What it is to pretend

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Abstract: Pretense is a topic of keen interest to philosophers and psychologists. But what is it, really, to pretend? What features qualify an act as pretense? Surprisingly little has been said on this foundational question. Here I defend an account of what it is to pretend, distinguishing pretense from a variety of related but distinct phenomena, such as (mere) copying and practicing. I show how we can distinguish pretense from sincerity by sole appeal to a person's beliefs, desires, and intentions—and without circular recourse to an "intention to pretend."

1.   Ways to pretend

The kinds of actions we call 'pretense' are really quite diverse. Consider:

Make-believe pretense: Three-year-old Ella says '*meow*' while crawling on all fours, rubbing her

head against a table leg. She is pretending to be a cat. It is "make-believe." Though the name is

misleading, since she is not trying to *make* anyone *believe* she is a cat. She is not disappointed

when everyone continues to believe she is a girl. She's obviously just playing.

On the other hand there are cases of:

Deceptive pretense: Adam is unemployed. Today he dresses and acts like a security guard. Is he

playing make-believe, like Ella? No, he is pretending to be a security guard in order to gain access

to the bank vault. In cases like this, the pretender aims to cover up or hide something from

someone else. Unlike make-believe, these pretenses involve an attempt to deceive—nothing

playful about it.

But there are also pretenses that are neither playful nor deceptive, such as:

Theatrical pretense: Tom Hanks yells at a volleyball. Why? He is pretending to lose his mind, during the filming of *Castaway.* He is not trying to make anyone believe that he, Tom Hanks, is losing his mind. Nor is he trying to make anyone believe that some other person is losing his mind. The intended audience will know it is just a movie. So this is not a case of deceptive pretense. There is no attempt to give anyone a false belief. At the same time, he has gone well beyond what we would normally call "make-believe." He is entirely serious in this endeavor and will be (more than) amply compensated.

I am not suggesting that these "forms" of pretense are mutually exclusive, or even exhaustive. A child might engage in make-believe pretense while acting in the school play, being simultaneously involved in theatrical pretense. An improvisational theater troupe may begin a performance on a subway car without letting other riders know it is only a performance, being engaged in both deceptive and theatrical pretense.

My reason for drawing the distinctions as I have is to highlight the very different kinds of action that can count as pretense: a child's game, a criminal act, the work of a thespian. In virtue of what do we group them together as pretense? What are we saying about these people, when we say they are pretending? That is my question.

It could be that the question has no satisfying answer. It is possible that, while we are picking out a single importantly shared feature in calling each a case of pretense, there is no interesting analysis of that feature to be had, because pretense is a *primitive* notion. Sure, we might say that pretending involves "acting as if,'" or acting "non-seriously," but—if the primitive view is right—when pushed to explicate the relevant senses of acting as if and acting non-seriously, we will have to fall back on the term 'pretending.' The circle of explanation will be too tight. Leslie (1994, p. 218) considers a view of this kind, likening the analysis of pretense to the analysis of belief.

Another possibility is that our tendency to call each of the above a case of pretense is only due to their sharing some family resemblances. There is, however, nothing like an "essence of pretense" to be discovered by philosophical analysis—just, perhaps, a loose cluster of features that go under that name, some had by one sort of act, others by another, and none shared by all. One might think that the term 'game' is like this. We use it in a wide variety of contexts, but (perhaps) without any expectation that there is a deep or interesting answer to the question 'what is it to be a *game*?'

I think that both of these approaches are unsatisfactory. Pretense is not so fundamental as to admit of no enlightening analysis; and there *is* something interesting and important—a unifying set of features—that marks something *as* pretense. While the proof of these claims will be in the pudding, I want to say one thing now about why simply falling back on a family resemblances view is problematic.

In each of the three examples above, quite a lot hangs on the fact that the person is (only) pretending. Our ability to describe them as pretending is linked to our ability to *rationalize* their behavior (given what else is true of them). Asking whether they are pretending—and in virtue of what they count as pretending—is not like wondering whether the word 'sofa' correctly applies to a loveseat. We will not approach the loveseat entirely differently if we decide it is not really a sofa. The converse is true in the case of pretense. We make a psychologically "deep" comment on the child, the thief, and the thespian in describing them each as pretending. Nor are these *borderline* cases of pretense (as there will inevitably be). They are all easily identified as situations where a person is pretending. Yet no one has said what it is that these agents crucially have in common, other than that they are all… *pretending*.

My goal in this paper is to defend an account of what it is to pretend—one that applies to all three kinds of cases—and to reveal some of the unappreciated difficulties in providing such an

3

account. The core idea will be that we can capture the difference between sincerity and pretense simply by appeal to a person's beliefs, desires, and intentions, and without circular recourse to an "intention to pretend." (It bears emphasis that the criterion also makes do without appeal to *sui generis* "imaginative" mental states).[1]

After setting out the basics of such an approach in Sections 2 and 3, I sharpen the criterion in subsequent sections in order to 1) account for cases of pretending that *p* that do not involve acting as would be appropriate if *p* (Section 4), 2) distinguish pretending from mere copying (Section 5), and 3) show why only some representational arts involve pretense (Section 6). Effectively drawing these distinctions is a significant challenge for any account of pretense. Doing so is crucial to understanding what is really special about pretense: that it is a context where aiming at the obviously unachievable is socially acceptable. I close, in Section 7, with some related reflections on the importance of pretense to learning and child development.

2. *First approximations*

Despite the considerable interest among contemporary philosophers and psychologists in pretense and imagination, few have made any attempt at a rigorous definition of pretense itself.[2] The clearest attempt at a formal definition of pretense I know of is J.L. Austin's famous paper on the topic. Austin's (1958) focus was on distinguishing pretense from sincere acts that, behaviorally speaking, may appear the same—for instance, in saying what distinguishes a genuine window-washer from a thief who pretends to wash windows as a means to assess what valuables

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[1] This account of pretense thus coheres with my approach to imagination—defended elsewhere (2012)—which holds that propositional imagining requires only the use of ordinary beliefs and desires.

[2] See Liao & Gendler (2011) for a useful overview. Some relevant recent discussions within philosophy include Nichols & Stich (2000), Currie & Ravenscroft (2002), Velleman (2000), Gendler (2003), Carruthers (2006), Doggett & Egan (2007), and Van Leeuwen (2011).

lay inside. Pretense, he notes, does not require one to "stop short" of completing the pretended action. Rather, it is the intent to deceive that is essential. As he puts it:

> To be pretending…I must be trying to make others believe, or to give them the impression, by means of a current personal performance in their presence, that I am (really, only, &c.) *abc*, in order to disguise the fact that I am really *xyz* (1958, p. 275).

