UNCONSCIOUS BELIEF, UNCONSCIOUS IMAGINATION

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Abstract: Unconscious mental states are frequently brought up to explain behaviors that cannot be sufficiently explained merely by conscious mental states. Some theorists have posited unconscious imagination as a distinctive cognitive state, which is purported to explain various phenomena like pretense behaviors and implicit bias. I argue that the arguments for unconscious imagination fail. To posit a distinctive cognitive state, one must establish that it fulfills a distinct functional role. In the case of unconscious imagination, it would have to be similar enough to conscious imagination, while also being different enough from other unconscious states like unconscious beliefs and emotions. First, I argue that the interaction between the important features of unconscious imagination, which are lack of voluntariness and norm of truth, leads to functional outputs not sufficiently similar to conscious imagination. Second, I argue that unconsciously quarantining (keeping track of what is real or imaginary) unconscious imagination from unconscious belief is psychologically implausible. In other words, unconscious imagination cannot retain a distinctive functional role from other unconscious states. Thus, the case for unconscious imagination remains unmotivated.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science all appeal to unconscious mental states (Bargh & Morsella, 2008; Berger, 2014; Goldstein & Young, 2021). It has been used to explain several different phenomena like blindsight, subliminal priming, decision-making, tacit learning, implicit bias, and Freudian drives, processes that demand explanation beyond conscious mental states. For instance, in blindsight—a putative case of unconscious vision—patients with lesions in the specific areas of their primary visual cortex (V1) still have residual capacity for accurate visual detection without reported awareness (Weiskrantz, 1996). Cases like these have prompted debates about the nature of unconscious mental processes and, by extension, our cognitive architecture as a whole. Consequently, the explanatory paradigms have focused on psychological processes involving belief (Levy, 2014b; Mandelbaum, 2015), perception (Phillips & Block, 2016), emotion (Kihlstrom et al., 2000; Zajonc, 1980), and reasoning (Evans & Stanovich, 2013; Kahneman, 2011). More recently, unconscious processes involving imagination have gained traction among several theorists. If there is unconscious belief, unconscious perception, and unconscious emotion, why cannot there also be unconscious imagination? Several theorists have argued that there can—extending an unconscious interpretation to imagination seems like the next logical step in populating our theories of cognition.
Thus, while some have explicitly posited unconscious imagination to explain mental imagery, pretense, and implicit bias (Brogaard & Gatzia, 2017; Church, 2008; Sullivan-Bissett, 2019, 2023), others have been sympathetic to the idea of unconscious imagination in our explanatory repertoire (Goldman, 2006; Nanay, 2013, 2021; Spaulding, 2016; Walton, 1990; Van Leeuwen, 2014).¹

In this chapter, I argue against the psychological plausibility of unconscious imagination on two grounds. First, if unconscious imagination exists, it must be sufficiently similar to conscious imagination; it should be similar in its functional role in cognition, affect, and action generation. Second, if unconscious imagination exists, it should be sufficiently dissimilar to any other unconscious mental state; it must perform a distinct function (i.e., cause affect or action or influence other mental states) from other “unconscious” mental states (unconscious beliefs, emotions, and perception). I argue that unconscious imagination is neither of these things. I argue that the lack of voluntary control (combined with the lack of norm of truth) over unconscious imagination leads to behavioral outputs that are very different from those that result from conscious imagination. I also argue that unconscious imagination cannot be quarantined from mental states in the ways it would need to be sufficiently dissimilar from other unconscious states. By neither being sufficiently similar to conscious imagination nor being sufficiently dissimilar from other unconscious mental states, the notion of unconscious imagination warrants skepticism.

