

## Chapter One

### Explaining Imagination

#### 1. *Introduction*

Suppose you awoke one day having lost your imagination.

Some things would be easier. There would be no wavering on what clothes to wear. You wouldn't be able to imagine the different possibilities. The creativity of your work might suffer, however. And you would do well to avoid films and novels with absurd or devastating plot lines. Unable to imagine the events described, you'd have no choice but to corral them, somehow, into your view of the real.

Games of pretense would come to an end, confounding your partners in charades. How can you pretend that you're bodybuilder, if you can't imagine being one? Worse, your empathy would diminish, as you could no longer imagine what it's like to be someone else—no longer stand in anyone's shoes but your own.

Yet few could rival your honesty. When you can't imagine things being different than they are, you won't conceive of a lie, much less tell one. This would affect your personal relationships in interesting ways. Even so, you'd have an enviable peace of mind. There's little that can worry someone who can't imagine the future.

This is all to say that I don't really imagine it would be *you* who woke up, having lost your imagination. Imagination is too central to who and what we are to remain ourselves without it. There are animals—crickets, crocodiles, crayfish—that, arguably, cannot imagine. But that's not us. If we lost our imagination, we wouldn't be around to miss it.

The centrality of imagination to who and what we are hints at this book's main thesis: when we imagine, we don't make use of a distinct faculty of mind or collection of *sui generis* mental states, quarantined from our actual beliefs, desires, and intentions. "The imagination" is not something that, like sight, or knowledge of a second language, could be carved off the mind

while leaving our self-defining commitments and inclinations intact. Instead, when we imagine, we make use of our most basic psychological states in complex bits of reasoning, planning, and contemplation. Indeed, imagining is nothing over and above the use of such states—beliefs, desires, and intentions central among them. To see how this can be so is to arrive at an explanation of imagination in simpler, more general terms.

### *1.1 What it is to imagine*

Despite its importance to who and what we are, imagination remains an elusive explanatory target—“one of the last uncharted terrains of the mind” (Byrne, 2005, p. xi). Even in broad outlines, it just isn’t clear *what* imagination is supposed to be. Describing our plight without it, I relied on an intuitive notion of imagination as means for thinking about the world being ways it is not—for considering fictions, possibilities, and fantasies. And I relied on the fact that, for each of the abilities I imagined us losing—be it for hypothetical reasoning, pretense, empathy, or the enjoyment of fictions—there are philosophers and psychologists who have held imagination to be its cognitive engine.<sup>1</sup>

However, characterizing imagination by appeal to the diverse capacities it enables invites the charge that we’ve lumped together a heterogeneous collection of quite distinct mental states and processes (Kind, 2013). Why think that what counts as “imagining” in the context of enjoying a fiction, or considering someone else’s perspective, is the same mental phenomenon as imagining during a daydream, or during hypothetical reasoning? Indeed there are longstanding concerns that ‘imagination’ is an ill-defined notion (Moran (1994, p. 106); Strawson (1970, p. 31)). Stevenson (2003) counts no fewer than twelve distinct conceptions of imagination at work in philosophy. And P.F. Strawson finds the different uses of ‘imagine’ to compose a “diverse and scattered family,” where “even this image of a family seems too definite” (1970, p. 31).

A natural reaction is to draw distinctions. The current landscape is littered with them: propositional imagination is contrasted to sensory imagination (Stock, 2017), recreative

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<sup>1</sup> With respect to imagination’s role in pretense, see, e.g., Nichols & Stich (2000) and Carruthers (2006); for conditional reasoning, see, e.g. Williamson (2007, 2016) and Currie & Ravenscroft (2002); for the appreciation of fiction, see, e.g. Walton (1990), Currie (Currie, 1990), and Stock (2017); for third-person mindreading, see, e.g., Goldman (Goldman, 2006a, 2006b) and Nichols & Stich (2003). There is controversy surrounding some of these putative roles, of course. Matravers (2014), for instance, questions whether we need to appeal to imagination in explaining our responses to fiction; and, in earlier work (Langland-Hassan, 2012), I have argued that pretense can be explained without invoking imagination. These controversies will be discussed in due course.

imagining is distinguished from creative imagining (Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002), sympathetic imagining from perceptual imagining (Nagel, 1974), enactive imagining from suppositional imagining (Goldman, 2006a), constructive imagining from both attitudinal and imagistic imagining (Van Leeuwen, 2013), imagining ‘from the inside’ from imagining ‘from the outside’ (Peacocke, 1985; Shoemaker, 1968), imagining *proper* from supposing and conceiving (Balcerak Jackson, 2016; Chalmers, 2002), and so on. Yet, somehow, the fog surrounding imagination remains equally thick within each of its slices. As Amy Kind and Peter Kung comment in their introduction to a recent anthology:

Anyone coming to the imagination literature for the first time would undoubtedly be frustrated by the lack of a clear explanation of the mental activity being talked about. The problem is not simply that philosophers give different theoretical treatments of imagination but rather that there doesn’t even seem to be consensus about what the phenomenon under discussion is. Among contemporary philosophers in particular there is a surprising reluctance to offer a substantive characterization of imagination; instead, it is understood simply as a mental activity that is *perception-like but not quite perception*, or *belief-like but not quite belief* (Kind & Kung, 2016, p. 3, emphasis in original).

I take Kind and Kung’s point to be that we are not in the usual situation where there is a clear phenomenon to be explained—e.g., temperature fluctuation, or animal reproduction—and a set of competing theories about its nature and causes. Rather, in the case of imagination, “there doesn’t even seem to be consensus about what the phenomenon under discussion is,” much less agreement concerning its deeper nature. In trying to characterize “the phenomenon” of imagination, comparisons are made between imagination and states like perception and belief; but it’s emphasized that imagination remains quite distinct from those states. Attempts to specify the precise ways in which it is distinct—and to thereby distinguish what it is we aim to study—threaten to leave us knee-deep in theory, before we’ve clearly identified what the theory is supposed to be theory *of*.

Here is how I aim to move forward. I will follow a common practice in drawing a distinction between two primary senses of the word ‘imagining.’ Then I will give a superficial characterization of these two kinds of imagining—more superficial than is normally offered, in fact. Importantly, they will be characterizations that mesh with our practice of associating imagination with a range of distinct abilities—from pretending, to daydreaming, to

counterfactual reasoning, to engaging with fictions, and being creative—while remaining neutral on questions concerning its deeper nature. In short, I aim to say clearly what the phenomenon of imagination *is*, such that it can be approached from a variety of different theoretical standpoints. To get there, it will help to begin with a distinction in ways that a word or concept might be “heterogeneous.”

### 1.2 *Cats and bats*

There are many kinds of cat. The class of cats is heterogeneous, we might say, insofar as it contains sub-types. There are Siamese cats, Silver Tabby cats, Maine Coon cats, and more. However, the very notion or concept of a cat is not heterogeneous or equivocal. Nor is the *word* ‘cat’ ambiguous in its reference. It always refers to one and the same kind of thing—namely, cats. (If we may overlook all the *jazz cats* out there.)

The situation is different with bats. There are bats used to hit baseballs; and there are bats that hang upside down in caves. Is the class of bats therefore heterogeneous? Not exactly. It is more proper to say that we have two distinct concepts, each of which corresponds to the same string of English letters. Assuming that the meaning of a word is one of its essential properties, we also have two distinct *words* in play: there is ‘bat’ referring to the cave-dwelling creatures; and there is ‘bat’ referring to the ball-hitting implement. These distinct words have the uncommon feature of being both homonyms *and* homographs. There is a kind of heterogeneity here that is different than what we saw with ‘cat.’ It is a heterogeneity of concepts corresponding to one and the same string of English letters. Of course, with respect to each ‘bat’-concept, there is the same kind of heterogeneity that we saw with the concept of a cat, relating to sub-types. There are both wooden and aluminum bats for hitting baseballs; and, among the cave-dwellers, there is the golden-capped fruit bat, the vampire bat, and many others besides.

‘Imagine’ is a lot like ‘bat.’ There is a heterogeneity of concepts corresponding to a single string of letters. Further, with respect to each concept, there *may be* a heterogeneous collection of states and processes that fall within its extension, as sub-types. I will briefly explain the heterogeneity of concepts now, as a means to clarifying this book’s proper subject.

Controversial elements of this picture will be flagged, with their proper defense occurring only later, in Chapters Three and Four.

