reasons of which Reason Knows Not” (2005).

In the case of the traumatized crash survivor, it is implausible to think that she has been personally conditioned to respond to such violence in the way that she does, since it is unlikely that she has encountered enough that is similar in the past, or that she has responded in just this way to anything else. On the other hand, it may be especially tempting in cases such as these to think that evolution has “conditioned” us to adopt certain protective positions in the face of extreme violence – positions in which limbs surround one’s torso, in which one’s eyes remain closed, in which no sounds are uttered. The woman’s response persists long after the danger is past, of course, but instinctual responses do tend to linger beyond their usefulness. It is unlikely, however, that the survivor would retain her position unless she also continued to ‘replay’ the scene she just witnessed, and that depends on mental representation. Furthermore, her self-clutching behavior is likely to become more rather than less intense as she begins to focus on the broader implications of what she has just witnessed – which is the opposite of what one would expect from a mere instinct. (I am not, of course, denying that there is an instinctive component to such responses to trauma.)

The Unconscious Belief Alternative

In each of the cases we’ve described, there is no reason to doubt a person’s explicit disavowal of a particular belief – the belief that someone else is in the house, the belief that the boss is one’s father, or the belief that one is at risk of falling apart. The person’s honesty is not at issue, and most of their deliberate acts cohere with the beliefs they profess to hold. The contents of our minds (beliefs or otherwise) are not entirely coherent, however, so it may seem perfectly natural to suppose that each of these people harbors unconscious beliefs that contradict his or her consciously endorsed beliefs.

While I acknowledge that conflicts of belief do occur, I do not think that it works as an explanation of the cases at issue. For these are not cases of simple oversight – as when I believe that we are going to a movie tonight *and* I believe we are staying home tonight without (yet) having noticed the conflict. Nor are they cases of repression or self-deception – as when I believe my lover is unfaithful but arrange my thoughts and actions to shore up a conviction to the contrary. Instead, these are cases in which the unconscious content seems unresponsive to available evidence (where responsiveness to belief is one mark of belief) and ineffectual in one’s reasoning (where efficacy in reasoning is another mark of belief).

Jonathan Lear identifies the motivation in favor of supposing that the mental states that govern our behavior unconsciously are unconscious beliefs and desires. Beliefs and desires, he reminds us, are the states that provide *reasons* for one’s actions, and providing reasons for our behavior is precisely what contentful attributions attempt to do.

If we take the idea, say, of unconscious fear at face value, we have to locate that fear in a rationalizing web of beliefs and expectations. As Aristotle pointed out, the emotion of fear requires that an agent believe she is in some danger. Fear makes an implicit claim that it is a merited response to one’s circumstances. Of course, an agent may be mistaken, but without a rationalizing belief, we lose grip

on the idea that what the agent suffers from is fear (rather than, say anxiety). Thus we are led to the idea that the agent must also have an unconscious belief that she is in danger and perhaps an unconscious desire to escape. (A similar argument applies to other self-regulating emotions like shame and guilt.) We are quickly led to the idea of The Unconscious as a mindlike structure with its own rationality. ... And if we inquire into the nature of the unconscious belief and desire we are led even further in this direction. The very idea of an agent's having a particular belief (or desire) depends on that belief's (desire's) being located in a web of the beliefs and desires which both rationalize it and provide the structure in relation to which the belief has the particular content it has.³

Lear then argues against this reliance on unconscious beliefs and desires on the grounds that it erases the real *irrationality* of the unconscious mind – irrationality that is not just a result of being at odds with the conscious mind, and *its* rationality, but irrationality that is due to the different way that representations *function* in the unconscious mind. Even if there were someone in the house, the mother's furtive gestures would not make much sense; even if the manager were the assistant's father, his undermining tactics would not be very rational; and even if the crash survivor were about to fall apart, her self-encircling position would not offer much help. (Lear goes on to describe the irrational functioning of what psychoanalysts call phantasy. I return to a discussion of phantasy below.)

An interesting variation on the unconscious belief alternative is suggested by Jonathan Cohen's distinction between belief and acceptance.⁴ Belief, according to Cohen, depends on the feeling that something is true – a feeling that often persists despite evidence to the contrary, while acceptance depends on reflective endorsement of something as true and a willingness to use it in inferences. The advantage of introducing this distinction is that it allows some mental representations to be more emotionally compelling while others are more rationally compelling. Could it be that the prying parent believes that someone is in the house in the sense that she feels it to be so, even though she accepts that the house is empty in the sense that she reflectively endorses the rationality of that competing claim? Similarly, that the assistant feels that he is a child while reasoning that he is not; and that the crash survivor feels that she will fall apart while accepting that she will not? The problem with Cohen's distinction is the problem of understanding how there can be a feeling for the truth of something apart from any endorsement of its logical implications – the problem that is articulated in the above quote from Lear. At the very least, more must be said about why the relevant attitudes are *beliefs* rather than something else.