Taken as a criterion for pretense, Austin's proposal faces a number of problems—several noted at the time by Anscombe (1958). For one thing, it seems to require that there can be no solitary pretense. A child cannot go into the backyard and pretend anything on her own. But, more to the point, it is simply wrong—to contemporary ears, at least—to saddle pretense with the intent to deceive. The vast majority of pretenses studied by developmental psychologists—make-believe pretenses—involve no intent to create a false belief in another. Neither do theatrical pretenses. It is no failure of a film or play that the audience leaves without forming any false beliefs. One might respond, in Austin's defense, that he is simply concerned with explaining a certain form of (deceptive) action, and that make-believe pretenses and theatrical events are simply other kinds of actions that travel under the same name. However, his own discussion reveals that he does, in fact, wish to count certain make-believe episodes as pretense.[3] And, in any event, the present analysis will show the three kinds of actions to have something importantly in common, and thus that a more general—and explanatorily more powerful—account is available.

Ryle (1949) also offers remarks on the nature of pretense, though he does not present (or, I think, aim at) a reductive analysis. His characterizations rely upon closely related terms. For instance, he says that 'to describe someone as pretending is to say that he is playing a part, and to

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[3] For instance, Austin grants that, during a party game, he might pretend to be a hyena. And he allows that "there is no question of my trying to convince you *seriously* that I am something other than myself." Why, then, is it a pretense, on his account? His answer is that "on the party level, my performance [is] convincing" (1958, p. 274). However, it is unclear what it could be for the performance to be convincing "on the partly level," if it does not cause anyone to believe he is a hyena.

play a part is to play the part, normally, of someone who is not playing a part, but doing something ingenuously or naturally' (1949, p. 259). For this to serve as an explanation of pretense, we would need an independent account of what it is to do something ingenuously, as opposed to disingenuously. In addition, Ryle seems content to include all acts of copying within the realm of pretense (p. 260). As I will discuss in more detail below, there are many acts of copying (e.g. copying how someone ties his tie) that are not properly considered pretense. But saying *why* they do not count as pretense is a difficult task for any account that—like Ryle's, and the one developed here—departs from Austin in allowing for non-deceptive pretense.

I propose to start afresh, considering and sharpening candidate definitions as I go. As good a place to begin as any is with the following thumbnail account offered by Gomez (2008) in an article on the evolution of pretense. Pretending, he suggests, is 'acting as if something were the case when one knows that it actually is not' (p. 586). Gomez's project is not to define pretense, but the proposal sounds reasonable enough on a first hearing—with the exception that 'knows' is clearly too strong. To pretend, it is enough that one acts as if something is the case that one *believes* not to be the case. For suppose an actor is tricked into attending an actual Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, under the false impression that it will be an improvisatory group pretense— part of an audition for an upcoming role. He might participate, and pretend that he is at an AA meeting, without knowing that he is not at one. I will modify Gomez's definition to account for this, and so that it leaves us with a criterion for what it is to *pretend that p*:

D1: To pretend that *p* is to act as if *p* when one believes that not-*p*.

A word now about "acting as if." According to one sense of 'acting as if,' acting as if *p* is the very same thing as pretending that *p*—the two are synonymous. In that sense of 'acting as if,' we could simply (and trivially) define pretending that *p* as acting as if *p*. No need to mention what one knows. This would not be an interesting or informative definition.

Nor is it, I take it, the sense of 'acting as if' that Gomez is working with. By 'acting as if *p*' Gomez likely means something along the lines of 'acting as would be appropriate if *p*' (Cf. Nichols and Stich, 2000). For then it is relevant to add something else—namely, that one also believes (or knows) that not-*p*. For not all cases of acting as would be appropriate if *p* are cases of pretending that *p*. After all, one typically acts as would be appropriate if *p* when one acts sincerely: when doing open-heart surgery, the surgeon acts as would be appropriate if she were a heart surgeon (we hope). If, however, she believes that she is not doing open-heart surgery, yet still acts as would be appropriate if she were, then she is more plausibly pretending.

Of course, pretending that *p* does not require one to act *exactly* as would be appropriate if *p* (whatever else it requires). A child can pretend that she is a lion without acting exactly as she would if, *per impossible*, she were a lion. Indeed, it is no problem for the pretense if many things she does are things a lion definitely would *not* do (e.g., saying, '*Roar,* I'm a lion!'). All that matters is that she intentionally undertakes *some* actions that would be appropriate if she were a lion. With that in mind, let us say that:

D2: To pretend that *p* is to act *in some ways* that would be appropriate if *p*, while believing that not-*p*.

There are other questions one can raise about the claim that pretending involves acting 'as would be appropriate if.' [4] But, to ease exposition, I will delay addressing them until Section 4. I want now to focus on the term 'acting', as much rides on the distinction between *intentionally* acting some way and *unintentionally* acting that way. To pretend that *p* is not merely to (unintentionally) act in ways that would be appropriate if *p*. As I limp around the house after a soccer game, I may (unintentionally) act in ways that would be appropriate if I were a peg-legged pirate, while believing that I am not one. But I am only pretending to be a peg-legged pirate if my limping is done with the intention of acting like a peg-legged pirate. Here, as throughout, 'intention' is to be read non-extensionally, so as to create intensional (or "referentially opaque") contexts.

Intentions, as I will understand them, are causally efficacious *psychological states.* And, in particular, I have in mind intentions-in-action (as opposed to "prospective intentions," which are linked to planning). These intentions can, for present purposes, simply be understood as action-guiding desires.[5]

These clarifications bring us to D3:

D3:   To pretend that *p* is to intentionally act in some ways that would be appropriate if *p*, while believing that not-*p*.

Yet, considered as a necessary condition, D3 is still too narrow, as it overlooks our ability to pretend what we believe—a feature of pretense emphasized by Nichols (2004, 2006), Leslie

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[4] These are problems relating to 1) pretenses involving props (e.g. pretending that a pencil is a car), 2) pretenses where stereotyped behaviors that the object of the pretense is not really believed to have are mimicked, and 3) pretenses where one pretends to be some kind of thing one believes does not really exist.
[5] I leave open the question of the relation between one's beliefs and such action-guiding desires. Whether or not one's beliefs must be substantively linked in some way to one's guiding desires in order for one to count as acting intentionally will not matter for present purposes.

