

Forthcoming in *Mind*.

*Recreative Minds*, by Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Pp. x + 233.

The imagination is enjoying a burst of scholarly attention. Over the last decade, a number of researchers at the intersection of philosophy and psychology have explored the nature of the imagination. Gregory Currie has played a central role in these discussions, both as an insightful critic and as an apologist for a ‘simulation’-based account of the imagination. As a result, *Recreative Minds*, the new book by Currie and Ian Ravenscroft has been widely anticipated by those in the field. The book delivers. It stakes out an interesting, detailed, and provocative view of the imagination. The account that emerges has broad ramifications for central issues in aesthetics, philosophy of psychology, and philosophy of mind. The book is also distinguished throughout by fair and balanced readings of their opposition.

Like other work in this tradition, Currie and Ravenscroft do not attempt to give an account of the *creative* imagination, the capacity that led Einstein to discover relativity and Borges to invent Menard. Rather, Currie and Ravenscroft offer an account of what they call the *recreative* imagination, the imaginative capacity for putting oneself in another person’s place or ‘perspective shifting’ (p. 9). There are, according to Currie and Ravenscroft, a number of different aspects of another person’s perspective that might be occupied through recreative imagination. We can shift to take on beliefs, desires, perceptions. Crucially, these recreative states have the same ‘character’ as their counterpart states. So, belief-like imagining has the same character as belief, desire-like imagining has the same character as desire, and vision-like imagining has the same character as vision. Currie and Ravenscroft never define the notion of character very precisely, but they do make quite clear that character needs to be distinguished from content. What makes something count as belief-like imagining or vision-like imagining, they maintain, is not the *content* of the imagining, but the *character* of the imagining. This allows them to skirt familiar problems that face other accounts. For instance, visual imagining is sometimes characterized as imagining that has, as part of its content, *I see X* (e.g. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 28). This leads to obvious puzzles about whether, for example, it is coherent to visually imagine an unseen landscape. Currie and Ravenscroft easily evade these puzzles since they maintain that what makes something count as visual imagining is not that it has *content* that tags it as visual, but rather a visual character (pp. 30-1).

*Recreative Minds* offers a far reaching account of the recreative imagination. One chapter sets out a state-of-the-art overview of empirical work on visual imagery, making a powerful case for close parallels between vision and visual imagery. However, the bulk of the book focuses on propositional imaginings, and in particular belief-like imaginings and desire-like imaginings. After setting out their account of the imagination, Currie and Ravenscroft explore the possibility that the recreative imagination is damaged in some clinical psychopathologies. They consider the now familiar view that autism involves a deficit in imaginative capacities. The evidentiary

situation on this issue is now rather complicated, since a basic ability to pretend, as well as mathematical abilities seem to be spared in autism. Indeed, there is some reason to be optimistic that the capacity for counterfactual reasoning is relatively intact in autism. Currie and Ravenscroft carefully navigate this complicated literature to carve out their own interpretation of the findings. More innovative, though, is their proposal that schizophrenia is characterized by a different disorder of the imagination, a ‘failure to identify imaginings’ (p. 164). Currie and Ravenscroft deftly use this idea to explain a wide variety of symptoms characteristic of schizophrenia.

Not surprisingly, much of the book concerns contemporary discussions of simulation theory. Simulation theory was originally proposed as an account of how we predict and explain others’ behavior. The then prevailing view, the ‘theory theory’, maintained that we predict and explain behavior by relying on a tacit body of psychological information. The ‘off-line simulation’ account held that in predicting another person’s decisions, I exploit no specialized body of psychological information but rather I insert ‘pretend’ versions of the target’s beliefs and desires into my practical reasoning mechanism, which then generates a ‘pretend’ decision which I use to predict the decision of the target. Since those early years, research on simulation and theory theory has been gravitating towards the middle. Most theorists now maintain that both simulation-like and theory-like processes are implicated in the everyday prediction and explanation of behavior (see e.g., Alvin Goldman, ‘The Mentalizing Folk’ in D. Sperber (ed.)

*Metarepresentation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; Shaun Nichols and Stephen Stich, *Mindreading*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Currie and Ravenscroft too embrace a hybrid theory. Perhaps the central feature that places their hybrid on the simulation end of the spectrum is their appeal to *desire-like imaginings*. These, of course, are the Pretend Desires from past incarnations of simulation-based accounts. The idea that there are desire-like states of imagination is present in Currie’s work as far back as 1990, but Currie and Ravenscroft offer the fullest presentation and the most extensively developed exploration of the idea. Desire-like imaginings play a central role at several parts of their theory. The appeal to desire-like imaginings explains how we recreate practical reasoning (chapter 1), how simulation is to be distinguished from theorizing (chapter 3), how supposition differs from full-fledged imagining (chapter 2), and how tragic emotions get generated (chapter 9).