The Social Constructivist Alternative

If one believes that mental attributions, in general, do not reflect the inner representations and reasoning of an individual so much as they reflect the preoccupations

³ *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul* (1998), pp.82-3.

⁴ *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* (1992). I discuss his distinction at length in my "Taking It to Heart: What Choice Do We Have?" (2002).

and norms of a society, it becomes tempting to view much of our behavior as governed by the imagery of a society at large rather than the imagery of any one individual. Here it is important to distinguish between cases in which a society's imagery is internalized so as to become full-fledged parts of an individual's psychology – cases in which external images are replicated by internal counterparts, and cases in which a society's imagery may determine the contents of an individual's mind without that content being represented 'in' that mind. The first possibility concerns the external *sources* of certain imaginings (whether conscious or not) without disputing their eventual *location* within an individual mind. The second possibility replaces individual imagery with a kind of societal imagery that transcends the representational capacities of any one person. While the first possibility is relatively uncontroversial, the second constitutes a radical alternative to explanations that appeal to internal representations of any sort.⁵

In the case of the prying parent, the (radical) social constructivist might maintain that the furtiveness of the mother's movements is determined by the way that her society treats parent-child relations, the way that searches are portrayed in the movies, the way that certain spaces are regarded as private – social pressures that guide her behavior not because she is guided by an internal representation of herself as a burglar or of someone else in the house, nor because she has become conditioned to imitate the movies, but because the larger social context of which she is a part constructs her behavior in accordance with certain norms and shapes it accordingly – without the need for any internal representation of possible intrusions, etc.. On this view, there is a sense in which her behavior has been conditioned, for social forces have actually caused it to assume a certain form. The relevant conditioning is quite unlike that considered above under the Conditioning Alternative, however, since the relevant stimuli are extremely diverse, the resultant behavior is not simply replicating past behavior, and the deeper meaning of her behavior resides in larger societal patterns without being individually registered in any way.⁶ The mother may acknowledge that she is acting as if she were a burglar about to be discovered, the assistant may acknowledge that he is acting as if his boss were his father, and the crash survivor may acknowledge that she is acting as if she were about to fall apart. None of these acknowledgements is necessary, however, for the truth of an explanation that accounts for an individual's behavior by situating it within the imagery of a culture more generally.⁷ According to the (radical) social constructivist, the content of one's mind extends far beyond the boundaries of one's inner representations.

⁵ See my "Making Order out of Disorder: On the Social Construction of Madness" (2004) for a fuller analysis of different versions of the social constructivist thesis. See Gardner (1998), p. 248-9, for a brief but useful description of Lacan's understanding of a *social* unconscious.

⁶ This is unlike instances of content externalism in which individuals agree to defer to experts to determine the meaning of their terms since there are no agreed upon experts to interpret the imagery of a culture. See Burge (1979).

⁷ Part of what is at issue in disputes over the status of social constructivist explanations is the status of causal explanations versus descriptive explanations, for example – explanations that explain something by subsuming under a given type rather than by

One problem with this social constructivist approach to the cases I have outlined concerns their local and circumscribed character. If mothers in general behaved as though they were being watched in all of their dealings with their children, then it might make sense to say that the mother's behavior is socially constructed by widespread oversight of parent-child relations, by the pervasiveness of a movie culture, by its social preoccupation with privacy and its violation. But in the case I've described, her furtive behavior is more isolated – to a particular space at a specific time. Likewise, if students and assistants in general behaved as though the whole world (or every adult, or everyone who made a request) was an authority to be resisted, then it might be tempting to explain the assistant's behavior as socially constructed – as part of a society-wide configuration of certain ages and stages, or of certain work roles. But the case I have described is the case of a particular assistant's response to a particular manager who bears a special resemblance to his father. Behavior that is socially constructed tends to be continuous and pervasive – typical gender behavior for example; while the behavior in the cases I have described is more temporary and restricted in scope.

Another problem with the social constructivist approach to the cases I have described concerns the apparent absence of any broader social *function* for the behavior in question. Unlike the case of socially constructed gender behavior, it is hard to see how society at large (or certain privileged segments of society, or certain powerful elements within a society) benefit from the parent's furtiveness, the assistant's belligerence, or the survivor's clutching behavior. Clever hypotheses about social benefits are always possible, but these hypotheses would have to have independent plausibility, or the available alternatives would have to be seriously implausible, before social constructivist explanations would seem like the best explanation for these cases.