(1994), Walton (1990), and others. Examples are not hard to find. The following is an oft-cited case from a study by Leslie (1994, p. 223-5):

Tea Party: In an experiment with two and a half year-olds, Leslie set out two cups on a table and invited children to take part in a tea party with him. He then made pouring motions with an (empty) pitcher over the two cups. Next he lifted one of the cups, turned it upside down, shook it, and set it back right side up on the table. Then he asked the children which cup was empty and which was full. His young participants had no trouble identifying the one that had been overturned as "empty" and the other as "full."

Plausibly, these children both pretended and believed *that the shaken cup is empty*. Since we can pretend what we believe, D3 is not a necessary condition for pretending that *p*. And the plot thickens when we recall that one's outward behavior while pretending that *p* can be exactly the same as that of someone who is acting sincerely (Austin focuses on this feature of pretense). For while Tom Hanks was only pretending to lose his mind in *Castaway*, someone else could have acted just like him (in the sense of undertaking the same physical motions) while under the stress of being a genuine castaway.

So then, someone can pretend that *p* while both believing that *p* and acting exactly as someone would act who is doing the same actions sincerely. What makes it the case that such a person is pretending? One idea might be that only the pretender acts with the *intention to pretend* (Van Leeuwen, 2011, p. 75). But, if taken as a proposal for what distinguishes pretense from sincerity, this just buries the problem one level down.[6] How is intending to pretend that *p* different

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[6] Van Leeuwen's (2011) project is *not* to define pretense, but rather to propose a set of mental states that are often involved in pretense. However, that argument relies upon a distinction between "full" and "semi" pretense, where acting with the intention to pretend is what distinguishes full pretense from semi-pretense (2011, p. 75). Thus, until

than intending to act in some ways that would be appropriate if *p*? If we can answer this question, we need not have appealed to an "intention to pretend" in the first place. If we cannot, then we have just arrived at primitivism about pretense, via primitivism about the intention to pretend.

Another possibility is to appeal to *imagination* in order to account for the difference between pretense and sincerity. After all, it is natural to think of imagination as the cognitive component of pretense. Perhaps the pretender is acting from an *imagining*, while the sincere agent acts from her beliefs, and this accounts for why only the former is pretending. While initially tempting, this proposal does not in fact move us forward. If acting-from-imagination (whatever imagination might be) is necessary for pretense, it is surely not sufficient. For imagination plausibly drives all kinds of actions that are not pretense. Suppose a detective talks with his partner about which suspect to interview next, his mind wandering occasionally to imagine interviewing different people. There is no pretending going on here—no pretending to be a detective, no pretending to interview someone. Yet his imagining may well be action-guiding. It may influence his choice of which person to interview next. And, by imagining the suspect answering his questions, he may prime himself for the kinds of questions to ask.

So the mere fact that an action is guided by an imagining does not by itself transform the action into pretense. This is true if, like many, one conceives of the imagination that guides pretense as being "belief-like" in nature. For such views typically hold that the same belief-like attitude is involved in ordinary hypothetical reasoning (S. Nichols & Stich, 2000; Weinberg & Meskin, 2006) which, when it guides action, need not involve pretense. And it is true if one views pretense-guiding imagination as involving sensory imagery (Kind, 2001; Van Leeuwen, 2011), since sensory imagery guides many forms of non-pretend action as well. For instance, it is used in

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the intention to pretend is properly understood, the needed distinction between full and semi pretense is not well grounded.

spatial reasoning (Barsalou, 1999; Kosslyn, Thompson, & Ganis, 2006), the development of new technologies (Arp, 2008), and both episodic memory and ordinary action planning (Schacter, Addis, & Buckner, 2007). In addition, both Funkhouser & Spaulding (2009) and Kind (2011) have plausibly argued that pretense does not—even as a necessary condition—require acting from an imaginative analog to desire.

One might press on, insisting that the imagining has to be action guiding *in the right way* for the action to count as pretense. Perhaps, but I am not optimistic about finding the right way. Put it this way: by the time we find the "right way," I think we will no longer need to appeal to imagination as part of our criterion itself. That will be my argument. For now I want to press on in a different direction.

3. *The importance of disbelief*

We can arrive at the difference between pretense and sincerity, I think, if we simply work a bit harder with belief. The following principle seems to capture something crucial:

Not All Believed (NAB): Not all of the propositions pretended as part of a particular pretense are believed.

Yes, you can pretend what you believe, but you cannot engage in a pretense where you believe *everything* you are pretending. Whenever someone pretends, there is *some* proposition that is being pretended that is not also believed. Consider the absurdity of cases that would suggest otherwise:

Hand: Waving my hand in the air I say: 'Look, I am pretending that I have a hand!' You say, 'Pretending that you have a hand and *what else*?' 'Nothing else,' I say, 'just pretending that I have a hand.'

Standing: Standing before you I say, 'Look, I'm pretending that I am a person standing up!' You say, 'A person that is standing up who is…?' 'No,' I say, 'just a person who is standing up. A person with arms and legs and so on.'

Surely, in both cases, I speak falsely—and necessarily so. I am not pretending what I say I am. I *cannot* be pretending these things. At least, I cannot pretend these things without *adding* to each pretense something that I do not already believe. Waving my hand in the air, I can pretend that I have a hand *that is on fire*. This is, *ipso facto,* to pretend that I have a hand. But, I cannot *merely* pretend that I have a hand—not so long as I believe myself to have one. And, standing before you, I can pretend that I am a soldier standing at attention, and thereby pretend to be a person standing up. But I cannot *merely* pretend that I am a person standing up (provided, again, that I believe myself to be standing). Pushing the point to its logical limit: one cannot pretend the world is exactly the way one believes it to be. That, I submit, just doesn't make sense. So, it is one thing to say that you can pretend what you believe, quite another to propose the absurd—that you can pretend a set of propositions *all of which* you believe.

One might respond that, while there is something odd about the idea that one could pretend a set of propositions all of which one believes, it is nevertheless *possible* to do so. Such pretenses (I've heard it said) are merely *practically* absurd, as the whole point of pretense is to pretend something is true that is in fact false. While this is the practical "point" of pretense, one might insist that the metaphysics of pretense place no barrier on exclusively pretending what you believe.