The plan for the chapter is as follows. Section 2 clarifies the concept of the “unconscious” and identifies three essential features of unconscious mental states: non-phenomenality, representationality, and non-voluntariness. Section 3 introduces the salient features of “imagination”

¹ Imagination is not just any kind of mental activity, and it is not equivalent to our ordinary usage of imagining as simply “thinking.” Here I adopt a fairly standard picture of imagination, which considers imagination to be a distinctive cognitive attitude that nonetheless shares with belief similar propositional content, inferential patterns, and functional connection to affect and action (Nichols, 2006; Liao & Gendler, 2020). This is contrary to theories that would not neatly fit into this picture of imagination like that of Schellenberg (2013) and Langland-Hassan (2012).
and gives a brief account of the contemporary defenses of unconscious imagination. Section 4 lays out the main argument of the chapter. The first subsection argues that unconscious imagination is not sufficiently similar to conscious imagination. The second subsection argues that unconscious imagination is not sufficiently dissimilar to other unconscious mental states. Finally, by addressing some worries about my theoretical criteria for unconscious mental states, I conclude that extant accounts of unconscious imagination remain unmotivated. This analysis has important implications for the nature of unconscious mental states, our understanding of spontaneous thought, and the boundary of imagination. It also has implications for the rational power of imagination.
CHAPTER II

UNCONSCIOUS MENTAL STATES

The conscious/unconscious distinction is used to distinguish many different notions like sentience, wakefulness, and self-awareness, but the distinction that we are interested in concerns mental states. Unconscious mental states are mental in so far as they are representational and are distinct from non-representational physiological processes (Manson, 2000). For instance, all sorts of factors such as transitory motivational states (hunger, thirst, pain), neurobiological processes (hormones, neurotransmitters, pharmacological agents), and physical forces (gravity, air pressure) can affect our actions and behavior without conscious awareness; however, they are not taken to provide evidence for unconscious cognition.

But why appeal to unconscious cognition at all? All arguments for unconscious states are based on inference to the best explanation of observed functional outputs (of perception, behavior, emotion, and thought). The reasoning goes something like this: first, we observe a certain functional output in a subject; second, we affirm that the subject is not conscious of the mental cause of the output; third, we establish that the best explanation is that the output is caused by some unconscious mental state; finally, we infer that the unconscious mental states exist and can function as explanatory posits.

2 Scholars in cognitive science study slightly different aspect of the “unconscious” mental states (“cognitive unconscious” that works beneath the subject’s awareness) than those working in neuropsychoanalysis (the Freudian “dynamic unconscious” where the subject’s repression takes places) (Krickel, 2018). While these differences are important, we can safely set them aside for the present purposes.

3 For more elaboration on this and a recent discussion surrounding unconscious mental states, see Krickel (2023).
While this intuitive explanation of unconscious mental states is a good starting point, the conscious/unconscious distinction in the current theoretical landscape is fraught with ambiguity; and the proponents of unconscious imagination have, unfortunately, not been especially helpful in this regard. In the existing literature, unconscious mental states are usually articulated as those unavailable to introspection or occurring outside of awareness (Brogaard & Gatzia, 2017; Church 2008; Sullivan-Bissett, 2019, 2023). However, this raises more questions than it answers. Is it the case that these states are simply lacking in phenomenality (what it is like to be in that state), or are inaccessible to several other cognitive mechanisms (like reasoning), or are they unconscious because they are not available for some higher-order thought/meta-representation (awareness of being in such a state)? Pinning down the most relevant features of what we mean by “unconscious” is paramount if we want to minimize ambiguity, which is what I attempt to do here.

Non-Phenomenality. I will take the consensus view that any “unconscious” mental state needs to lack phenomenality, a sense of what it is like in a first-person experience. Without this condition of phenomenality, the border between conscious/unconscious would become too thin. If there are any good reasons to demarcate the conscious and the unconscious, it makes sense to start by saying that in conscious states we experience what it is like, and in unconscious states, we do not. However, this does not preclude unconscious mental states from ever being part of our conscious mental lives. One might very well have a conscious experience of a previously unconscious mental state through introspection, creativity, or by sheer luck of the spontaneous mind (Fox & Christoff, 2018). For our purposes, it is sufficient to maintain that for a mental state to be unconscious, one’s subjective experience of the content of that state should be “no different from the subjective experience of nothing at all” (Peters et al., 2017: 2). Moreover, it should be noted that the functional output or

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4 See Block (1995) on the seminal discussion on access and phenomenal consciousness and Carruthers & Gennaro (2020) on the discussion of Higher Order Thought theories of consciousness. Here, I avoid taking a stand on varieties of consciousness—like access, phenomenal, introspective, etc.—and surrounding debates like
the effect of an unconscious state will not necessarily lack phenomenality. If the unconscious state did not have some sort of causal relevance to some observed (or subjectively experienced) effect, there would be no need to posit the unconscious state.