II

Our review of several alternative explanations has highlighted the fact that the cases under consideration are best explained through (1) the attribution of unconscious representations (versus mere conditioning, or selective reinforcement of certain neural pathways), (2) the attribution of something other than an attitude of *belief* with respect to those contents, and (3) the attribution of contents and attitudes that are specific to *individuals*. This next section is devoted to a defense of the view that the attitude that is appropriate to the explanation of these cases is best understood as one of *imagining*, and that *unconscious* imagining is not as implausible as it might seem initially.

Imagining, unlike believing, does not include a commitment to the truth of what is imagined. Whether we think of belief as the attitude that *aims* to represent things truly, shaping its own content in the process of coming to be, or whether we think of belief as the endorsement of a particular representation as true, making judgments about the

identifying its cause. Often, it is not clear which of these sorts of explanations social constructivist are offering.

representations that are presented to one, the attitude or belief is tied to truth in a way that imagining is not.⁸ I can imagine things that I take to be false – that I disbelieve – and I can imagine things without having any view about their truth or falsity – about which I remain agnostic. This disconnect between imagining and concerns about truth accords well with the explicit denials on the part of the prying parent, the belligerent assistant, and the shattered survivor – the denial that there is anyone else in the house, the denial that the manager is one’s father, and the denial that one is about to fall apart, respectively. But does this disconnect from truth also disconnect imagination from having an impact on the behavior that we are trying to explain?

In cases of *conscious* imagining, there is no need for imagining to have any effect on one’s behavior. Your announcement that you are imagining someone else in the house generally suffices for our attribution of such imagining to you. In the case of unconscious mental states, though, it is the resultant behavior that indicates to us that some such state exists. Thus the very intelligibility of unconscious imagining may be called into doubt if the imagining is isolated from any behavioral consequences.

In response to this concern, it is important to note that while imagining *need not* guide our behavior, it often *does*.⁹ Even when our imagining is conscious it may guide the way in which we play with one another, or the way we stroll down a street, or the way we sing a song. We know that the contents of our imaginings are false but we behave (at least to some extent) as if they were true. So too, then, there is no reason to think that unconscious imagining can’t give rise to certain behavioral patterns – especially when there is no obvious conflict between the behavior based on one’s imagining and the behavior required by one’s beliefs and desires. The parent’s furtive manner does not stand in the way of her intention to pry, for example; the assistant’s belligerent manner does not prevent him from carrying out his duties; and the survivor’s self-hugging does not prevent her from moving elsewhere when the police direct her to do so. Indeed, as in various cases of imaginative play, these cases exhibit an almost heightened sensitivity to the line that separates imagination from belief. When I walked down the street imagining that I am on a beach, I tend to be more rather than less aware of the difference between a beach and the street that I’m on; and when I sing a song as though I were on an opera stage, I tend to be more rather than less aware of the smaller room I am in. Likewise, the furtive parent is often more rather than less surprised than the non-furtive searcher by the appearance of another persons in the house; and the belligerent assistant is usually extra alert to what does versus what does not put his job in jeopardy. There is no reason, then, to suppose that unconscious imagining would not have behavioral consequences.

Another worry about the attribution of unconscious imagining as opposed to belief is this: if the distinction between believing and imagining depends on a subject’s ability to distinguish between truth and falsity, and if it is not possible for a subject to make the true-false distinction unconsciously, then it is not possible to distinguish

⁸ Corresponding to these options are different options with regard to truth itself: truth as the expression of a certain intention versus truth as a substantive property, for example.

⁹ The influence of imagination on behavior is nicely documented in Gendler (2006).

between unconscious believing and unconscious imagining. Full discussion of the various premises of this argument lies outside the scope of this paper; they rely on certain understandings of what is required for the recognition of a true-false distinction, what consciousness is.¹⁰ For our purposes, however, it is enough to agree that unconscious imagery (with representational content) can guide our behavior quite independently of any judgments we make about its truth or falsity. So even if distinguishing between truth and falsity requires consciousness, and even if the attitude of belief and the attitude of imagining depend on having the capacity to distinguish truth from falsity, that fact does not preclude the flourishing of unconscious imagery.

So far, our defense of unconscious imagining has revolved around the distinction between imagining and *believing* where believing requires an attunement to truth that imagining does not. There is another important distinction to be drawn between imagining and *conceiving* – where imagining requires a kind of imagery that conceiving does not.