In response, there are plenty of "pointless" pretenses that are easy enough to accomplish and that don't give rise to anything like the same feeling of absurdity, or the sense that the person trying to take part in them doesn't understand what it is to pretend. I can pretend, while sitting here at my computer, that I cannot find the G key. I hunt and I hunt…where could it be? This is a perfectly pointless thing for me to do; but it is not in any sense absurd or seemingly impossible. In general, using things for something other than their ordinary purpose (e.g. a knife as a screwdriver) does not give rise to any sense of absurdity. So trying to account for the absurdity of *Hand* and *Standing* simply by calling them pointless cannot be the whole story. Note also that I have not claimed that one cannot *imagine* a set of propositions all of which one believes—only that one cannot *pretend* such a set of propositions. Pretending and imagining are not the same thing. To note one contrast: in pretense, one's outward behavior must be substantively related to what is pretended; this is not so for imagination.

In addition, those who reject NAB face the question of why, if one really can pretend a set of propositions all of which one believes, this rarely (if ever) seems to occur "in the wild." That is, all sides will agree that, statistically speaking, the vast majority of actual pretenses involve the pretender pretending something she does not believe. NAB can be taken as a hypothesis for explaining this uniformity. Almost all actual pretenses involve someone pretending at least one proposition she does not believe, because that is part of what makes her actions *count* as pretense. In denying NAB, one is forced either to declare the uniformity a coincidence, or to offer a plausible explanation for why a merely "pragmatic" feature of pretense accompanies it in almost all (or all) cases.

Finally, a principle derived from NAB will constitute an important part of the final definition of pretense to be offered. Thus, a further reason for accepting NAB is that, in the absence of a plausible competing account, it provides grounding for the distinction between

pretense and sincerity. So, even if one lacks a strong intuition in favor of NAB, there are good reasons to accept it as a working hypothesis.

Supposing we stand by NAB, how should we modify D3 in light of it? It will help to introduce the notion of a *Pretense Episode*, which incorporates NAB:

Pretense Episode$_1$ (PE$_1$)*:* an agent takes part in a pretense episode when (and only when) she intentionally acts in ways that would be appropriate if q, while not believing that q.

We can then (re)define what it is to pretend that p as follows:

D4: To pretend that p is to intentionally act in ways that would be appropriate if p, in the furtherance of a Pretense Episode$_1$.

By ensuring that pretending that p only takes place in the context of a Pretense Episode, we allow that a person can pretend that p while believing that p, without suggesting (against NAB) that a person can pretend a set of propositions all of which she believes. What is it for something to be done "in the furtherance of" a pretense episode? To understand whether a case of intentionally acting as would be appropriate if p furthers a particular pretense episode, we need to know the purpose of the Pretense-Episode-initiating act. Is it to deceive someone? Is it to initiate game between parent and child? Is it to get a role in a film? Once we know the purpose of the Pretense-Episode-initiating act, we can then determine whether a case of intentionally acting as would be appropriate if p was done in the furtherance of that purpose. So long as the purpose is not characterized as a purpose *to pretend*, there is no threat of circularity. And note: the notion of

14

a "game" invoked here does not "smuggle in" pretense. Many games (checkers, kickball) involve no pretending at all. Only game-playing that fulfills a further criterion for pretense will constitute "playing make-believe."

Nevertheless, D4 may still be too liberal. For there are many situations where, out of an abundance of caution, we intentionally act in ways that would be appropriate if q while not believing that q, yet without initiating a Pretense Episode. These are cases where we think q may be the case (and aim to be prepared if it is), but where this "suspicion that q" does not yet rise to the level of belief. For instance:

Parking meter: Bill is not sure whether the parking meter must be paid on Sundays. To be on the safe side, he feeds it some quarters.

Bill intentionally acts as would be appropriate if the meter must be paid, while not believing that it must be paid. No pretense here. But now suppose that Bill is quite sure that meters needn't be paid on Sundays and nevertheless intentionally acts as if it must be paid, feeding it some quarters. Why would he do such a thing? Hypotheses according to which he is *pretending* immediately suggest themselves. Perhaps he is acting in a film. Or maybe he is trying to deceive someone else into thinking the meters must be fed. Or maybe he wishes to join his son in a game of make-believe that they are arriving for work together on a Monday morning.

This suggests that pretense requires not just lack of belief in some relevant q, but rather *dis*belief in q. In short, it suggests:

One Disbelieved (OD): In any pretense, at least one proposition will be pretended that is disbelieved.

As *Parking Meter* shows, it is not enough that one not believe some proposition that is pretended. One must go past agnosticism to actually disbelieve some proposition one is pretending, to count as pretending at all.[7] Incorporating OD into our criterion, we get:

PE^2 and D4*:

Pretense Episode₂ (PE₂)*:* an agent takes part in a pretense episode when (and only when) she intentionally acts in ways that would be appropriate if q, while believing that not-q.

D4*: To pretend that p is to intentionally act in ways that would be appropriate if p in the furtherance of a Pretense Episode₂.

D4* captures what of substance changes as Bill's meter paying turns from prudence to pretense. However, one might think that OD (and D4*) is now too strong, when considering the following kind of case:

Coin Flip: Bill and Jim decide that the winner of a coin flip will take the big prize. Bill calls heads. The coin is flipped and, before he sees the outcome, Bill begins to jump up and down, pretending that he has won.

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[7] For simplicity, I am treating belief as binary—an all-or-nothing affair. Opting for the more nuanced language of degrees of belief, we can say that in any pretense at least one proposition must be pretended that one is *quite certain* is not true. Being "quite certain" involves having a very high degree of belief (though it lacks foundationalist aspirations). So, I am quite certain that I am working at a computer, that I have two hands, that Obama is the current President of the United States, that cats are animals—and not quite certain that it will be sunny tomorrow, or that the Democrats will win the next election.

Here Bill neither believes nor disbelieves that he has won. And his failure to believe that he has won may seem sufficient for him to count as pretending that he has won.