### 1.3 *Imagistic Imagining and Attitude Imagining*

Just as there are distinct concepts corresponding to ‘bat,’ there are at least two distinct concepts of philosophical interest corresponding to the term ‘imagine.’ I will refer to them as *imagistic imagining* and *attitude imagining*, respectively.<sup>2</sup> While I will define them in ways that make them my own terms of art, they align closely with other conceptions of imagination in the literature (e.g., Van Leeuwen, 2013; Kind, 2016).<sup>3</sup>

At a first pass, *imagistic imagining* (or ‘I-imagining’) refers to the use of endogenously generated mental states that appear image-like, or to have sensory character, to the people having them. This meshes with the first sense of *imagine* recognized by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “to form a mental image of...to picture to oneself (something not present to the senses)” (Dictionary). This sense of ‘imagining’ is at work in the platitude that imagining involves image or picture-like mental states. We describe ourselves as *visualizing*, or as *seeing an image in our mind’s eye*, or, yes, as *imagining*, where the ‘image’ in ‘imagine’ is emphasized. Whether the mental states so described *really are* image-like is a matter of debate (Block, 1981; Kosslyn, 1994; Pearson & Kosslyn, 2015; Pylyshyn, 2002); but there is no controversy surrounding the claim that most people make occasional, or even frequent, use of mental states that seem to them to be image-like, or to have sensory character—where such states arise not from an external stimulus impinging on a sense organ but from endogenous causes of some kind.<sup>4</sup> Making use of such mental states is equivalent, in my terms, to using *mental imagery*. I-imagining, then, is simply the use of mental imagery in thought.<sup>5</sup> Conjure a mental image, no matter the reason or context, and you are imagining, in the I-imagining sense. So understood, I-imagining is not a

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<sup>2</sup> The one salient sense of ‘imagine’ I will not discuss is the one that means, roughly, “to believe falsely and without good reason.” As in: ‘He imagines himself the Canadian Casanova.’ This sense corresponds to definition six for ‘imagine’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “to form an idea or notion with regard to something not known with certainty; to believe, fancy ‘take into one’s head’ (that). Often implying a vague notion not founded on exact observation or reasoning” (Dictionary).

<sup>3</sup> A particularly close fit is Van Leeuwen’s (2013, 2014) distinction between *imagistic imagining*—which closely tracks my notion of *imagistic imagining*—and both his and Kind’s (2016) “attitudinal imaginings,” which correspond roughly to my *attitude imaginings*. However, my understanding of *attitude imagining* is importantly different from theirs, in ways I will discuss.

<sup>4</sup> Reports of “aphantasia” are the exception (Zeman, Dewar, & Della Sala, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> More thorough characterizations of mental imagery and I-imagining are developed in Chapter Three.

distinctive type of mental process or attitude (at least, not obviously) but, rather, any sort of cognition at all that involves a mental image. To trigger a memory of this morning’s breakfast is to engage in I-imagining, provided that the memory involves a mental image. I will offer a few refinements to this characterization of I-imagining—in response to challenges—in Chapter Three. For now, this general definition will suit our needs.

The second sense of ‘imagining’—attitude imagining (henceforth, ‘A-imagining’)—has it that imagining is a kind of thought processes that allows us to step outside of what we really believe to consider mere possibilities. It is in this sense of ‘imagine’ that the things we imagine are, well, *imaginary*. Here the emphasis is on the capacity of imaginings to enable rich, elaborated thought about the possible, fictive, pretended, and fantastical, without any attached stipulation that the thoughts be image or picture-like. Of course, delusions and hallucinations are also rich and elaborated ways of thinking about the possible, fictive, and unreal—as are sequences of false judgments generally. This highlights another important aspect of imagining in the attitude sense. A-imagining is a way of engaging in rich, elaborated cognition about the possible, fantastical, pretended, and so on, that is *epistemically compatible* with things not really being they are being thought about, and with one’s not believing things to be that way. A person who is imagining in the A-imagining sense is not epistemically at fault or at risk—is not being unreasonable—when she engages in elaborated cognition about a situation that does not (and never did) obtain, or about an object he believes does not (and never did) exist.<sup>6</sup> A-imaginings allow us to *safely* step outside of what we really believe, without subjecting ourselves to epistemic scrutiny. The *Oxford English Dictionary* recognizes several senses of ‘imagine’ that mesh with this characterization. Its second entry for ‘imagine’ is: “to create as a mental conception, to conceive; to assume, suppose”; its third: “to conceive in the mind as a thing to be performed; to devise, plot, plan, compass”; its fourth: “to consider, ponder, meditate.” Note that none of these definitions invoke mental images or the act of “picturing to oneself”; yet all of them allude to thought about imaginary things.

To foreshadow: A-imagining aligns roughly with the idea, common in philosophy, that there is a propositional or cognitive *attitude* of imagining, or a *sui generis* psychological *mode* of

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Currie & Ravenscroft: “Belief, however weakly characterized, is normative in that an agent who has contradictory beliefs...is in a less than ideal epistemic situation. It is no defect in any agent’s epistemic condition that she imagines things contrary to what she believes” (2002, p. 17).

imagining. This is why I have resorted to using the term ‘attitude imagining’ in naming these imaginings; I aim to be talking about the same basic phenomenon as these other theorists. However, in my usage, the notion of an “attitude” does not occur within the definition of A-imagining itself. This is important. Cognitive (and conative) attitudes are common theoretical constructs within philosophy. As we will see, in Chapter Two, what it is to bear an attitude toward a proposition is itself a matter of controversy. When we define imagination, in one of its primary senses, by appeal to an *attitude* of some kind—one with a certain force or “direction of fit” (Searle, 1983)—we have moved into explaining imagination before we have said what it is we aim to explain.<sup>7</sup> But we should remain as neutral as we can in our initial characterization of imagining. The definition of A-imagining as “rich, elaborated, epistemically safe thought about the possible, fantastical, unreal, and so on,” aims for that kind of neutrality. It is akin to characterizing believing as “taking to be true” or desiring something as being impelled to its attainment. Such definitions are consistent with a wide range of more substantive views about the deeper nature of the states. Yet they have real value. Asked why we find it intuitive to say that such different activities as pretending, reading fiction, reasoning counterfactually, daydreaming, and writing a poem all involve *imagination*, we can respond that they all involve one’s engaging in rich, elaborated, and epistemically safe thought about the possible, fantastical, unreal, and so on. Even in light of the diverse contexts in which imagining occurs, the class of A-imaginings retains a kind of unity.

One might worry, however, that this maximally neutral definition of A-imagining is too broad—that it risks including acts like supposing and conceiving that, arguably, are not cases of *imagining* at all. For that matter, it may seem to include some ordinary acts of reasoning that we might not want to describe as imagining. Yet this broadness is a feature of the definition and not a bug. The strategy is to begin with a maximally broad characterization and then, to ensure that imagination *proper* does not slip through our fingers, tether our investigation to imagination’s instances in contexts where common sense tells us it typically occurs. Familiar platitudes tell us that people who are *pretending* are imagining, that when we *daydream* we are imagining, that when we *consider different possible plans of action*, we are imagining different situations, that when we *make up a story*, we do so by imagining, that when we *enjoy a fiction*, we are imagining the story it tells. And so on. These generalizations and platitudes are essential guides.

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<sup>7</sup> This point is elaborated and substantiated in Chapter Three.

Asked for uncontroversial cases of imagining in the “thinking of imaginary things” sense, this is where we should look. If we can then give an explanatory account of the kind of thought that occurs in each context, we can justly claim to have explained imagination, in the A-imagining sense. No harm is done if our net pulls in, and forces us to explain, other things as well.