*Recreative Minds* deserves much more critical attention than I have space to devote. I will focus my allotment on desire-like imaginings, since desire-like imaginings play such an important role in the book. There is a broader issue at stake here too, of course. If there are desire-like imaginings, this greatly expands the available resources for explaining the phenomena surrounding fiction and imagination.

What are the arguments for desire-like imaginings? One familiar argument for desire-like imaginings comes from the early simulation debates. Roughly, the argument is that if we predict others’ practical reasoning by running our own practical reasoning mechanism off line, then we must use pretend desires as well as pretend beliefs. For to reach accurate predictions, the simulation-system must accommodate the divergent desires of the target. This argument is, of

course, convincing only to those who think that we predict other's decisions by running our own practical reasoning mechanism off line. As a result, this argument itself is entirely contentious in the simulation debates. Currie and Ravenscroft present this argument briefly (p. 20) and move quickly on to two new arguments.

The first new argument is that in order to explain our emotional responses to fiction we must invoke desire-like imaginings. In normal emotion production, Currie and Ravenscroft maintain, emotions that depend on beliefs also depend on desires: 'where emotions depend on beliefs, they depend on desires as well; if I didn't desire your success or success relevantly like it I would not be envious' (p. 20). Hence, they argue, the same must be true for emotions produced by the imagination: 'And so it must be with emotions that depend on belief-like imaginings; to be genuinely belief-like, these imaginings ought to have emotional consequences only in conjunction with states that are desire-like' (p. 20). So the argument seems to be that emotions that are generated by beliefs also must implicate desires; hence, emotions that are generated by belief-like imaginings must similarly implicate desire-like imaginings.

There are serious problems with this argument. First, it's not at all clear that emotions that are generated by beliefs must implicate current desires as well. The central scientific tradition on emotion processing, the affect program tradition, does not typically appeal to an agent's current desires in the explanation of the process that leads to an emotional response like fear, sadness, or disgust (see, e.g., Paul Griffiths, *What Emotions Really Are*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). Rather, the standard explanation appeals to appraisal processes that do apparently draw on information from the subject's beliefs about the situation. For instance, the appraisal of the details of a described scenario can produce the basic emotions of fear, sadness, and disgust. And, importantly, the responses can be triggered whether the subjects regard the scenario as fact or fiction (see e.g., Paul Harris, *The Work of the Imagination*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). Of course, it is possible that desires really do play a crucial role in generating all these emotions, but that the role of desires has not been adequately articulated in contemporary affect theory. However, even if it turns out that basic emotional processing does crucially implicate an agent's current desires, it still doesn't follow that one need appeal to desire-like imaginings to explain imagination-based emotion. For it's quite possible that one's actual desires can do the necessary work.

Although contemporary affective science does not appeal to desires to explain the processing of emotions like fear, there are emotions for which one's current desires do seem to be crucial, including envy and jealousy. However, for those emotions, there's a real question about how they get generated by the imagination. One possibility is that for emotions like envy and jealousy, the imagination only generates emotions that fit with one's current *real* desires. So, I can easily generate jealousy-affect by imagining my spouse being unfaithful. It's not implausible that this response depends on desires I have about my spouse. By contrast, however, I cannot easily generate jealousy-affect by imagining that Anna Karenina (or Laura Bush) is unfaithful. One explanation for this is just that I don't have the relevant real desires when it comes to Anna. I can, of course, try to figure out how Alexey Karenin feels by imagining how I would feel were

my spouse to be unfaithful. But this need not involve any desire-like imagining. As a result, even though there are emotions that plausibly do depend on desires, it's not clear that these emotions are ever generated by desire-like imaginings.

The second new argument for desire-like imaginings appeals to the experiences of spectators: 'We say that we *want* Macbeth to suffer, and Desdemona to be saved. These are not really desires, they are desire-like imaginings' (p. 20). To explain our claim that we *want* Desdemona to be saved, Currie and Ravenscroft say, we need to appeal to desire-like imaginings. The obvious alternative is that when we say that we want Desdemona to be saved, we are reporting a *real* desire that, in the fiction, Desdemona be saved. Currie and Ravenscroft anticipate this response and maintain that it fails because many of us do *not* wish that Shakespeare had given *Othello* a cheery ending:

When I am sorry and upset about the fate of Desdemona, I am not sorry that this fiction has it that an innocent and good-hearted girl suffers a cruel fate. One might be sorry about that, deploring that there are fictions with such unhappy outcomes. This is not what at least many of us are sorry about; we are glad that Shakespeare's fiction has it this way (p. 21).