However, looking more closely, there clearly *is* a proposition that is pretended and disbelieved. Bill is not *merely* pretending that he won, but rather that he *has just found out* that he won (presumably he would tell us so if we asked him, 'Did you just find out?!' as part of the pretense). Saying that Bill is *simply* pretending that he won (full stop), fails to capture what he is up to. For that coarse-grained description ('pretending that he won') would equally well apply to someone who is behaving entirely differently. For example, it would be true of someone who is pretending that he won the lottery *five years ago,* and is now being investigated for tax evasion. This suggests that Bill does indeed act on the more specific intention to act as would be appropriate if he *just found out* he won. And of course, Bill believes that he has *not* just found out that he won. That is why we say he is pretending. So, on closer examination, D4* is not eluded by *Coin Flip.*

What these reflections suggest is that small differences in the intentions (and related desires) we ascribe can make all the difference in our determinations concerning whether someone is pretending or not. We see this also when considering cases of *practicing* or *preparing for* an event of kind *x*. For instance:

Rock Band: The rock band is at rehearsal, running through some songs they plan to play at their next show.

It may seem that the band members intend to act in ways that would be appropriate if they were at their next show, while believing they are not at the show—and yet without *pretending* to do anything. If so, D4* is again in trouble.

Again we must look closely at intentions. During a normal rehearsal the band stops when they hit a snag, repeating the section several times before going on. While this is no way to act at the show, their intentions are not subverted as they repeat the difficult section over and over. The whole point of the rehearsal is to iron out the wrinkles. It may be that the rehearsal goes quite well, and the band *in fact* engages in behavior that would be appropriate at the show. But this would not mean that their intention was to act as would be appropriate at the show (recall that intentions are to be read non-extensionally). More likely their intention is simply to get better at playing the songs. Only if the practice ends without improvement is their intention not satisfied.

Of course, *some* practices may amount to pretenses. Suppose the band no longer faces each other during practice, but instead sets up in crowd-facing "gig formation," in order to better simulate performance conditions. Further, they agree that they will push through their snags without stopping, just as they will if they hit any at the show. Go far enough in this direction and it becomes plausible to say that they are pretending they are at the show—and that this pretense helps their preparation. This is because their motivating intention is specifically to act as would be appropriate at the show, while they believe they are not at the show.[8]

Admittedly, the distinction here is subtle. But that should not be surprising, since the distinction between practicing and pretending is itself subtle, and there is overlap between the two. In some cases it may be hard to judge whether something is pretense or (mere) practice. This is not a problem for D4*, so long as that difficulty traces to a difficulty in determining the exact

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[8] A similar sort of case is where, in order to elicit better performance on a task, we try to act as absolute masters at the task would, while knowing our actual abilities fall short of that standard. For instance, it might *seem* that the golfer teeing up intends to act as would be appropriate if he were shooting a hole in one, while believing he is not shooting a hole in one, or that the sprinter may intend to act as would be appropriate if she were breaking the world record, while believing she is not breaking the world record. Yet this oversells their intentions. After all, the golfer is thrilled at simply getting onto the green in one swing, and the runner celebrates when she wins the race, even if she falls far short of the world record. So, it is implausible to think that either really acted upon (thwarted) intentions that were counterpoised to their beliefs in the way that generates pretense. That said, someone might *imagine* shooting a hole in one, or imagine setting the world record, as a means to improving performance—but this is different than *intending* to do those things.

beliefs or intentions of an agent. For then the difficulty lies not in the criterion, but in the epistemology of determining whether it is fulfilled.

Similar points hold for cases of copying and imitating that fall short of pretense. But, before addressing those head-on, we need to sharpen D4* in response to a very different sort of worry.

4. *Pretending that p without acting as would be appropriate if p*

In an insightful paper concerning young children's ability to recognize pretense in others, Friedman & Leslie (2007) point out that there are many cases of pretending that *p* that do not, strictly speaking, involve one's acting in ways that would be appropriate if *p*. These are principally cases where the main object of the pretense—the thing *of which* something is pretended—is something other than oneself (Friedman and Leslie call these 'object substitution' pretenses). For instance, a child may pretend that a pencil is a rocket, moving it through the air and making sound-effect noises ('Wooooshh!'). But the child herself is not really acting as would be appropriate if the pencil were a rocket: if the pencil were a rocket, the child would not be holding it up in the air; nor would she be making 'Woooosh!' noises. The rocket would be making those itself. The child's own behavior is not of the sort that would be at all appropriate if the pretense premise were true.

It seems that D4* needs to be broadened to encompass pretenses that we initiate, but where we ourselves do not figure as characters in the pretense narrative. To that end, first observe that instances of 'pretending that *p*' can be rewritten as instances of 'pretending that *x is y,*' so long as we allow that *x* and *y* can replace terms that refer to a wide variety of things, including objects, properties, and actions. For example, in the formulation 'Billy pretends that the pencil is a rocket' (and where *p* = 'the pencil is a rocket), 'x' can stand in for 'the pencil' and 'y' for 'a rocket'. In

the formulation 'I pretend that I am a dolphin', 'x' stands in for 'I' and 'y' replaces 'a dolphin'.

For 'Jill pretends that she is at a tea party', 'x' replaces 'Jill' and '*y*' can stand in for 'at a tea

party'. And so on. We have here a *transformation rule* for turning instances of 'pretends that *p*'

into instances of 'pretends that *x* is *y*.'

Given this way of transforming *p*, we can then say (at a first pass) that the relevant

behavior involved in pretending that *p* involves making *x y-like*. Pretense behavior is likewise

driven (partly) by an intention to make some *x* y-like (or, where *y* is a kind of situation or an

action, like things in that kind of situation, or undergoing that kind of action). In rewriting the

intention in this way, we also do away with the potentially problematic 'as would be appropriate

if.' What it is for an act to be of a kind that would be "appropriate" if something else were

happening is, I think, much less clear than what it is for two things to resemble each other.

So, in the case of pretending that the pencil is a rocket, the child tries to make the pencil

rocket-like; in the case of my pretending to be a dolphin, I try to make myself dolphin-like; in your

pretending to be at a tea party, you try to make yourself at-a-tea-party-like. Usually the ways that

x is made *y*-like will be by mirroring some of *y*'s *salient* properties. Pretenses tend to focus on

stereotypes or characteristic traits. But I do not see that as a necessary feature of pretense.

Someone might intentionally duplicate in *x* relatively obscure properties of a *y*. So long as it is a *y*

that the agent has in mind as the thing to which she is making *x* similar, this seems to me sufficient

to count as pretending that *x* is *y*.