There are conceptions of imagining that do not assume the presence of any imagery – conceptions that regard the mere conceiving of a state of affairs as a form of imagining. Colin McGinn professes not to experience mental imagery at all, and he explicitly defends a broader conception of imagination that includes “cognitive imagining”.¹¹ Peter Kung, likewise, is careful to include both sensory imagining and “stipulative imagining” under the broader umbrella of imaginings.¹² I agree with Kung’s inclusion of non-visual sensory modalities as possible forms of imagining, but his stipulative imagining is what I would call conceiving as opposed to imagining. Regardless of the terms we use, however, I want to defend the presence of unconscious imagining that does involve images.¹³ In order to do that I must respond to the objection that images by their very nature have a phenomenology, and phenomenology is precisely what the unconscious lacks.

In responding to this objection, it is worth noting how Sebastian Gardner and Jonathan Lear each defend the claim that there is an unconscious phenomenology for

¹⁰ The argument proceeds most smoothly if one assumes that reflection, or higher-order thought, is necessary for making the true/false distinction (Davidson, 1985), and that conscious states are precisely those which are the objects of higher-order thought (Rosenthal, 2005). The argument against unconscious imagining could be strengthened further if one assumed that all mental contents are conceptualized contents and conceptualization itself depends on one’s attunement to truth versus falsity (McDowell, 1994). Each of these assumptions is highly controversial and it is not clear just what part of the argument can be salvaged if some of these assumptions are modified.

¹¹ *Mindsight: image, dream, and meaning*. (2004)

¹² Kung (unpublished) is interested in the epistemic importance of imagining, and he rejects “stipulative imagining” as epistemically relevant.

¹³ I’m not suggesting that images are the *objects* of one’s imagining. The objects of our imaginings are, in general, the states of affairs represented by the images. See Kind (2001) for a helpful discussion of these issues.

unconscious emotions. Gardner distinguishes between (i) the non-cognitive sense of phenomenological properties of mental states *registering* with a person, and (ii) the cognitive sense associated with, and manifested in the ability to *self-describe* that state.¹⁴ Unconscious pain on his account is pain that is felt, but not self-described. Its presence is registered but not conceptualized. Lear also distinguishes between cognitive and non-cognitive phenomenology by distinguishing between the *matter* of mentality and its *form*.

Basically, I want to argue that in the cringe what we see is *the matter* of fear – as Aristotle would put it, *that from which* fear is constituted. What the cringe lacks is, in the literal sense of the term, *information* ... When we consider a functioning human being in a state of fear, we want to capture, on the one hand, that the fear reaches down to the most elemental bodily reactions – it expresses itself in structured forms of muscle clenching, constriction of veins, pulse, respiration – while on the other, fear reaches out and offers a rationalizing orientation to the world.¹⁵

It is this latter aspect, on Lear's account, that is absent when an emotion is unconscious. An unconscious fear is felt in one's body but not yet given the form that is necessary for cognitive content.

Both of these philosophers of psychoanalysis defend the notion that unconscious states have a phenomenology only insofar as it is a phenomenology of bodily sensation, movement, and impulse. Unconscious states, according to Gardner and Lear, display direction and purpose but lack an intentional object. However structured the unconscious urgings may be, they lack representational content. With respect to the cases we are considering, however, I have argued that we must attribute *representational* mental states (and not just conditioned responses). The phenomenology of unconscious imagining is not merely the phenomenology of inclinations that pull us in one direction or another, however rationally or irrationally; it must also include the phenomenology of representing things in one way or another. But can there be a phenomenology of representation without consciousness?

W. Nimmo grants that if imagining requires images then imagining must be conscious, but Nimmo goes on to offer an interpretation of unconscious imagining whereby images that were consciously entertained in the past may be unconsciously *remembered* and influential in the present. "I suggest, then, that [here] Freud's notion of "unconscious fantasy" can be reinterpreted as a possibly distorted memory of a past conscious memory, a memory which may be inaccessible to consciousness."¹⁶ On this understanding of unconscious imagining it is the non-imagistic memory of an image that was experienced (consciously) in the past that makes the mother act furtively, the assistant act belligerently, and the survivor act self-protectively. Certainly it is plausible to suppose that each of these people have consciously experienced the relevant sorts of

¹⁴ *Irrationality and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (1993) p. 217

¹⁵ Lear (1998), p. 93-94.

¹⁶ Nimmo (1974) p. 55.

images in the past – images of burglars, images of bullying fathers, images of people falling apart – and that they have the capacity to remember these scenes. What does it mean to say that they now remember these without re-experiencing the relevant images?

There seem to be two options here. First, there could be a kind of “body memory” whereby powerful images from one’s past have altered one’s bodily response in such a way that it is appropriate to say that those images remain active – no longer as images, but influential nonetheless. This is a version of the non-representational conditioning alternative discussed and rejected in Section I. Second, we could remember the fact of a particular image without re-experiencing that image; we could access it in propositional form rather than in imagistic form. If the entertaining of propositions, unlike the entertaining of images, does not depend on a certain phenomenology, and thus on consciousness, then our propositional memory of images need not be conscious. This seems to be what Nimmo has in mind.