#### *1.4 The relation of I-imagining to A-imagining*

The conceptual distinction between I- and A-imagining brings with it no assumptions concerning whether, or to what degree, each notion picks out the same class of phenomena. This follows from our starting with a theoretically neutral definition of each. Some I-imaginings may also be A-imaginings, and vice versa. (Here we have a difference with bats, insofar as fruit and vampire bats are not, to my knowledge, used to hit baseballs). For all I have said, it may be that *all* I-imaginings are also A-imaginings and that all A-imaginings are I-imaginings, just as all renates are cordates and all cordates renates. If, for instance, all uses of mental imagery are also cases of rich, elaborated and epistemically safe thought about the possible, unreal, or fantastical, then we would have reason to think that A-imaginings include I-imaginings as a sub-set. The view I will defend, in Chapter Three, is that the concepts’ extensions only partially overlap. Some, but not all, I-imaginings are also A-imaginings; and some, but not all, A-imaginings are also I-imaginings. For the time being, distinguishing A- from I-imagining allows me to clarify that *my main project in this book is to explain A-imagining*. But it would be wrong to conclude from this that I am not also explaining paradigmatic cases of I-imagining (or “sensory imagining”, or “perceptual imagining”). Many I-imaginings are simply A-imaginings that involve mental imagery; so there can be no comprehensive explanation of A-imagining that is not also, in part, an explanation of I-imagining. In particular, some have argued that there is a kind of imagining that both involves mental imagery *and* that constitutes a *sui generis* mental image-involving *process, procedure, or attitude* (see, e.g., Arcangeli; Kind, 2001). This view is just as much a target for my reductive approach as is the more general claim that A-imagining involves use of *sui generis* imaginative states. These matters are sorted out in more detail in Chapter Three.

#### *1.5 Explaining in what sense?*



There are many kinds of explanation. The sort of explanation I want to offer works by breaking a complex phenomenon into simpler, more general parts. The parts are more general in the sense that they are found both within and outside of the phenomenon they are called on to explain.

An example: the fact that H<sub>2</sub>O composes water explains many things about water. Yet it would explain little if we had no understanding of hydrogen and oxygen *outside of* their roles in composing water. If, for instance, hydrogen and oxygen were found nowhere but in water, and if their relations to other molecules were obscure, then water's being composed of H<sub>2</sub>O would explain little. Of course, hydrogen and oxygen have rich theoretical lives outside of their roles in constituting water. That is why they can appear in explanations of water and its properties.

This kind of explanation works by *unifying*. In a classic paper in the philosophy of science, Philp Kitcher (1981) argues that a theory's explanatory value lies in its ability to unify a diverse set of phenomena under a single set of principles or "argument patterns." It is explanatory *unification*, so achieved, that brings understanding. Scientific theories provide this kind of understanding-through-unification insofar as they uncover a certain core pattern or style of argument that can be "used in the derivation of descriptions of many, diverse, phenomena" (Kitcher, 1981, p. 514).

Newtonian mechanics and Darwinian evolutionary theory are two of Kitcher's examples. The theories provide understanding of a diverse set of facts by showing them to be instances of a single core pattern. Understanding is provided even when the theory offers few means for predicting which specific phenomenon (e.g., which specific species, in the case of Darwin's theory) we should see next. Indeed, part of Kitcher's project is to distinguish mere prediction from explanation, as there can be reliable predictive devices—e.g. barometers—that fail to explain what they predict. Explanatory argument-patterns typically apply a small set of primitive terms—such as 'force', 'mass', and 'acceleration,' in the case of Newtonian mechanics—to a broad set of phenomena. These unifying terms may themselves be primitive terms, in the sense that they are not unified under yet more general principles or argument patterns. Explanatory theories simply aim to "reduce, in so far as possible, the number of types of facts we must accept as brute" (1981, p. 530).

Without any suggestion that the theory developed here has the significance of Newton's or Darwin's, I want to ask how we might break imagination into smaller, more general parts.

How can imagination be unified within a broader framework for understanding the nature of the mind? We don't have to endorse Kitcher's precise account of scientific explanation to see that, in answering such questions, we move toward a better understanding of imagination.

One way to provide an explanatory unification of imagination would be to show how imagining involves the use of particular neural states and processes—neural states and processes that we have some independent understanding of and that are also used in cognition outside of imagination. A theory that invoked such neurobiological states and processes might thereby unify imagination with other modes of thought. However, that is not the approach I will take here. While I think it holds promise, there is important prior work to be done. To break imagination into neural parts at this stage would be getting ahead of ourselves. It would be like trying to understand the world's biodiversity by appeal to the molecular structure of DNA, in advance of evolutionary theory. (My *argument* for this point occurs across the entire book to come).

Another possibility would be to show how imagining can be broken into smaller *cognitive* components, where these components are understood as parts of a functionally specified cognitive architecture. Cognitive architectures—which seek to detail the actual information-processing algorithms, representational structures, and data stores exploited in human cognition—abstract away from the specifics of neural implementation to describe a computational processing architecture that could, in principle, be instantiated in non-neural cognitive systems. This “boxological” approach to explaining imagination has proven popular in recent years (Doggett & Egan, 2007; Nichols, 2006c; Nichols & Stich, 2000; Schellenberg, 2013; Weinberg & Meskin, 2006). I'll have much to say about it in due course; it offers another path I will avoid. In my view, recent attempts to analyze imagination in boxological terms—as in many of the essays in Nichols (2006c)—only obscure its nature. My skepticism with respect to those approaches doesn't stem from any general misgivings about cognitive science or the practice of understanding cognition in computational or functional terms. As elaborated in Chapter Two, my concern is rather that, in the case of imagination, the move to the level of box-and-arrow diagrams brings with it questionable assumptions about the representational format of

cognitive states, and needlessly forecloses dialogue with those who don't share those assumptions.<sup>8</sup>

What options then remain for breaking imagination into smaller parts? My approach will be to break imagination into independently understood *folk psychological* states and processes. By “folk psychological states and processes” I mean the kinds of mental states and processes that ordinary adults know and talk about. Beliefs, desires, and intentions are examples of folk psychological *states*—as are hope, gratitude, and resentment. Folk psychological *processes* include mental events like thinking, judging, deciding, remembering, and—yes—imagining. Mental states, capacities, and processes known only to those with a background in empirical psychology or neuroscience—such as working memory, semantic memory, or feed-forward neural networks—are not folk psychological kinds, however real they may be. Because folk psychological states like belief, desire, and intention play a prominent role in our discourse about the mind outside of situations having anything to do with imagination, they are the right sort of pieces with which to explain imagination.

These pieces will not themselves receive an explanation or deep analysis here. The project is instead to reduce questions about A-imagining to questions about states like beliefs, desires, intentions, decisions, judgments, and the like—mental kinds that have a life outside of imagination. One folk psychological process, imagining, will be explained in terms of a collection of others. At the same time, I won't propose any adjustments to the most superficial, platitudinous accounts one might give of these other states and processes. To believe something is to take it to be true; to desire something is to be impelled to its attainment; to intend something is to have it in mind as something to be done; and so on. Views about the *deeper nature* of these states—concerning, e.g., their representational format and realization in the brain—are relevant to only some of the specific arguments in this book. Chapter Two is an extended meditation on the nature of folk psychological states the question of when and why their format and neural realizations are relevant to the project of explaining imagination.

### 1.6 *What we do when we imagine*

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<sup>8</sup> To endorse boxology in its canonical form (Fodor, 1987; Nichols and Stich 2000; Mandelbaum & Quilty-Dunn, 2018) is not equivalent to being a functionalist about mental states; boxology requires, in addition, the existence of *mental representations* that are tokened “in” the various boxes that are posited. A (mere) functionalist about mental states need not be committed to mental representations at all. These matters are discussed in Chapter Two.

The idea that imagination can be reduced to other kinds of folk psychological states is roundly rejected by most philosophers and psychologists now working on imagination. In fact, “most” is, to my knowledge, an understatement. I do not know of anyone else who proposes the sort of reduction I pursue here. In her introduction to *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Imagination*, Amy Kind presents the claim that “imagination is a primitive mental state type (or group of types), irreducible to other mental state types” as one of “four basic claims about imagination that enjoy near universal agreement” (2016, p. 2). According to this consensus, if we listed a person’s current set of beliefs, desires, intentions, judgments, decisions, hopes, wishes, fears, and so on, and fully described her ongoing use of those states in practical and theoretical reasoning, we will have left open whether she is imagining. For the facts about what, if anything, a person is imagining are thought not to be entailed by any facts about these other kinds of folk psychological states one might be in.<sup>9</sup> This is the sense in which imagination is thought to involve a *sui generis* or “primitive” type of mental state—one’s *sui generis imaginative states*, for lack of a better term. I will be in conversation with this view throughout the book.