Now it is true that resemblances are cheap, everything resembling everything else in some

way or other. The reason this poses no problem is that what matters is *not* simply that x is made y-

like, but that it is *intentionally* made y-like. This ensures that only a very small subset of

resemblances—the ones the agent intentionally bestows in x—are relevant to the pretense. In

addition, it seems to me that an agent does not need to *successfully* make x y-like, in order to count

20

as pretending that x is y. She simply needs to act with the intention of making x y-like. So, if Olivia mistakenly thinks that penguins can fly (while being otherwise knowledgeable about penguins), she may pretend that she is a penguin by running with arms out at her sides—as though soaring above icebergs. She is pretending that she is a penguin because she acts with the intention of making herself penguin-like. (Of course, if she is sufficiently mistaken about penguins, then the question will be raised as to whether she has the concept *penguin*. If she does not, then she will not be able to act on a desire to make herself penguin-like, since she will not be able to have such a desire).

These points suggest the following adjustments to PE$_2$ and D4*:

Pretense Episode$_3$: A Pretense Episode$_3$ occurs when (and only when) one acts with the intention of making some *x* *y*-like, while believing that *x* is not *y*.

D5: To pretend that *p* is to act with the intention of making some *w* *z-like* (in accordance with our transformation rule, above) in the furtherance of a Pretense Episode$_3$.
(Note that *w* and *z* may or may not have the same values as the *x* and *y* in the definition of Pretense Episode$_3$).

D5 allows us to capture cases of object substitution within our general definition of pretense. Pretending that the pencil is a rocket does not always involve making oneself act as would be appropriate if the pencil were a rocket, but it *does* involve intentionally making the pencil rocket-like. For instance, rockets make a more or less vertical trajectory through the air (not moving side to side, or running along the ground). To the extent that the child intentionally makes

the pencil rocket-like by moving it on a vertical trajectory through the air, while believing it is not a rocket, she is pretending that the pencil is a rocket.

As for the *Wooosh!* sound effects, these too can be understood as instances of making the pencil rocket-like. For just as a rocket's movements are accompanied by *Wooosh!* sounds, so too are the pencil's movements accompanied by such sounds in the pretense. True, the pencil would be made *more* rocket-like if it were made to emit the *Wooosh!* sounds itself. However, the point of pretense is to go some distance toward making some *x y*-like—not a thing of the same *kind* as *y*— and this is accomplished merely by making sounds accompany the pencil's movements of the sort that accompany those of a rocket. Quite generally, to make *x y-like* in the relevant sense, one need not fiddle with the intrinsic properties of the *x*. Part of making *x* saliently *y*-like (when you yourself are not *x*) can involve making your reactions to *x* of the kind you would have toward *y*.

This helps us see how mimicking certain "stereotyped" traits can count as pretense, even when we do not believe that the things mimicked have those exact traits. Cats do not really make the precise sound '*meow,*' nor do dogs really say 'ruff, ruff.' We know this. But, nevertheless, in making these sounds we are still making ourselves saliently cat or dog-*like*. For these sounds are relevantly *like* the sounds that cats and dogs make—however poor our imitations may be. And it is a good thing that pretense sets the bar for similitude so low. It means we do not need to be Jim Carey to pretend to be a cat. Moreover, recall how low the bar really is: what matters is not that you in fact make yourself cat-like, but that you act with the intention of making yourself cat-like. This can be done while giving yourself no trait that is in fact shared by cats.

But what about cases where one pretends to be a character or creature from a fiction—say, a member of the "undead," from a zombie movie (this is Doggett & Egan's (2007, p. 6) example). Presumably one lacks any beliefs about the traits of the undead (believing there to be no such things). How can one then act to make oneself *like* the undead? In this kind of case, it is natural to

22

suppose that we act to make ourselves like the kind of character or creature depicted in thus and such fictions. We have beliefs about how the undead are depicted (e.g., as stiff, as having a faraway look in their eyes). In pretending to be the undead, we try to make ourselves like the kinds of things depicted in such films. Our ability to do this is no more complex or puzzling than our ability to remember what has happened in a film or novel. Remembering the traits of the people and creatures therein depicted, we are able to give ourselves some of those traits.

5. *Distinguishing pretense from mere copying*

These responses aside, D5 may nevertheless seem to have become too broad when we consider the following kind of case:

Photocopy: Bob makes a photocopy of page *w,* resulting in page *z*, which is a copy of *w*.

Shouldn't D5 count this as pretense? For here Bob intentionally makes *z w-like*, while believing that *z* is not *w*. But, obviously, mere photocopying is not pretense.

The problem here rests on an ambiguity in how we can interpret what it is to 'intend to make x y-like.' The variable *y* can either be taken to refer to a *kind* of thing (a kind of flyer, say) or to a particular token of that kind (e.g., the particular instance of the flyer put in the copier). Call these the "*token* intention*"* and "*type* intention," respectively. They are clearly different intentions, even if they can at times give rise to the same behavior. For instance, only someone with the token intention will be disposed to try to pass the copy off as the particular token it was copied from. By contrast, someone with the type intention will not go beyond trying to make the copy relevantly like the *kind* of thing being copied. Assuming there are properties of the token flyer that are not relevant to its being the type of thing it is (e.g. it is printed on Aunt Sally's

favorite piece of paper), someone with the type intention will not be disposed to make x like the token y in those respects. If Bob is just doing some normal photocopying, it is safe to assume he has the type intention; his specific intention is to make the copies like the same *kind* of thing he is copying. Expecting success, he believes he will indeed make them into the same kind of thing (i.e., flyers of a certain kind) and so is not pretending.

What if he had the token intention? To have the token intention, he would have to be focused on making the copy like the original in some way that goes beyond making it one more token of the same kind of thing. This will really only occur when the agent is focused on making *x* like some thing of which there can only be one instance. So, suppose the original flyer is printed on Aunt Sally's favorite piece of paper. If Bob attempts to make the copy like Aunt Sally's favorite piece of paper (e.g. he gives the copy to her, saying 'here it is again, your favorite piece of paper…'), then we can credit him with the token intention. We can also credit him with an act of pretense; for he does not believe that he has made the copy into Aunt Sally's favorite piece of paper.

To be clear, a person can pretend either while having a type or a token intention, depending on the details of the case. The point of noting the distinction is that it allows us to see how certain apparent counterexamples—specifically, those involving "mere" copying—can be accommodated by the present account.

To that end, we can consider another similar case:

Elvis for Halloween: Oscar dresses up as Elvis Presley for Halloween, affecting the singer's mannerisms and fashion style.