Currie and Ravenscroft are surely right that we wouldn't want *Othello* to be rewritten so that it spared Desdemona. But this doesn't force us to abandon the real-desire proposal. To see why, consider how Currie and Ravenscroft continue their discussion of their *Othello* example:

Part of the inner tension one experiences on watching the play derives from the fact that we experience a desire-like imagining that Desdemona flourish, combined with a (genuine) desire that the play be one which will ensure that that desire-like imagining is unsatisfied (pp. 21-2).

Currie and Ravenscroft acknowledge here a tension in our experience of *Othello*. They maintain that this tension derives from the combination of a real desire for a tragic narrative and the desire-like imagining that Desdemona be saved. But this explanation relies on an unargued presupposition – that we experience tension when we have the desire that *p* and the desire-like imagining that *not p*. Notice that the parallel does not hold for belief-like imaginings. We feel no tension in having the belief that *Lolita* was written by Nabokov and the belief-like imagining that it was not. Why then should we experience a tension when we have the desire that the narrative be tragic and the desire-like imagining that it not?

Of course, Currie and Ravenscroft can simply add a stipulation to the theory here and say that it is characteristic of desire-like imaginings that they (unlike belief-like imaginings) come into tension with their counterparts. But consider another alternative. The tension we experience in watching *Othello* arises because we have conflicting *real* desires about the play. One desire is that the fiction have it that Desdemona be saved; the other desire is that the play be tragic. I both want it to be the case (fictionally, of course) that Othello not kill Desdemona, and I also want it to be the case that the narrative be tragic. This proposal preserves the idea that we have a real desire that Desdemona be saved (in the fiction), and it also explains the tension we feel without relying on any additional stipulations.

The appeal to real desires can explain many of the reactions to fiction that are charted by

Currie and Ravenscroft. But real desires needn't do all the work here. In some cases, our reports about fiction reflect our emotional responses to the fiction. In the case of Desdemona, this seems especially plausible. When we say, with Currie and Ravenscroft, 'I am sorry and upset about the fate of Desdemona', we might merely be reporting the affect that follows imagining her murderous end. As we saw above, there is no reason to assume that emotional responses to fiction require desire-like imaginings. Having the belief-like imagining that Desdemona is being unjustly murdered might be sufficient to generate the sorrow and upset.

Given these resources for explaining our reactions to fiction, it's unclear that there are any cases left that would require desire-like imaginings. But is there any way to test whether or not desire-like imaginings exist? If there are desire-like imaginings, then we should be able to generate desire-like imaginings that will modulate our responses to the same belief-like imaginings. So, if we see *Othello* once with desire-like imaginings that match our own desires and once with desire-like imaginings that match the desires of, say, Iago, then we should have, according to Currie and Ravenscroft, vastly different emotional and moral experiences of the play. However, as the intriguing literature on imaginative resistance suggests, we have a *very* hard time doing such things (e.g., Richard Moran, 'The Expression of Feeling in the Imagination,' *The Philosophical Review*, 1994; Tamar Gendler, 'The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance,' *The Journal of Philosophy*, 2000). That is, it's notoriously difficult to occupy the emotional and moral perspective of someone with alien desires. We can't get ourselves to respond the way we would if we had the desire-like imagining that Desdemona meet a grisly demise. That fits well with the hypothesis that there are no desire-like imaginings. Currie and Ravenscroft have a different interpretation of the phenomena: 'it is harder, much harder, to get people to desire in imagination against the trend of their own real desires than it is to get people to believe in imagination against the trend of what they really believe' (p. 23).

By adding the qualification that it's hard to generate desire-like imaginings that diverge from one's own desires, the desire-like imagining proposal becomes dangerously insulated from evaluation. It also leads to a puzzle for Currie and Ravenscroft's broader views. If it's so difficult to have desire-like imaginings against the trend of our real desires, how then do desire-like imaginings play such a vital role in predicting the practical reasoning of people with divergent desires? In fact, we seem to be tolerably good at predicting the practical reasoning of those with nefarious desires. When Iago acquires Desdemona's handkerchief from his wife, we have no trouble predicting important aspects of his practical reasoning – that he'll incorporate the handkerchief into his plan to frame Desdemona and that he will take care not to let Othello discover how Desdemona lost the handkerchief. If we find it so hard to generate divergent desire-like imaginings, then our success at these predictive tasks can't be explained by appeal to desire-like imaginings. Of course, the account of desire-like imaginings might be qualified further to accommodate this discrepancy. But as the qualifications grow, the plausibility surely ebbs.

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