Nimmo’s interpretation, understood in this way, may seem a bit odd insofar as we think of the shift from images to propositions as involving a shift towards greater consciousness rather than less. This does not however preclude the possibility that propositional memories can persist unconsciously by retaining the grammatical or functional properties that determine their content while imagistic memories cannot persist unconsciously because they cannot retain the phenomenological or sensory character that determines their content. My conceptualization of certain actions as instances of burglary or instances of bullying or instances of falling apart may be something that is retained in unconscious memory even when I am unable to an image of the action in question. The real awkwardness of this suggestion lies elsewhere – namely, in the ineffectualness of purely propositional memories when it comes to present behavior.

As Kant tells us, concepts without intuitions are empty. The mere claim that I am a burglar or that he is a bully cannot drive my behavior unless it is given sensual content – unless it is “schematized” in such a way as to connect concepts to intuitions, cognitive categories to spatial-temporal perceptions. Nimmo’s invocation of non-sensory memory as the means by which memory may be retained unconsciously does not render the notion of unconscious imagining incoherent, then, so much as it undermines its explanatory power.¹⁷

So in order to have a significant influence on our behavior, unconscious imagining must have a phenomenology, and in order to have representational content it must have a phenomenology that includes representations of a spatial-temporal world, not merely the feeling of pre-cognitive urges and inclinations. The phenomenology of unconscious imagining must, in short, be a lot like the phenomenology of unconscious perception.

¹⁷ Wollheim (1984), following Freud (1914), makes a related distinction between reliving the past and recounting the past, noting how the former is therapeutically powerful while the latter is therapeutically inert.

What, then, is the difference between unconscious imagining and unconscious perception, and can this difference be preserved when the states in question are unconscious? Imagination, it is often said, is active where perception is passive; and the objects of imagination are indeterminate while the objects of perception are determinate. The animal that we imagine may be indeterminate between a leopard and a cheetah, and it may have an indeterminate number of spots, while the animal that we perceive must be one or the other and the number of its spots must be determinate. If we are necessarily passive with respect to our unconscious states (because we do not have any control over our unconscious), then they all fall on the side of perceiving rather than imagining; and if the objects of our unconscious states are necessarily indeterminate then they all fall on the side of imagining. Phenomenologically, however, these distinctions are unconvincing. Much of our (conscious) imagining takes the form of daydreams which we undergo quite passively – helplessly even; and many of our perceptions are arrived at very actively – indeed allowing us to exert quite a bit of control over what we do or do not perceive. The distinction between imagining and perceiving does not derive from their phenomenology, but rather from their distinct functions and their distinct position vis-à-vis our other mental states. Perception, like knowledge, must aim to get things right, and must get things right in fact; as such, it must inform our beliefs which also aim at the truth. Imagination, on the other hand, does not aim at getting things right, and may or may not in fact get them right, or to the extent that it does aim at truth and does get things right (informing our beliefs about what is possible and what is necessary, for example) it becomes a kind of perception. Insofar as unconscious representations can be used for either of these purposes, then, they can be the content of either imagining or perceiving.

In the case of our prying parent, our belligerent assistant, and our self-embracing survivor, it is not the phenomenal character of their unconscious images that constitutes them as imagining rather than as perceiving. It is, rather, the fact that even though these unconscious representations influence these people's behavior, they do not in general inform their beliefs and correspondingly they do not generate behavior that interferes with their belief-governed behavior. The unconscious perception of someone else in the house would be far more disruptive of the mother's search; and an unconscious perception of an approaching car would result in much more dramatic alterations in the survivor's behavior.

I have now contrasted imagining with believing, conceiving, and perceiving – indicating why it is imagining that is relevant to the cases under consideration. There is one more contrast that I would like to address: the contrast between unconscious imagining and unconscious *phantasizing*, as that category is understood within some prominent schools of psychoanalysis. Unconscious phantasy, according to those working in the Kleinian tradition, for example, is a species of unconscious imagination notable for the fact that it is guided by strong feelings, urges, or desires; notable also for its flexible sense of the boundary between what is internal and what is external.¹⁸ The content of my phantasy is a version of something that I badly want but cannot have, and the phantasy

¹⁸ See Klein (1952). Gardner's (1993) account of phantasy draws heavily on the Kleinian tradition, as does Hopkins (1982) and Lear (1998).

provides a kind of substitute satisfaction in lieu of the actual satisfaction of my desires. Many ordinary fantasies or daydreams could, of course, serve this purpose as well. Our oldest and most deep-seated phantasies, according to Klein, are thought to have a further feature of imagining the fulfillment of one's desires by imagining the bodily incorporation of what is good and the bodily expulsion of what is bad. If I desire more attention or love from my mother than she can or will give me, I may phantasize the incorporation of her body (or, more precisely, the parts that I desire most) into mine; and if I desire the cessation of a particular sensation, I may phantasize the expulsion of the affected body part. As a result, my phantasy world is both a world that is more to my liking and a world with radically distorted boundaries and bodies. For that reason, if for no other, on the Kleinian view the contents of our phantasies can be especially difficult to acknowledge and to accept.