Oscar is pretending to be Elvis. He intentionally makes himself like the token person Elvis

Presley. And, of course, he believes he will not actually become Elvis in the process. That is why

he counts as pretending. But now contrast James:

Elvis Forever: James greatly admires and is indeed obsessed with Elvis. His daily appearance,

actions, and personality are deeply informed by his appreciation of The King.

James, I think, is not pretending to be Elvis. But why not? One might think that, like Oscar, he

intentionally makes himself like the token person Elvis Presley, while believing he is not (and will

not become) Elvis. But I think that, on reflection, the proper intention to ascribe James is the type

intention—he intends to make himself like an Elvis-type-person, and believes he may have some

success. That is, he thinks he may become that type of person, and so is not pretending. Unlike

Oscar, he does not do things he would do if he had the token intention; he does not offer his

autograph or say that Graceland is his home. His behavior (and behavioral dispositions) fall well

short of anything that could be construed as intending to make himself like that *token* person; he

aims to adopt a certain personality *type*, and will be pleased if he only goes that far.[9]

This is not to say that one *cannot* pretend to be a particular type of person (or that one

cannot pretend to be some token person for a very long time). The point is just that our

assessments of pretense must be sensitive to whether the person's intention concerns a token or a

type. James does not count as pretending to be an "Elvis-type of person" just because he thinks he

may well have success at becoming that type of person, and being a person of that type is all that

he is aiming at. Yet someone else acting on the intention to make himself like an Elvis-type of

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[9] I don't know that I can provide skintight account of what qualifies one as an Elvis-type person (or any *type* of particular individual). But, in any event, the matter must rest in the eye of the agent. The imitator or emulator will have in mind certain features of a person—normally, I would guess, longstanding personality traits and characteristic behaviors driven by such—the possession of which would make one into that *type* of person.

person could easily pretend to be an Elvis-type person, so long as he remained quite certain he would not in the process become an Elvis-type person.

   In light of the token/type distinction, we can sharpen our definition of a pretense episode as follows (keeping in mind that where the intention is interpreted in the type sense, so must be the relevant disbelief; and, where the intention is taken the token sense, so must be the disbelief):

Pretense Episode$_4$: A Pretense Episode occurs when (and only when) one acts with the intention of making some x y-like (where y refers either to a token or type), while believing that x is not, and will not thereby be made into, y (or a y).

This gives us D6:

D6: To pretend that p is to act with the intention of making some w z-like, in the furtherance of a Pretense Episode$_4$.

   There is one further distinction to keep in mind when interpreting D6. We must distinguish between intending to copy, in x, some *particular feature* of y, versus intending to copy, in x, y itself (i.e., y considered "as such"). Again examples will help.

Paper airplane: Joey and Robbie have made paper airplanes of different types—Joey's is a glider, Robbie's is traditional straight-shooter. But Joey wants his glider to have raised wing flaps like Robbie's, so he copies Robbie's straight-shooter in that respect.

This example might seem to find D6 too broad. Joey is not pretending that his plane *x,* is a straight-shooter. But isn't he intentionally making some *x* (his plane) *y*-like (where *y* is a straight-shooter-type plane), while believing that *x* is not, and will not in the process become, a *y*?

The answer is that we have interpreted Joey's intention too coarsely. His intention is narrowly focused on copying a *certain aspect* of Robbie's plane—and, in that regard, he expects success. Joey intends to make his plane, *x*, like a plane with raised wing flaps. And he believes that he will, in the process, make his plane into a plane of that kind—namely, one with raised wing flaps. It is no failure of his purposes when he does not make his plane like Robbie's straight-shooter in any other respect; and his intention *is* unsatisfied when he makes it like a straight-shooter in all respects but that one.

Where pretense may emerge is if Robbie's intention is focused on making his paper plane like some other kind of plane he is sure he cannot make—if, for instance, he intends to make it like a Boeing 747.

6. *Why only some representational arts are pretenses*

But that raises an interesting question: is making a plastic model of a Boeing 747 from a toy kit a case of pretense? And what about painting and sculpture, where an artwork is made to resemble some other kind of thing? Is the sculptor who shapes a lion out of clay pretending that the lump of clay is a lion? It seems hard to deny that the clay is intentionally being made lion-like, while it is believed that it will not become a lion. The same point applies to the model 747.

One option is simply to include such model-making and artistic works within the realm of pretense. This would expand somewhat the ordinary notion of pretense, though there is of course a long tradition of linking the arts to pretense (see, e.g., Walton (1990), and perhaps Plato and Aristotle, depending on one's understanding of *mimesis*). However, I think the ordinary notion of

pretense can (and should) still be preserved, by adding a last amendment to our definition.

Consider the following contrasts:

(1) Elena carefully makes a model Boeing 747. Let us assume this involved no pretense. Having completed the model, she lifts it off the table and moves it through the air, as a plane would move, making sound effects. Suddenly she *is* pretending.

(2) Tillman makes a caricature puppet of Bill Clinton. He is not pretending while making the puppet (we assume). But, as soon as he animates the puppet, making it behave in Clintonesque ways, he *is* pretending.

(3) Recall Oscar, who dressed up as Elvis for Halloween. He was making himself Elvis-like as he put on a white suit in preparation for the evening. But he was perhaps not *yet* pretending that he was Elvis (similar points pertain to actors preparing for a performance). The pretense began, in earnest, when he started *acting like* Elvis.

What these cases suggest is that pretending does not simply involve acting with the intention of making some *x y*-like, but rather with the more specific intention of making some *x currently act or function* in *y-like* ways.[10] In the process of building a model of a 747, one is not acting on the intention to, at that moment, make the model do things that a 747 does. But, in guiding it through the air, one is acting on such an intention. And as one stiches and glues together the puppet of Clinton, one is not acting on the intention to, at that moment, make the puppet act like Clinton. But, in animating it, one is acting on such an intention. The same points apply to the Elvis case.

Thus I propose the following last amendment:

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[10] What about extended pretenses that last for weeks or months (e.g. an undercover detective pretending to be a drug dealer)? It does not seem plausible that, during the entire time, the detective is acting from an intention to currently make himself act like a drug dealer. Here we are dealing with loose sense of 'pretense' where we say that a particular pretense continued over an extended period just because, during that time, the agent often took part in relevant pretense actions (and where these actions involved acting from an intention to act like a drug dealer). Compare: we might say that Babe Ruth played professional baseball for twenty-two years. We don't mean that he was literally engaged in a game of baseball for twenty-two years, but that, over the course of twenty-two years, he was often playing baseball.