My view is that A-imagining is a complex folk psychological process that can be broken down into, and explained in terms of, more basic folk psychological states and processes. I won’t, however, be arguing that A-imagining is just the same thing as believing, or judging, or desiring. My argument is *not* that imagining that *p* is the same thing as believing that *p*—or even as *weakly* believing that *p*. It is rather that some uses of beliefs, desires, judgments, memories, and so on—*none* of which may have the precise content *p*—constitute cases of imagining that *p*. Further, whether they constitute cases of imagining that *p* will at times turn on matters extrinsic to the states themselves, such as the reason for which the judgments are made, or the social context in which they occur. By loose analogy, J.L. Austin (1975), in *How To Do Things With Words*, emphasized that some vocal utterances *constitute* acts of naming, dedicating, taking a vow, and so on, depending on the context of the utterance. Similarly, I’ll argue, some uses of

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<sup>9</sup> Most will allow that we can sometimes make reasonable *inferences* as to what, if anything, a person is imagining, from facts about the other mental states she is in. The point is that, on the orthodox view, facts about what a person is imagining are neither logically entailed nor metaphysically determined by facts about the other folk psychological states the person is in.

beliefs and desires, judgments, intentions, and decisions constitute instances of imagining, and that whether they do depends in part upon the context in which they occur.<sup>10</sup>

To some, the kind of reductive explanation pursued here will seem to involve an “elimination” of imagination—a kind of denial that imagination *really* exists. But that misinterprets my view. Showing that a phenomenon—water, say—can be explained in more basic terms—molecular composition, say—doesn’t write the phenomenon out of existence. (Not on my metaphysics, anyhow). People really do imagine things, and that ability brings with it the important capacities mentioned at this chapter’s opening. My project is to explain *what we do when we imagine*, not to establish that there is no imagining.

Why has no one else pursued this sort of view? Mustn’t it be crazy, by dint of its novelty alone? While the view is indeed novel, the approach is not as idiosyncratic as it might at first seem (and perforce not as crazy). The most common explanatory strategy in the philosophy of imagination over the last twenty years has been to characterize imagination in terms of its similarities to other folk psychological states—imagination being said to be *belief-like* (Arcangeli, 2018; Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002; Nichols, 2006a; Van Leeuwen, 2014) *desire-like* (Currie, 2010; Doggett & Egan, 2007), or *perception-like* (Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002; Kind, 2001) in its instances. Implicit in these proposals is the thought that we can gain a better grasp on the nature of imagination by appreciating its similarities to other, less mysterious folk psychological states—and, indeed, that we have a good enough idea of what these other states are like to make it worth highlighting imagination’s similarities to them. I share those guiding assumptions and thus am engaged in much the same explanatory project—albeit with a bit more enthusiasm.

There are, nevertheless, clear reasons others have not followed me as far as I wish to go. Some of those reasons can only be explained and addressed over the course of several chapters. Yet many of what initially seem to be the most powerful objections to my approach are also the most easily defused. Doing so will be my project in the balance of this chapter, where my aim is to create some breathing-room for this book’s larger thesis. I will, in the process, preview some of the central arguments to come in later chapters. This chapter is, in effect, an extended trailer for the book as a whole—some spoilers included.

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<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Amy Kind for suggesting the analogy to Austin.

### 1.7 Simple and Complex Attitudes

To see why a reduction of imagination to more basic folk psychological states seems so implausible to so many, it helps to contrast cases where such reductions are more obviously available. Thankfulness, regret, and suspicion are good examples. Each is a folk psychological state that can be invoked to explain or predict someone's behavior. Yet few are inclined to hold that thankfulness, regret, or suspicion are *sui generis* folk psychological states. It seems that we can explain each in more basic folk psychological terms. In that sense, we can say they are each *complex* attitudes, insofar as they can be understood as combinations, or particular types, of more *simple* attitudes (Schroeder, 2006). For example: I am thankful that my university gave me a full academic year free of teaching to work on this book. What does this thankfulness consist in? Here is a sketch: I believe that I have the full academic year free of teaching; I desire to have the year free of teaching; I believe that I could have, without injustice, not had the year free of teaching. I have feelings of relief when I recall that I have the year free of teaching. And so on. Perhaps I have not completely nailed thankfulness with this characterization. But it seems that we could get there if we really tried. Once we give a full specification of my current beliefs, desires, and intentions—and, perhaps, my dispositions to go into certain affective states—we will have captured what it is that qualifies me as being thankful to have the year free of teaching. The same goes for regret: to regret that  $p$ , I need to believe that  $p$ . I probably also need to desire that not- $p$  and to believe that I could have done something to prevent it from being the case that  $p$ . Perhaps, too, I must experience some negative affect when I recall that  $p$ . If something along these lines is correct, regret is a complex psychological state with these more basic parts. Similarly for suspicion: if I believe that  $p$  with less than full certainty, or if I believe it is somewhat probable that  $p$ , it seems fair to say that I suspect that  $p$ . My suspecting that  $p$  is nothing over and above my having such beliefs. If that is right, we need not include suspicion among the *sui generis* folk psychological states.

In each of these reductions of complex to simple states, we find a characteristic asymmetry: it is possible to believe that  $p$  without being thankful that  $p$  and without regretting that  $p$ . But, arguably, it is not possible to be thankful that  $p$ , or to regret that  $p$ , without believing that  $p$ . And it is possible to believe that  $p$  without suspecting that  $p$ . But it is not possible to suspect that  $p$  without believing that it is somewhat likely that  $p$ . This apparent asymmetry is essential to belief's being more basic than these other mental state kinds. It also alerts us to a

possibility: perhaps being thankful (or regretting) that  $p$  is simply a matter of believing that  $p$  with a few accoutrements (including, perhaps, relevant desires). Likewise, perhaps suspecting that  $p$  is nothing other than believing it is somewhat likely that  $p$ . After all, why should believing that  $p$  (or that it is likely that  $p$ ) be necessary to being in these other states, if these states were not going to decompose into simpler parts, one of which was belief itself?

Matters are different with imagination and its ilk (*viz.*, conceiving, entertaining, supposing, assuming, considering). Not only is it possible to believe that  $p$  without imagining that  $p$ ; it is *also* possible to imagine that  $p$  without believing that  $p$  (and without believing that it is somewhat likely that  $p$ ). Or, at least, so says common sense—and so I will agree. Similarly, just as one can desire that  $p$  without imagining that  $p$ , one can also imagine that  $p$  without desiring that  $p$ . A simple reduction of imagination to the two most distinguished folk psychological states appears stopped in its tracks.

It is crucial to see, however, that such observations only stand in the way of the most simplistic, homogeneous reductions we might pursue. The fact that a person can imagine that  $p$  without believing that  $p$  only shows that not every case of imagining that  $p$  is a case of believing that  $p$ . But it is quite compatible with *some* cases of imagining that  $p$  consisting in one's believing that  $p$ . It is also compatible with *all* cases of imagining that  $p$  consisting in one's believing something other than  $p$ . The same goes for desire: not every case of imagining that  $p$  can be equated with one's desiring that  $p$ , sure. But this does not, by itself, show that none can. It is only if one assumes, at the outset, that every instance of a complex attitude must reduce to simple attitudes *in just the same way*, if it is to reduce at all, that the project of reducing imagination is defeated by platitudes such as that we can imagine that  $p$  without believing that  $p$ . Fortunately, there is no reason to limit our investigations with an assumption that any reduction of imagination must be homogenous in this manner. After all, as we saw at the outset, a starting point for many theorists is to claim that the term 'imagining' picks out a diverse and "scattered" family of states. Even after we have distinguished two concepts of imagining—I-imagining and A-imagining—we may find that each concept picks out a heterogeneous disjunction of different, more basic kinds of folk psychological states.

Compare: within philosophy, many apply the phrase 'entertaining the proposition that  $p$ ' to any of a heterogeneous set of occurrent mental episodes during which the proposition  $p$  is "before the mind." On this usage, we entertain the proposition that  $p$  when we judge that  $p$ ; and

we also do so when merely wondering whether  $p$ , or when deciding that  $p$ . The fact that entertaining the proposition that  $p$  is not strictly the same thing as judging that  $p$  does not stand in the way of reducing entertaining that  $p$  (as a mental state type) to a heterogeneous class of other occurrent states.

“Fine,” comes the response, “but, in the case of imagination, what on earth could this heterogeneous array of other folk psychological states *be*?” Well, I will come to that. That is what this book is about. But let’s not underestimate the importance of the point just made. It is no barrier to *one* instance of imagining being identified with some more basic folk psychological state that the same *type* of state cannot be identified with *all* imaginings. Put otherwise, showing that imagination is a *sui generis* mental state kind requires more than establishing that there is some particular imagining that is not reducible to a specific combination of more basic folk psychological states. It requires showing that there is *no* collection of more basic folk psychological states with which the token imagining can be identified. And *that* is not so easily done.