This brings us to a question that some readers may have wanted to ask first of any account of unconscious imagining: to what extent, and under what circumstances can unconscious imagining become conscious? I do not take the capacity for unconscious states to become conscious as essential to their mental, contentful status.¹⁹ Any specification of the conditions under which mental content *would* become conscious seems impossibly complex (in order to rule out possible distractions, emotional resistances, disorienting suggestions, and so on) or hopelessly circular (if demanding that nothing stand in the way of the relevant representations becoming conscious). But neither do I assume that becoming aware of our unconscious imagining is always an arduous task. The prying mother, if asked whether she was imagining someone else in the house might very well respond with "I wasn't aware of imagining that, but I guess I was;" or, less directly, asked whether she would imagine another person in the kitchen or in another bedroom or somewhere else, she may suddenly recognize that one of those situations was, indeed, what she was imagining. (From a third person perspective the quickness of her reply, together with the direction of her looks while searching the child's room, may be further evidence of her unconscious imagining.) Likewise, an astute and trusted observer may prompt the belligerent assistant to become aware of his unconscious imagining – through direct suggestion or, more likely, through a few well placed questions concerning his interactive style, his childhood memories, and so on. Instances of transference are sometimes acknowledged quite easily. And if the upset survivor can be brought to describe just what she is feeling, she may well recognize that the governing images (of which she was initially unaware) are images of her own body or of her own psyche "falling to pieces."

III

In this final section I start to explore some of the ways that unconscious imagining is particularly significant in our lives. I consider the relevance of unconscious imagining for our empathetic understanding of others, for our appreciation of art, and for our capacity to register the objectivity of the world around us.

¹⁹ Searle (1992, Chapter 7) presents an argument for such a view. Davies (1995), among others, has offered forceful refutations of his argument.

The psychology of morality, as usually understood, rests on our ability to recognize other points of view or other subjective positions as having some claim on us. Bracketing many important questions about the substance of such claims (which is also the substance of ethical disagreements), we can ask about what *sort* of recognition of other points of view is required, and about how the relevant sort of recognition of other points of view leads to their having a claim on us. If we think of our recognition of other points of view as a matter of having certain *beliefs* about the subjective states of others, it is natural to suppose that some additional beliefs must be added in order to arrive at a state in which the subjective states of others have a claim on us. For example, before my belief that you feel pain can have a claim on me, I must also believe that (other things being equal) that I ought to act to as to alleviate the suffering of others. But, as others have remarked, this understanding of moral psychology seems to require both too much and too little – too *much* insofar as it seems to depend on too much deliberation (too many beliefs, too many steps), and too *little* insofar as the belief that I ought to alleviate the pain of others seems insufficient for the experience of a moral claim as such.

A Humean, or sentimentalist, remedy to these shortcomings looks to feelings rather than thoughts to bridge the gap between ourselves and others, and to give all the recognition of others its proper motivational force. Observing the behavior of another we sympathize with their pain even before forming a belief about their point of view, and that sympathy disposes us to want to alleviate that pain even as if it were our own. But a Kantian, cognitivist, objection to this remedy is that basing morality on feeling limits the scope of our moral experience, both *qualitatively* – by restricting those with moral claims on us to those with whom we sympathize (which, usually, are those who are most like us) – and *quantitatively* – given the empirical limits on just how much we can sympathize with, and for how long.

The resources of unconscious imagining go some way towards overcoming the shortcomings of each of these approaches. On the one hand, the scope of what we can imagine is much wider than the scope of what we can sympathize with; in this respect it is more like belief. I can imagine the perspectives of many people for whom I do not feel much sympathy – the perspective of a religious fundamentalist, or the perspective of an unruly adolescent, for example – and I can imagine several different perspectives on a situation simultaneously even when I cannot simultaneously sympathize with them all.²⁰ Although it might be thought that imagining different perspectives itself takes a fair amount of work and is limited in scope by the limits on our energy or our inclination for such imagining, unconscious imagining (like unconscious believing) proceeds more or less automatically and has a farther reach. Among the unconscious imaginings of the prying mother, it is likely that she imagines her child's perspective, her neighbors perspective, her teacher's perspective, and so on – alternative perspectives that help, however incompletely and partially imagined they may be, to make the mother's perspective a more morally sensitive perspective. (I'm not arguing for the sufficiency of

²⁰ It is also not clear that I *should* sympathize with all points of view. Moral respect for another is sometimes paired, quite appropriately, with antipathy.

imagining, unconscious or not, for the attainment of a fully moral perspective; I'm only pointing out certain advantages of imagining over sympathy for the psychology of morality.)