Pretense Episode: A Pretense Episode occurs when (and only when) one acts with the intention of making some x function (or act), at that moment, in y-like ways (where y refers either to a token or type), while believing that x is not, and will not thereby be made into, y (or a y).

This gives us D7 (final offer!):

D7: To pretend that p is to act with the intention of making some w function, at that moment, in z-like ways, in the furtherance of a Pretense Episode.

With this last condition we add back in something lost when we rejected the idea that pretense involves '*acting* as would be appropriate if….' For that formulation is explicit that it is a similarity between one's present *actions* and those of some other thing that matters, and not just any similarities whatsoever. However, that version did not allow for pretenses with props, where one guides but does not figure in the pretense narrative. Such pretenses are captured by the new criterion.

Interestingly, we now are able to see why only *some* of the representational arts (e.g., acting and puppetry) intuitively get counted as pretense, despite their close similarities to other arts. Prior to adding the last condition, the close connection between puppetry and portraiture is obvious: both involve purposefully making some x like some kind of thing y that one believes it will not become. However, only (what we may call) the "pretense arts" involve acting so as to make some x *currently act or function like* some such y.[11] And it is this difference that links the

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[11] One might object that, in making a realistic portrait of the Queen, a painter is intentionally making an object that acts or functions like the Queen in the weak sense that the painting (like the queen) causes thoughts about the Queen, upon being perceived. But as the painter works on the portrait she does not act with the intention of making

actor and puppeteer—but not the painter and the filmmaker—to the child playing make-believe, and the crook in disguise.

7. *Faking it until we make it*

Needless to say, grounding the distinction between *non-pretend* copying (or imitation) and pretense copying and imitation is a delicate matter. I do not know of any other attempt to capture it. The key to the distinction, I have argued, is that pretense copying comes with an expectation that one will *not* succeed in making oneself into the kind of thing being copied.

In this section I want to offer an indirect form of support for this account of the difference. It centers of the roles of copying, imitation, and pretense in learning and development. The fundamental difference between pretend copying and non-pretend copying, I have suggested, is that the former involves a cognitive focus on making oneself like a kind of thing one believes one will not in fact become in the process of the actions undertaken; the latter involves a focus on making oneself like a kind of thing one believes one may well become. In some cases, we see a behavior we think we can likely duplicate and set about trying to copy it; this is non-pretend copying and imitation. In other cases, we see a behavior or ability we would like to duplicate and believe we *cannot* duplicate it—not in the near future anyway. Often a good teacher will tell you to break that behavior into manageable pieces that you can successfully copy, and to build your way up. The novice guitarist should not try to play Jimi Hendrix's version of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' all at once—start instead by learning some basic chords.

Yet, sometimes, the measured approach is the wrong tool for the job; sometimes it helps to focus on imitating the unachievable itself—so long as one does not expect immediate success. For

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the painting, *at that instant,* act or function like the Queen. Rather, she acts with the intention of contributing to a process that has *as its end product* something that (in this questionable sense) acts like the queen. And once the portrait is completed and hung on the wall, the painter is no longer involved in any actions of the kind that would potentially qualify her as pretending.

when there are no serious expectations for success, a rich and expanded set of actions can be imitated (and thereby *practiced*) without the anxiety that can arise out of a fear of failure. Indeed, the "practicing" can become a kind of game. By contrast, if in trying to learn the ways of adults children only undertook action-types that they thought could they could accurately duplicate, their range of opportunities for learning would be greatly narrowed.

For instance, during a tea party pretense, a child may imitate the manner and affectations of adults at a tea party. Here the child's focusing on *being adult-like* enables a far richer set of behaviors to emerge than would be possible if the child were merely to focus on being a kind of thing (e.g. a dish-setting person) that she thinks she can presently be or become. The pretense allows her to inhabit the complex role of being an adult without any expectation—on the part of herself or her role-models—that she will in fact "successfully" become the kind of thing imitated. The pretense is a success so long as it is fun.

My suggestion is that our ability to intentionally aim at what is, by our own lights, unattainable opens up wide behavioral possibilities for things like deception and theater—but also, crucially, for learning. To be clear, I am not proposing that it is a *necessary* feature of pretense that we aim at what seems unattainable. I might pretend to give a talk while believing I really will give one tomorrow. The key point is that pretense is a context where aiming at the obviously unattainable is a rational thing to do. Pretense "games" make elaborate, half-baked forms of imitation socially available in ways that mere copying does not. Thus, the distinction I have drawn between pretense copying and non-pretense copying harmonizes well with, and maybe gives a little insight into, the particularly important role of pretense in learning and child development.

8. *Next steps*

I have defended an account of what it is to pretend. Ignoring the fine print, pretending occurs when someone intentionally acts to make something function or act, at that moment, *like* some other kind of thing, without intending to make it into a thing of that same kind—indeed, while believing it is not, and will not become, a thing of that kind. The account is broad enough to encompass the three kinds of pretense with which we began (make-believe, deceptive, and theatrical), while sufficiently nuanced to allow for a distinction between pretense and mere copying, and between the pretense arts and other representational arts. Further, it sheds explanatory light on the psychology of pretense, as it does not appeal to an "intention to pretend" as part of the definition (nor to a *sui generis* mental state of imagination).

In addition, the present account helps clarify some other important questions with respect to the psychology of pretense. First, the question of what kind of mental states are needed to *guide* one's pretense—to which the answer "imaginings" is often given—becomes the question: what kind of mental states does one rely upon in intentionally making something function or act like some kind of thing one believes it not to be? It could be that the answer here is indeed "imaginings"—but it is also a possibility that belief and desire alone are sufficient (and not just for some pretenses, but for all (see, e.g., Langland-Hassan, 2012)). Second, the question of how we recognize pretense in others becomes the question of how we detect instances of another person intentionally making something function or act like some kind of thing they believe it not to be. These remain central questions in philosophical and psychological studies of pretense (Carruthers, 2006; Friedman, Neary, Burnstein, & Leslie, 2010; Lillard, 1994; S. Nichols &

Stich, 2000; Sobel, 2009).   My hope is that this discussion may suggest some new possibilities

for answering them.[12]

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