I will aim to make this point more concrete, and more plausible, by applying it to specific cases below. For now, two summary conclusions to keep in mind:

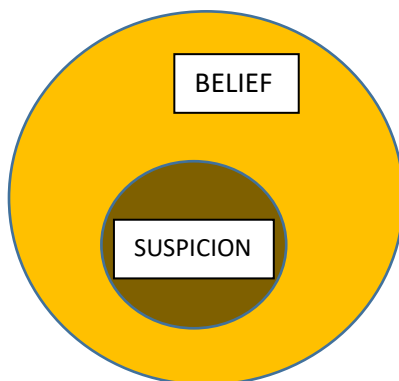
- 1) *Don’t assume content-mirroring*: In order for a token mental state of  $\varphi$ -ing that  $p$  to consist in one’s being in some more basic token state, that more basic state need not also have the content  $p$ . For instance, we saw that suspecting that  $p$  is not precisely reducible to believing that  $p$ ; but it is plausibly reducible to believing that  $q$ , where  $q$  is the proposition that *it is somewhat likely that p*.
- 2) *Don’t assume homogeneity*: An instance of  $\varphi$ -ing that  $p$  may consist in one’s being in some particular set of more basic mental states  $\Delta$ , even if another instance of  $\varphi$ -ing that  $p$  does not consist in one’s being in  $\Delta$ . To assume otherwise is to presume a kind of homogeneity to the class  $\varphi$ -ing that may not exist. We saw the case of entertaining the proposition that  $p$  as a likely example. This possibility is especially salient when theorizing about a kind, such as imagination, which, even on its face, appears heterogeneous to many.

### 1.8 What do I mean by “more basic”?



Before applying these points to specific examples, I'd like to make a last clarification. I have said that I'll reduce A-imagining to more basic folk psychological mental states and processes—and so provide an explanatory unification of imagination with those other states. Above, I briefly explained the sense in which belief is *more basic* than suspicion in terms on a certain asymmetry: for any situation where we might attribute a suspicion to a person, we could alternatively, and equally plausibly, attribute a certain belief; by contrast, there are many cases where we attribute a belief where could not alternatively, and equally plausibly, attribute a suspicion. For instance, I believe that I am sitting at my computer, typing. I do not suspect—or even *strongly* suspect—that I am sitting at my computer, typing. Nor do I suspect that my name is 'Peter,' that I am a human being, or that I am thinking now—though I certainly believe those things. Thanks to this asymmetry—depicted in Figure 1, below—we can say that belief is more basic than suspicion.

Because, in my view, imagination reduces to a heterogeneous set of folk psychological states, the sense in which these states are more basic is not as straightforward as with suspicion and belief. For it is not the case that, for any situation where we attribute to a person an imagining that *p*, we could alternatively, and equally plausibly, attribute a belief with a certain content. I will argue instead that, for any situation where we attribute an imagining to someone, we could alternatively, and equally plausibly, attribute either a certain belief, desire, or intention—or one of their occurrent counterparts (*viz.*, a judgment, desire, or decision). Further, for each of belief, desire, and intention, there are many contexts where we attribute one of those states where we could not alternatively, and equally plausibly, attribute an imagining. A second diagram—Figure 1b—helps to clarify the relationships I have in mind:



*Figure 1a*

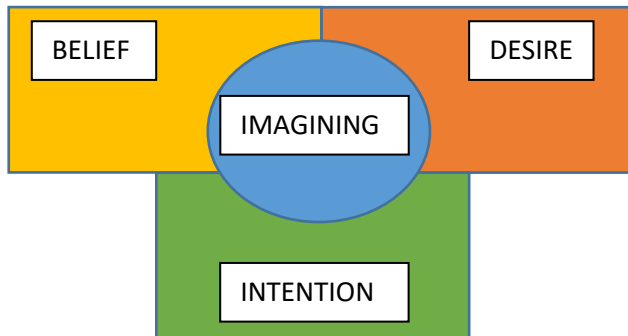


Figure 1b

We can interpret each rectangle in Figure 1b as containing the set of situations where we can plausibly—and, for explanatory purposes, profitably—attribute a belief, desire, or intention (or one of their occurrent counterparts). Likewise for the circle, with respect to imaginings. If the diagram is correct, then belief, desire, and intention are collectively more basic than imagining. This is similar to the way in which belief, desire, and certain basic emotions, are collectively more basic than regret or thankfulness, as earlier discussed. A difference, however, is that the reduction of thankfulness and regret to this more basic collection of states is relatively homogenous: every case of being thankful that  $p$  is identifiable with the same kind of collection of beliefs, desires, and emotions (or so I suggested). In the case of imagination, there is not a single reductive recipe of this kind, even if, on a case-by-case basis, each imagining is identifiable with some collection of more basic states.

Some may grant that belief, desire, and intention are collectively more basic than imagining in this way, yet deny that this shows imagining to be *reducible to*—or even explainable in terms of—those states. Others may object that the relations mapped in Figure 1b are inaccurate, insofar as every context where we ascribe one of the collectively “more basic” states—say, belief—is one where we could alternatively, and equally plausibly, ascribe a desire, intention, or imagining. If that were correct, then there would be no sense in which belief is *more* basic than imagining; the two would be on a par, with each notion or state being analyzable

into three others. Because these worries cannot be adequately addressed without first distinguishing different views one might have concerning the ontology of folk psychological states generally, I table their discussion to Chapter Two (Sections 2.5 and 2.6).

### 1.9 *The Delicious Mud Pie*

I turn now to applying the above points to explicit arguments commonly given for viewing imagination as irreducible to other folk psychological states. These arguments appeal to broad generalizations in how imaginings differ from states like belief or desire. Echoing claims endorsed by many others (including Sinhababu (2016), Nichols (2006), Stock (2017), and Picciuto & Carruthers (2016, p. 316-317)) Shannon Spaulding (2015) catalogs a number of differences between imagination and belief, as a means to establishing that imagination is “not reducible to belief.” While that point is tangential to her main argument in the paper, her list is a helpful compendium of common objections that need addressing by an account like mine.

Noting that imagination bears important similarities to belief, Spaulding emphasizes that:

Imagination is not *reducible* to belief. Imagination guides action differently than belief.

Imagining that a mud pie is a delicious treat guides my action differently than believing it is. Imagination is subject to conscious, voluntary control, whereas belief is not.

Imagination is less restrictive than belief insofar as one can imagine many false and absurd propositions that one in no way believes. Imagination-induced affect typically is less intense, less durable, and sometimes quite different than belief-induced affect. The upshot of these considerations is that imagination...is not reducible to belief (Spaulding, 2015).

I will consider each point on Spaulding’s list in turn. But, first, let’s reflect on the structure of argument and its aims. In order for observations of this sort to count as *evidence* for imagination’s irreducibility, they cannot assume what is in question. If imagination just is a species of belief—or even if only some imaginings are beliefs—then imagination does *not* guide action differently than belief, is not related differently to the will, is not less restrictive than belief, and does not trigger affect differently (at least, not always). In short, it begs the question against the advocate for imagination’s reducibility to offer such differences as *evidence* for its irreducibility. And yet, the platitudes Spaulding lists are hard to deny; indeed, I don’t deny them, properly understood. So we need a way to take this putative evidence for imagination’s irreducibility on board without assuming what is at issue.

Here is how: the generalizations Spaulding lists can be neutrally characterized as differences in the platitudes and dispositions associated with believing that *p* and imagining that *p*, respectively. A person who imagines that *p* will behave differently than a person who believes that *p*; a person can imagine that *p* at will but cannot believe that *p* at will; a person can imagine that *p* while believing that not-*p*; the affect a person experiences in response to imagining that *p* is usually different than what she will experience in response to believing that *p*. These general, *ceteris paribus* differences between the person who believes that *p* and the person who merely imagines that *p* can then be considered *evidence* for the claim that imagining is irreducible to belief *tout court*—without, in fact, assuming the point.

This is not particularly *good* evidence for imagination’s irreducibility, however. It leaves open the possibility that many, even all, cases of imagining that *p* will reduce to beliefs of some kind or other—just not the belief that *p*. It also leaves open the possibility that all cases of imagining will be reducible to some collection or other of more basic folk psychological states, many of which are beliefs.