On the other hand, being moved by our imagining is a much simpler affair than being moved by our beliefs; in this respect imagining is more like sympathy. When I imagine the victim of a car crash, I am inclined to act protectively quite apart from whether I believe there is such a victim present (and quite apart from the way that disbelieving that I am in such a situation will prevent me from acting on my inclination). While conscious and deliberate imagining might stand even farther apart from action than belief (requiring me to deliberate on the larger significance of my image before acting on it), unconscious imagining, as we have seen, informs what we do immediately and, more importantly, it informs *how* we do it. Thus, the worry that the moral cognitivist places moral motivations at too great a distance from spontaneous behavior can be met, at least in part, by an appreciation of the ways in which unconscious imagining serves as a kind of intermediary between belief and action – governing our behavior more automatically and more richly, than any belief can.²¹

Imagining the perspective of someone else is not equivalent to imagining oneself as having that person's perspective.²² We can “mirror” or replicate the subjective states of another, whether intentional or unintentional, conscious or unconscious, without entertaining the possibility that those states are our own states – just as we can imitate another person's behavior without imagining ourselves as acting in that way. This is not only possible; it is ethically important insofar as it is important to avoid narcissism in one's imagining as well as in one's thinking; inserting oneself into the imagined scenario involves an unnecessary detour and it risks a certain colonizing of the other – an interest in the other that depends on the other's incorporation into oneself. Still, the mere fact of imagining the perspective or the behavior of another person does tend to affect our own perspective and behavior, and that is a part of why such imagining is ethically important.²³

Let us turn next to the role of unconscious imagining in the appreciation of art. Clearly, there is much art that requires us to imagine non-actual states of affairs – states of affairs in which a disembodied head talks, or in which water runs uphill, for example. Clearly, also, there is much art that requires us to use our imagination to fill in the “blanks” – the unheard completion of a sentence or a chord, or the identity of a distant

²¹ See Gendler (2006) for a nuanced discussion of the many ways that imagination affects us.

²² See Velleman (2006) for an extended discussion of this distinction.

²³ Velleman writes about the way that imagining another's point of view not only leads us to empathize with them but also to adopt their behaviors and mannerisms – as if one were impersonating them (p. 351, *ibid*). Note that this is the case when imagining is accompanied by identification, but there are also cases in which imagining others perspectives and behaviors causes us to recoil to something more *unlike* the perspective or behavior of that other.

figure that can barely be seen, for example. Neither of these sorts of imagining relies on *unconscious* imagining however; we are, for the most part, perfectly aware that we are imagining an improbable series of events as we read a novel; and we are perfectly aware of imagining a note that resolves the tension of a melodic line. What we are generally unaware of, I want to suggest, is the role of *unconscious* imagining in the “as if” experiences that are crucial to many aesthetic experiences.²⁴

When we see a set of lines on a page *as* a dancing skeleton, we do not *perceive* (or *misperceive*) a skeleton, but neither do we merely *believe* that the lines represent a skeleton. Nor is it enough to *imagine* a dancing skeleton the page – dancing on or over the line, for example. We must imagine these lines *as* the bones of a skeleton, and we must imagine them *as* dancing. How is this achieved? How can our present perception of the lines on a page be “blended” with our imagining of a skeleton in such a way as to produce an experience of the lines *as if* they were a dancing skeleton.

First of all, I must transform my experience of a two-dimensional figure into the experience of a three-dimensional figure – not by simply replacing the lines with a skeleton, but, rather, by imaginatively adding another dimension to what I see, by eliciting an experience of depth. The experience of depth depends on the simultaneous activation of different perspectives or points of view on a single place in space. That is the reason that binocular vision is so important for the visual experience of depth and why stereo sound is so important for the experience of sound depth. In order to create the experience of imaginary depth, then, we must imagine the convergence of multiple imaginary perspectives on the object before us. We must imagine a perspective to the right of us from which one would see the side of a leg that cannot be seen from here; we must imagine a perspective from which the top of the skeleton’s head could be seen; and so on.