**Representationality.** Furthermore, an unconscious mental state will lack phenomenality and yet be about something (or have intentional/representational content). Intentional content is the stuff that our mind thinks about. For instance, even if I lack the experience of having an unconscious desire for an ice cream, it will still be about something (namely, the ice cream). Both conscious and unconscious states can have representationality, while the latter lack phenomenality.5 Recently, Johnson (2020) has argued that a “truly implicit” mental state (e.g., truly unconscious bias) is non-representational (contra Carruthers, 2018 and Mandelbaum, 2015). This suggests that unconscious states lack both phenomenality and representationality—thus, implying that unconscious states have to be understood non-propositionally (i.e., associatively). Roughly, associationism about the mind holds that activation of one concept (e.g. salt) automatically activates a learned-associated concept (e.g. pepper) (Hume, 1738; Skinner, 1953; Smolensky, 1988; Elman et al., 1996). This thesis undermines strong representationalism about both conscious and unconscious mental states.6 Furthermore, it will also undermine any sort of predication involved in propositional attitudes like imagination. For instance, imagining that “p is q” (“The apple is green”) means having a distinct kind of conceptualizing (that the apple is green) and relating to the proposition (that one is imagining, but not believing, that the apple is green). Without representationalism, it is unclear how imagination can be properly theorized. Thus, pure associationism would be a non-starter for the issue of unconscious imagination. For the sake of the dialectic, here I will assume that unconscious states do

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6 For more discussion, see Mandelbaum (2022).
have representational content as this gives the proponent of unconscious imagination the most plausible starting point (if it does).

Non-voluntariness. One of the most important effects of unconscious states is that they lead to non-voluntary actions. Their lack of phenomenality leads to a lack of control of the effects of the unconscious states; however, the opposite is not true—involuntariness or lack of control does not lead to non-phenomenality. Think of daydreams and impulsive thoughts, which are involuntary and yet phenomenally conscious experiences. It just does not make sense to say that one lacks subjective experience and yet is able to control the experience and its effects. In a nutshell, the three features that we ought to keep in mind when thinking about unconscious mental states are (1) non-phenomenality; (2) representationality; and (3) non-voluntariness.

Perhaps one other important criterion is attention. Would lack of attention to a mental state $M$ be sufficient for considering $M$ an unconscious mental state? I hold that it is not, but I get the intuitive force of this suggestion. In fact, many of the discussions seem to presuppose this as being sufficient for unconscious imagination (see Kind, 2021). My reason against this is that this lowers the bar for the unconscious considerably, such that any mental event occurring in the periphery of one’s mind is a potential candidate.\(^7\)

One last piece of ground clearing is essential here. The conscious/unconscious distinction does not mirror the occurrent/non-occurrent distinction. Conscious states are not the same as occurrent states, which are states that we are aware of as being part of our ongoing stream of experience. Similarly, unconscious states are not the same as non-occurrent or standing states, which are states that one is not currently undergoing. However, there is no consensus about what mental processes occurrent and non-occurrent states pick out—whether it is about awareness of mental activity, a

\(^7\) For more discussion, see De Brigard & Prinz (2010) & Mole (2008).
manifestation of dispositions, or simply the occurrence of mental activity. Nevertheless, for this project, it is safe to assume that the conscious/unconscious debate should be held separately from the occurrence/non-occurrence debate.

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8 For a more in-depth discussion of the occurrence/non-occurrence and conscious/unconscious mental states, see Bartlett (2018).
CHAPTER III

THE DEFENSES OF UNCONSCIOUS IMAGINATION

Before I sketch out the defenses that have been offered for unconscious imagination, let us also be clear about the concept of imagination, especially in its paradigmatic conscious form. Imagination is not a monolithic concept. It has been theorized under several different research programs concerning pretense, perception, memory, modal epistemology, and mindreading (Kind, 2013). Nevertheless, it is worth getting acquainted with the following non-exhaustive features of imagination:9

i. Distinctive cognitive attitude (DCA) irreducible to other mental state types

ii. Intentional content or aboutness

iii. Unconstrained by truth

iv. Propositional or imagistic or constructive10

v. Spontaneous or deliberate11

vi. Volitional or Non-volitional

vii. Occurrent or non-occurrent

viii. Governed by norms of mirroring and quarantining12

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9 See Nichols (2006), Kind (2016), and Liao & Gendler (2020) for the more in-depth discussion of the features listed here.