To see possibilities of this sort, let’s look at each putative difference in turn.

### 1.9.1 Imagination and action

Spaulding observes that imagination “guides action differently than belief.” A well-worn example, tracing to Walton (1990), is that “imagining that a mud pie is a delicious treat guides my action differently than believing it is” (Spaulding, 2015). Sinhababu also highlights this difference in action-tendencies when arguing that imagination is a distinct state of mind from belief, observing that “daydreaming about being Spider-Man typically doesn’t result in actually trying to shoot webs, and imagining that one is Harry Potter while reading of his adventures doesn’t usually result in trying to cast spells” (2016, p. 113). Nichols concurs that it is a “central fact about the propositional imagination” that “imagination and belief generate different action tendencies” (2006, p. 6-7). I have argued that, for these observations to not be question-begging with respect to imagination’s reducibility, we need to view them as assertions about the typical behavioral platitudes and dispositions associated with imagining that *p* and believing that *p*, respectively. The question is then whether the dispositions to action associated with imagining that *p* can alternatively (and plausibly) be ascribed through the use of other, more basic folk psychological terms.

Enter Uncle Joe, who *believes that* he is playing a pretense game with his nephew, where the point is to act like a mud pie is a chocolate pie. He *judges*, and thus comes to *believe*, that holding the pie to his face while saying “Mmm, tasty” is a good way to act like the mud pie is a chocolate pie. This is, after all, how one might behave around a real chocolate pie. Given that he has these beliefs, and wants to continue playing this game, how is he disposed to act? It seems to me that he is disposed to act exactly like someone who is imagining that a mud pie is a delicious treat (and who has a desire to play the game). After all, he’s not eating the mud pie; the disposition to do *that* only holds of people who *believe* the mud pie is delicious. He is stopping short of doing anything that would put him at digestive risk. He is only doing things you would do if you were, well, *imagining* that the pie is a delicious treat and wanted to play along with your nephew. This is a case where imagining that a mud pie is a chocolate pie generates the same action tendencies as an ordinary judgment—not the specific judgment that a mud pie is a chocolate pie, of course, but judgments about how to act like a mud pie is delicious. (I will take judgments to be occurrent mental processes through which one comes to have a certain dispositional belief). So, in this case, the mere fact that imagining that *p* has different associated action-tendencies from believing that *p* gives no reason to think that imagining is generally irreducible to other, more basic mental states. It turns out there is *another* collection of beliefs and desires that does give rise to the same dispositions to action as imagining that *p*.<sup>11</sup>

One response in favor of imagination’s irreducibility might be that a *sui generis* imaginative state is what enables a person to generate the beliefs and judgments just mentioned. For instance, it might be thought that Uncle Joe needs to have a belief-distinct (imaginative) mental representation with the content “this is a chocolate pie,” in order to see what the appropriate actions would be *if* the mud pie really were delicious. (This idea mirrors Nichols & Stich’s (2003) and Currie & Ravenscroft’s (2002) account of the role of imagination in pretense and hypothetical reasoning). This is, I grant, a possibility for how we arrive at such judgments; it’s one I reject in Chapters Five and Six, on conditional reasoning. For the time being, note that the debate has now shifted to whether having and acquiring certain beliefs is best explained by one’s having a particular sort of mental representation that is not itself a belief. Gone is the platitudinous,

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<sup>11</sup> One might object that the present example is simply one where a pretense does not involve imagination and where we would normally ascribe an imagining. Granting the possibility, I am only, at this point, explaining a general strategy—one that is applied to a full variety of pretenses in Chapters Seven and Eight.

undeniable claim with which we began—that imagining that *p* guides action differently than believing or judging that *p*. It has been replaced with a likely controversial proposal about the mental states necessary for arriving at certain other beliefs. If we accept that claim, it must be for reasons other than that we accept the platitude that imagination guides action differently than belief. The platitude on its own—rendered neutrally as the claim that imagining that *p* and believing that *p* have different associated behavioral dispositions—is insufficient evidence for imagination’s irreducibility.

Another objection may be to grant that *in this special case* the dispositions to action associated with imagining that *p* are the same as those associated with having certain beliefs, desires, or making certain judgements, while objecting that there are many other cases where no such translation will be available. Again, this might be so. But there is nothing special about the case just considered. The mud pie pretense is a standard example, handed down through the generations. More importantly, the objection again shifts the argument for imagination’s irreducibility from “imagination guides action differently than belief” to, “there are at least some cases where the behavioral dispositions we ascribe by saying someone is imagining that *p* cannot equally well be ascribed through any other plausible collection of beliefs, desires, judgments, intentions, and so on.” Once the objection is put this way, it hardly seems obvious. Its truth, or falsity, will be a delicate matter.

### 1.9.2 *Imagination and the will*

The next reason Spaulding gives for thinking that imagination is irreducible to belief is that “imagination is subject to conscious, voluntary control, whereas belief is not.” Sinhababu again agrees, noting that “it’s easy to perform an intentional action of imagining something that isn’t the case. It’s hard or impossible to perform an intentional action of believing something that isn’t the case” (p. 113). Nichols is also on board: “belief is not at the whim of our intentions,” he observes, “but imagination is” (2006, p. 7).

In order to view these claims as *evidence* for imagination’s irreducibility, and not mere assertions of it, we should again see them as noting a difference in the platitudes and dispositions associated with imagining that *p* and believing that *p*, respectively. There are cases where we say a person has freely imagined that *p* where we would not say he could have freely judged or come to

believe that *p*. The truth of this platitude, however, does not offer much reason for thinking that imagination is irreducible to other folk psychological states.

After all, this special freedom of imagination is fully evident in the mud pie example. There's Uncle Joe again, holding the mud pie to his face: "Mmm," he says, "*delicious!*" He is imagining that the mud pie is a delicious treat. That is what we are inclined to say as we watch. This game involving the mud pie, and the imagining that supports it, are things he does voluntarily. No one put a gun to Uncle Joe's head. Of course, he didn't—and can't—choose to *believe* that the mud pie is a delicious treat. But that is irrelevant. For while we can't choose our beliefs, judgments, or parents, we *can* choose the topics on which we'd like to reason. And that's exactly what Uncle Joe has done. In choosing to imagine that the mud pie is a chocolate pie, he has chosen to reason on the topic of how to act like a mud pie is a chocolate pie; and he has judged that holding it to his face while saying "Mmmmm...*delicious*" is a good way to do so. He could have *instead* chosen to reason about how to act like the pie is a Frisbee, or how to act a catfish. He was free to do so. Had he so chosen and put the reasoning to use in related games of pretense—arriving at judgments about how to make the pie Frisbee-like, or how to make himself catfish-like—we would have declared him to be imagining that the pie is a Frisbee, or that he is a catfish. Such freedom, genuine as it is, offers no reason to think that imagination is irreducible to collections of beliefs, desires, and judgments.

Again one may object that, in order to make the judgments in question (about, e.g., how to act like the mud pie is a delicious treat), Uncle Joe must (voluntarily) token a *sui generis* imaginative mental representation with the content "The mud pie is a delicious treat," or "The mud pie is a Frisbee," or "I am a catfish." And, again: *maybe* that is required. But here is another possibility: to voluntarily pretend that some *X* (e.g. a mud pie, or Uncle Joe) is a *Y* (e.g. a delicious treat, or a catfish), you simply need some beliefs about what *Ys* are generally like and a desire to make *X* saliently *Y*-like (Langland-Hassan, 2014). Uncle Joe knows some things about catfish: they've got whiskers, they're feisty, they make barking sounds when out of water. During a pretense, he can draw on this knowledge to make himself catfish-like in various respects, without ever thinking something he disbelieves (such as: I, Uncle Joe, am a catfish). This is a possibility that must be foreclosed if the voluntary nature of imagination is to offer reason for thinking that imagining is irreducible to other folk psychological states.

Again we may hear the objection that the mud pie example is a special case and that there are very many freely chosen imaginings that will not fit this explanatory mold. Two points in response: first, in line with the possible heterogeneity of A-imagining, my claim is not that the freedom of *all* imaginings is to be explained as a freedom to engage in reasoning on a topic of our choice; other cases, such as idle daydreams, may be explained in other ways. (More on that in a moment.) Second, with this objection the argument has again changed shape. It is no longer: “imagination is subject to conscious, voluntary control, whereas belief is not,” but rather: “there are at least some cases in which we ascribe a freely chosen imagining where we could not have alternatively, and equally plausibly, ascribed any other collection of more basic folk psychological states.” That is an interesting claim, but not an obvious one. We’ll just have to see whether it’s true, by examining—in Chapters Five through Twelve—a wide variety of paradigmatic contexts where A-imagining occurs.