Second, in order to see the lines as a *dancing* skeleton, I must imagine different temporal perspectives; I must imagine a series of perspectives that would reveal a certain rhythmic pattern in its shifting positions. Few if any of these imaginings will be conscious, however. Consciously, I am aware of lines on a page and I am aware of imagining a dancing skeleton; I am not aware of the perspectival imagining that effectively transforms one into the other.

Consider the somewhat different experience of seeing a face *in* a painting. Here, too, the face that we imagine and the patches of paint that we see must somehow be “blended” into an experience of the painting *as* a face. Again, this depends on creating an experience of imaginary depth – an imaginary shift from two dimensions to three dimensions. We must imagine a face that could be looked at from other angles, a face that could turn away from the light, a face that is connected to a body. More than in the case of the dancing skeleton, though, we are asked to look *through* the perceivable surface to what lies *behind* – to the attitude that is revealed by the raised eyebrow and the wide

²⁴ See my “‘Seeing As’ and the Double Bind of Consciousness” (1998) for a fuller discussion of “seeing as” experiences in relation to various theories of consciousness.

eyes, to the personality that is expressed by the attitude, and to the person who has that personality. Imagining our way through these layers is also imagining that is largely unconscious. We do not try to imagine an attitude based on an expression, or a personality based on an attitude; we are conscious of the fact that we are imagining a person, but we are not aware of the additional layers or kinds of imagining that make up that process.

From the above argument for the importance of unconscious imagining in aesthetic appreciation – more precisely in “as if” experiences in art, it is a short step to the conclusion that unconscious imagining is important for the actual – and not just “as if” – perception of objects in three-dimensional space.²⁵ For if experiencing objects in space depends on the simultaneous activation (and not merely the contemplation) of multiple perspectives on those objects, and if we can only occupy one perspective at a time, then it will always fall on the imagination to activate the relevant alternative. This is the truth behind Kant’s claim that conscious experience (of spatial-temporal objects) is only possible through syntheses of the (unconscious) imagination.

Kant claims that seeing (that is, consciously perceiving as opposed to taking in information and responding "blindly") requires us to consider conflicting presentations of a single object because we can't see an object without locating it in space (and time) and we can't locate it in space (and time) unless we recognize that it has more than one face (or phase), that it appears differently from different places in space and time. If an object were indistinguishable from its appearance to a given viewer at a given time, it could not be an object *in space*; and, clearly, when we see things we see them as located in space; but the only way to distinguish between an object and its appearance is to distinguish between different appearances of the same object; so, in order to see objects we must distinguish between the different appearances they may have. In perceiving a house, for example, we register its three-dimensionality even though its backside is hidden from us, and in observing a boat on a river, we recognize its pathway as continuous, even when we are not observing it continuously. This requires us to call forth, in imagination, points of view that are not actually ours -- the view from the backside, the view from here when we are looking the other way, and so on. Our memory of past observations can help us to imagine some of the missing points of view, of course, but usually memory is not enough to do the necessary 'filling in' since we have probably never observed an object from *every* point of view, and since we are regularly confronted with objects we have never before encountered. It is for this reason that Kant emphasizes the importance of "productive" as opposed to merely "reproductive" imagining; one must engage imaginative projections, not merely imaginative associations.

There are at least two reasons that the requisite imagining must be unconscious. First there is the fact that consciously imagining several different perspectives simultaneously, when it is even possible, tends to stand in the way of effective action.

²⁵ Likewise, from the above argument about the role of unconscious imagining in seeing a person “in” a painting, it is a short step to the conclusion that seeing a person “in” a body also depends on unconscious imagining. But that is not an argument I shall pursue here.

When it comes to acting, my attention must remain on my actual position rather than other possible positions. Second, and more importantly, there is reason to insist that conscious perception is more fundamental than conscious imagining; for if conscious imagining implies some awareness of the possibility of falsity in one's imagining, then it only becomes possible against the prior background of perceptions that can be accepted at face value.²⁶ Perception without unconscious imagining, on the other hand, may not be possible, and the imagining that underwrites conscious perceptions cannot itself be conscious.²⁷

Conclusion

There are many quite ordinary cases in which the attribution of unconscious imagining supplies the best explanation of a person's behavior. I have tried to clarify the conditions under which such attributions are preferable to some alternative explanations, and I have tried to respond to several *a priori* worries about the very possibility of unconscious imagining. Insofar as this defense is successful, it should help to counter some of the worries surrounding the psychoanalytic notion of unconscious phantasy, and it should invite further applications in our theories about moral psychology, aesthetic appreciation, and perception more generally – applications that this paper has only begun to develop.

²⁶ This is a famous insight of Sellars (1956).

²⁷ For a longer discussion of how I think imagination underwrites perception, see my "Seeing Reasons" (forthcoming).

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