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The Child in the Mirror: Pretend Play, Cognition and Imagination

Abstract

Play and pretence, along with imagination and make-believe, occupy an important position in discussions about mind reading and mental development. Philosophers, cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists joined their efforts to develop new theories and methods for exploring how we understand other people's behavior – beliefs, feelings, perceptions, goals, and the like. Although there are disagreements about the cognitive mechanisms that make mind reading possible, most researchers agree that there is a fundamental connection between our capacity to pretend and the deployment of representations of other peoples' mental states – “theory of mind”.

People routinely encourage the young children to use their imagination in order to empathize with others, both for moral and epistemic reasons. Children have a tendency to act out attitudes and expressions they see people have. Children with developmental disorders such as autism by contrast, have strong difficulties in the production of spontaneous pretend play and mimics. In this respect, pretend play, and imagination activities in general, are strongly involved in the cognitive and social development of the mind, interaction with others and creativity.

Within this framework, aesthetic philosophers, such as Gregory Currie and Kendall Walton, tried to explain how fictional experience and imagination might relate. Currie (1995) develops an empirically based *cognitive theory of imagination* according to which our capacity to respond to fictions depends on our ability to engage in mental simulation. Using the model of children pretend play, Walton (1990) argues that fictions are to be understood as props in games of make-believe. Now, Currie's and Walton's approach strongly differ in terms of what imagination exactly is.

My aim is to describe some central features of contemporary cognitive accounts of the relation between pretend play, imagination and fiction. What is the difference between imagination and make-belief? Does pretend play necessarily involve imagination – and conversely? What is the relation between more sophisticated – high quality-pretend-play, for example in comedians, and children’s experience with pretence?

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Emmanuelle Glon is currently a post-doc fellow in Berlin School of Mind and Brain (Humboldt Universität). She received her PhD in Institut Jean Nicod and University of Paris IV on cognitive aesthetics. Following her D.Phil she has been post-doc researcher in Queen’s College of Oxford, before coming to Berlin. Her research and publications in aesthetics are mainly in two broad areas: (1) Pictures and Perception (2) Imagination, Fiction and Ethics. In addition, she is working on the history of propaganda cinema in Centre Marc Bloch in Berlin.

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