### 1.9.3 *Imagining what we disbelieve*

Similar points apply to Spaulding’s observation that “imagination is less restrictive than belief insofar as one can imagine many false and absurd propositions that one in no way believes.” Schroeder & Matheson give cognitive scientific dress to this platitude: “Imagining that *p* is most obviously distinguished from believing that *p*, in that imagining that *p* does not lead one to automatically store in one’s memory that *p*” (2006, p. 25). (Sinhababu (2016, p. 112) and Nichols (2006, p. 6) also echo this claim, noting that we can imagine that *p* while not believing that *p*). Of course, on the account I have suggested, it remains correct to describe Uncle Joe as having imagined a false and absurd proposition—that *the mud pie is a delicious treat*—one he doesn’t believe. Yet, in line with points already made, we could have alternatively ascribed the particular judgments and desires mentioned above. When asked what it is for him to imagine the disbelieved proposition that the mud pie is delicious, we can say that it amounts to his having made those judgements and having had those desires—just as we can say that someone’s regretting that *p* consists in his having certain beliefs, desires, and emotional dispositions. The truth of the platitude that we can imagine what we don’t believe remains compatible with an imagining’s being reducible to other kinds of mental states—beliefs included.

### 1.9.4 *Imagination and emotion*



The last consideration Spaulding gives for thinking that imagination is irreducible to belief is that, “imagination-induced affect typically is less intense, less durable, and sometimes quite different than belief-induced affect.” Nichols finds it “common wisdom in psychology that imagining scenarios can have significant affective consequences.” While he is more impressed with the *similarity* of the emotions felt in response to imagining that *p* and believing that *p* than their differences (2006a, p. 8), Nichols also agrees that emotional responses to an imagining are often quite different than they are when we believe the same content (2006b). A comparable connection between imagination and affect—where imagination has some, *but not all*, of the same relationships to affect as belief—is proposed by many others (see, e.g., Schroeder & Matheson, 2006; Meskin & Weinberg, 2003).

We can again grant the superficial, platitudinous phenomenon: when we say that a person has imagined that *p*, we don’t expect him to experience the depth of emotions he would if he were to have judged that *p*. But neither are we surprised if he feels some semblance of those emotions. Intuitively, it is not obvious what emotions, if any, Uncle Joe experiences in imagining that the mud pie is a delicious treat. But consider a different example: imagining that your family is inside a burning house. Imagining this may cause unpleasant affect. This affect will be much different, however, than were you to judge that your family is inside a burning house. Yet this is no reason to think that imagination is irreducible to more basic folk psychological states. Imagining that your family is inside a burning house could very well have the *same* emotional impact as *some* related judgment or other—such as the judgment that your family *could* someday be caught inside a burning house and that, if they were, thus and such terrible events would unfold. Although it is only a judgment about what *could* happen, dwelling on the possibility may be enough to raise a lump in your throat. Once again, so long as there is *some* judgment, desire, intention, or decision with the same associated dispositions to generate affect as the imagining, we can make a case for identifying the imagining with those more basic states. The mere platitude that imagining that *p* has different associated emotional dispositions than believing that *p* does little, by itself, to establish imagination’s general irreducibility.

So much for the most common reasons given for thinking that imagination is irreducible to more basic folk psychological states. I want now to consider a slightly different form of objection—one grounded in introspection.

### *1.10 Introspection and Mental Imagery*

It might seem obvious that we know, just through introspection, that the states we enter into when imagining are not occurrent judgments, desires, or intentions of the kind I have so far proposed. Just as a matter of first-person phenomenology, it might seem clear that (1) we know *when* we are imagining and that (2) we can tell that that our states of imagining are not some other kind of state—judgments, beliefs, desires, intentions, or whatever. For instance, you may find that you are now imagining a ninja eating popcorn and that this episode is no belief, desire, or intention. What do I say to this?

My response is that the argument is question-begging. If you are indeed aware of an imagining that is not any other kind of state, then, sure, that imagining is not any other kind of state. The question is why we should think a person is well-placed to introspectively discern that an occurrent mental episode is an imagining and nothing else. I see no reason to think people are authorities on this. After all, if it were obvious to introspection that we can discern what is an imagining and what is not, there would be no need to consider the arguments made by Spaulding, Sinhababu, Nichols, and others in favor of imagination’s irreducibility. We could simply recede into the comfort of our own minds, notice that our imaginings are one thing, our beliefs, desires, and intentions another, and move on with our lives. Some readers may have done just that. But if you have taken the trouble to follow the argument this far, you probably agree that we have no such ability; arguments of a different kind will be needed to determine which mental states are basic, and which are not.

It may help to observe that in many ordinary cases of folk psychological explanation, we don’t expect the attributions to tell us much about the person’s conscious life. When Andrew breaks away from the televised soccer game to grab a beer from the fridge, we explain it by saying he desired a beer and believed that there is beer in the fridge (such is the classic example). But we don’t thereby assume that he said to himself “there is beer in the fridge” or “a beer would be great right now,” or that he consciously reflected on the question “where should I go, if I want a beer?” before doing so. We don’t expect the belief/desire attributions to have obvious phenomenological implications. The same goes for the attributions beliefs and desires relevant to explaining Uncle Joe’s pretense behavior, which, on reflection, we may identify with his token A-imagining.

One place where introspection *does* seem to get a grip, however, is with respect to mental imagery—especially as I have defined it. For we certainly can tell, introspectively, whether we are currently making use of mental states that *seem to us* to be image-like in nature. A separate, empirical question—the subject of historical debate (Block, 1981; Pearson & Kosslyn, 2015; Pylyshyn, 2002; Tye, 1991)—is whether the representational format of these putative images is indeed picture-like in some important respect. But let’s assume, for the moment, that the empirical question is settled: the mental imagery we are aware of through introspection does indeed occur in a pictorial, or iconic format. A common, but by no means universal, view in philosophy is that “propositional” folk psychological states like beliefs, desires, intentions, and so on, do *not* occur in an imagistic, picture-like format (see, e.g., Fodor (1975)). If that view were correct, and if it were indeed the case that mental imagery occurs in a picture-like format, then we could tell, just through introspection, that one of our current mental states was not what I have termed a “basic folk psychological state” (viz, a belief, desire, or intention) just by noticing that it involved a mental image. And, of course, in many of the paradigmatic situations where A-imagining occurs we do find ourselves making use of mental imagery. This would entail that at least some A-imaginings (i.e., those involving mental imagery) are not reducible to more basic folk psychological states.

My response is to deny the thesis that mental images never form proper parts of “propositional” folk psychological states like beliefs, desires, intentions, and so on. (Nor am I alone in rejecting this thesis (see, e.g., Kaplan, 1968; Kind, 2001; Martin, 2002; Van Leeuwen, 2013).) The mental images we introspectively discern may instead be proper parts of more basic (propositional) folk psychological states, such as judgments, desires, and decisions (Langland-Hassan, 2015). This can be true whether or not such images actually occur in an imagistic format—a point I will explain and defend in Chapters Three and Four. For now, the shape of my response to the objection from introspective-awareness-of-imagery should be clear: given that many basic folk psychological states—including beliefs, desires, judgments, and decisions—have mental images as proper parts, introspective awareness of a mental image cannot serve as evidence that we are in some state that is irreducible to those folk psychological states.

### *1.11 More case studies as prelude*

I will conclude this bird’s-eye-view of the book to come with a few more case studies in reducing A-imagining to more basic folk psychological states. The aim of these examples is not to convince you of the overall account but to advertise the shape of things to come.

### *1.11.1 Daydreaming: Imagining that I am rich and famous*

Kendall Walton offers the following as a “paradigm instance of an exercise of the imagination”:

Fred finds himself, in an idle moment, alone with his thoughts. Feeling unsuccessful and unappreciated, he embarks on a daydream in which he is rich and famous. He calls up images of applauding constituents, visiting dignitaries, a huge mansion, doting women, fancy cars. But alas, reality eventually reasserts itself and Fred gets back to selling shoes (Walton, 1990, p. 13)

The orthodox view of imagination has it that Fred makes use of a *sui generis* kind of mental state in the course of this daydream: his imaginings. In the face of cases like these, we have to ask if there are no other, more basic kinds of folk psychological states at work in disguise. Clearly, Fred wants to take leave of his position at the shoe store. He wants to be applauded by constituents, visited by dignitaries, housed in a mansion, pursued by women, driving Lamborghinis. Fred has many unfulfilled desires flooding his mind as customers wait for him to bring out loafers in the correct size. We *could* describe it as his imagining these things—these objects of desire. But it would be more perspicuous call it what it is: the conscious uprising of Fred’s outlandish desires. Some of these desires may have mental images—of cars, of women, of adoring fans—as proper parts. But they are desires all the same.

Of course, even if some of what get called ‘daydreams’ are simply desires, not all of them are. In some cases, we simply tell ourselves a story; in others, we confront our fears. Other cases are addressed in Chapter Four, on imagistic imagining, and Chapter Twelve, on the role of imagination in creativity.

### *1.11.2 Pretense – a sketch of Chapters Seven and Eight*

Bananas not only dominate sales of produce. They are also ubiquitous in discussions of pretense (Friedman & Leslie, 2007; Leslie, 1987; Nichols & Stich, 2000; Richert & Lillard, 2004). A common example involves someone holding a banana to his ear and speaking into one end, pretending that it is a telephone. When we look under the hood, what, psychologically, does this

little caper require? Inspecting the banana, a man—Carl, let’s say—judges it to be shaped like the receiver of an (old-fashioned) telephone. He wants to have some fun, to play a little game. So he decides to treat the banana in telephone-like ways, holding one end to his ear, talking into the other. Carl is able to do this—to temporarily make the banana telephone-like in various respects—because he knows some things about telephones. Of course, he does not *believe* that the banana is a telephone. That’s why we describe him as only pretending. We might also say that he is “imagining that the banana is a telephone.” But it might offer a clearer view of his mind to simply say that he believes that the banana resembles a telephone receiver, wants to play a little game, and, in order to do so, has decided to make the banana telephone-like in various respects, while believing it is not, in fact, a telephone.

This is not a template for explaining *all* pretenses. Some pretenses require us to reason hypothetically about what would be the case in some possible situation or other. Pretending that an airplane engine has landed in my backyard, for example, might require me to form some judgements about what would happen *if* an airplane engine landed in my backyard. Those if-then conditional judgments could then guide my pretense. This raises a question: does evaluating and making judgements about conditionals require *sui generis* imaginative states?

### 1.11.3 Conditional reasoning – a sketch of Chapters Five and Six

We have many beliefs of the form: if  $p$  then  $q$ .<sup>12</sup> How do we arrive at these beliefs, in cases where we don’t already believe that  $p$ ? A popular proposal is that we *imagine* that  $p$  and, with  $p$  fixed in imagination, see what else emerges as likely *in imagination* (Nichols & Stich, 2000; Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002; Williamson, 2016). If  $q$  is one of those things, we will then come to believe that *if  $p$  then  $q$* . Imagining that  $p$  enables us to infer the likely consequences of  $p$  being the case, it is said, just because imagination is “belief-like” in its inferential properties (Nichols & Stich, 2000; Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002).

Here is a different approach. I judge that, if my coffee cup turns over, then the coffee will spill out. How did I arrive at this belief? I don’t believe that my coffee cup is now turned over, or that the coffee has spilled out, after all. However, I have lots of relevant background beliefs about liquids and spills. In particular, I believe that, *ceteris paribus*, when a container holding a liquid is

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<sup>12</sup> In this chapter, I don’t distinguish between subjunctive and indicative conditionals, though that distinction is important and prominent in the full discussion of conditional reasoning in Chapters Five and Six.

knocked over, the liquid spills out. Asked what would happen if my cup turns over, I access that belief and infer straightaway: If my coffee cup turns over, then the coffee will spill out. This is not a deductive inference, of course. Such is the case with most of our conditional judgments. They are based on past experience and our knowledge of how things normally go. We can make use of that knowledge to infer conditionals, without ever representing to ourselves something we disbelieve.

In some cases, it may seem there are no relevant past experiences, no relevant “way things normally go,” to be used in arriving at the new conditional belief. This may seem to be the case with the airplane engine landing in my backyard. One question is whether these appearances are correct. Are there really no generalizations or past experiences on the basis of which I can infer what would happen if an airplane engine landed in my backyard? Another question is whether *sui generis* imaginings would offer any help to the inference if there are not. The surrounding issues—concerning the truth-conditions of both indicative and subjunctive conditionals, their relation to the material conditional of formal logic, and the psychological processes by which we arrive at our beliefs in each kind of conditional—are complex. I explore them across Chapters Five and Six, arguing that we gain no traction on the psychology conditional reasoning by invoking *sui generis* imaginings. We can better explain the key inferences at work by appeal to beliefs alone.

#### *1.11.4 Consuming fiction: the barest sketch*

Imagination is often cited in philosophical discussions of fiction (Currie, 1990; Friend, 2008; Matravers, 2014; Meskin & Weinberg, 2003; Nichols, 2004; Stock, 2017; Walton, 1990; Weinberg & Meskin, 2006). Cindy, let us suppose, is watching the Steven Spielberg classic, *E.T.* E.T. levitates Elliot’s dirt bike on their way to meet the mothership that will return E.T. to his home planet. They are silhouetted by the moon. As Cindy watches, we can say she is imagining that E.T. is going home. She doesn’t really *believe* that E.T. is going home, after all. Alternatively, we could say that she is judging that, in the film *E.T.*, E.T. is going home. This is something she believes. This judgment leads her into a certain emotional state—a state of wistfulness. She wanted it to be true, in *E.T.*, that E.T. goes home; but she also wanted it to be true, *in E.T.*, that E.T. and Elliot remain close friends on Earth. Her wistfulness makes sense,

given her beliefs and conflicting desires. We get a clear picture of her overall cognitive situation if we identify her episode of imagining with these states.

But why care about what is happening in a mere fiction? Why should beliefs about what is happening *in a fiction* generate any affect at all? These questions lie behind the well-known “paradox of fiction” in aesthetics (Friend, 2016; Lamarque, 1981; Radford, 1975). I won’t venture a summary response here; chapter Eleven is devoted to the topic. Other puzzles relating to fiction-consumption and imagining—including how we extract implicit truths from a fiction and how we are to define fictional truth itself—are addressed across Chapters Nine, Ten, and Eleven, with Chapter Ten generating a special challenge for any view at all that tries to find work for *sui generis* imaginings in fiction consumption.

### 1.12 Summary

In my experience, differences in the general platitudes surrounding imagination and belief—that we can imagine that *p* without believing that *p*, and so on—are what underlie the seeming *obviousness* of the view that imagination is irreducible to belief—or indeed to any more basic set of folk psychological states. It makes sense that this would be so. If it is indeed *obvious* that imagination is irreducible to other kinds of folk psychological states, its obviousness should lie on the surface. It is that superficial obviousness I have tried to chip away at here. I hope that imagination’s reducibility to other folk psychological states now seems an open, even delicate question.

In the chapters to come, my strategy for explaining imagination will be to identify contexts and abilities commonly agreed to involve imagination (in the A-imagination sense) and to show how the mental states and processes at work in those contexts can be understood as more basic folk psychological states. These abilities include conditional reasoning (Chapters Five and Six), pretending (Chapters Seven and Eight), engaging with fictions (Chapters Nine, Ten, and Eleven), and creativity (Chapter Twelve). In each case, my aim is to tell a *how plausibly* story explaining how the cognition we associate with imagination is composed of other, more basic folk psychological states. At the same time, I aim to cast doubt on explanations of these abilities that have appealed to *sui generis* imaginative states.

By the end of Chapter Twelve, there is no general reductive definition of imagination offered—no identification of all A-imaginings with certain specific kinds of other states or

patterns of inference. Instead, there is a collection of strategies for showing how paradigmatic contexts where imagination occurs can be understood as exclusively drawing upon a more basic collection of mental states, including beliefs, desires, and intentions. This is the right *form* of reduction, in my view, given that imagination is not a natural cognitive kind but is instead a heterogeneous collection of more basic mental states and processes that acquire the label ‘imagining’ on the basis of being cases of rich, elaborated, epistemically safe thought about the possible, fictional, unreal, and so on.



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