12 Gendler (2003); Nichols & Stitch (2003).
ix. Access to affect and action

While no empirical research targeting the unconscious imagination exists, the most that has been done for its defense is the inference to the best explanation. The proponents of unconscious imagination have given several different reasons to justify their position. Nichols (2004) infers from his “single-code” hypotheses a possibility of “tacit imaginings” or “tacit pretense,” which are imagined or pretense representations that would be immediately inferred (under appropriate circumstances) from any conscious set of imaginary representations.\(^{13}\) He argues that many true statements in fiction are not explicitly stated but are nonetheless tacitly assumed (or imagined) by the reader. He says, “When reading *The Great Gatsby*, we “know” that Gatsby could not survive decapitation and that he has fewer than one billion hairs on his head. But the novel never says such things explicitly and it is unlikely that we explicitly imagine such things” (2004: 135). Thus, he argues that what we must be doing is unconsciously imagining propositions that are not explicitly stated in the text.\(^{14}\) Relatedly, Church (2008) argues that unconscious imagination serves as the best explanation for our “as-if” behaviors in our everyday lives as well as in aesthetic appreciation and perspectival visualization. She presents cases in which the subject’s irrationally cautious behavior seems to demand an explanation through imagination occurring unconsciously and argues that appeals to conscious imagination or other unconscious representational states (beliefs, perceptions) will not suffice.

Furthermore, Sullivan-Bissett (2019, 2023) makes a case for thinking about implicit bias as *constituted* by unconscious imagination, which she thinks is uniquely placed in explaining several

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\(^{13}\) According to the single-code hypothesis, our cognitive architecture is such that belief and imagination/pretense have similar representational/functional features. See Nichols & Stitch (2000).

\(^{14}\) For the sake of consistency and to avoid confusion, I take the usage of the words “implicit”, “tacit”, and “non-conscious” to be synonymous with “unconscious,” unless stated otherwise.
conceptual worries in the current debates surrounding social bias. First, she argues that the imagination-based model of implicit bias does not face any of the problems that belief-based models (i.e., implicit biases are simply unconscious beliefs) do. The apparent problem with belief-based models is that if implicit biases are belief-like, why do they show inconsistency with explicit beliefs and are insensitive to relevant evidence or logical form? Sullivan-Bissett (2019) argues that since imagination (which is sufficiently belief-like but is its distinctive attitude) cannot be charged with inconsistency or evidential insensitivity, implicit biases are better explained by unconscious imagination. Second, she argues that her model of implicit bias requires neither a revisionary account of the psychological phenomenon of implicit bias nor a revisionary account of belief. All that is required is a parsimonious, “non-revisionary” account of imagination simply “tokened unconsciously” (Sullivan-Bissett, 2019). Third, she argues that the unconscious imagination, unlike the doxastic model, can explain the associative and the non-associative processing models of implicit bias. In her words, “implicit biases—which we do not know what to make of—are in fact constituted by unconscious imaginings. This is a category which we have not attended to much, but which is a legitimate and non-revisionary combination of two things we know a lot about: the unconscious, and the imagination” (2019: 644).

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15 Welpinghus (2020) argues that imagination is pertinent in the formation of implicit bias without endorsing the claim that implicit bias is constituted/caused by unconscious imagination. Here I only take issue with the latter claim.


17 Some examples are aliefs (Gendler, 2008), patchy endorsements (Levy, 2014), and character traits (Machery, 2016).

18 These include Spinozistic beliefs (Mandelbaum, 2014), in-between beliefs (Schwitzgebel, 2013), and fragmented beliefs (Egan, 2008). Here I do not aim to argue for or against belief-based model of implicit bias. My target is only the mental state of unconscious imagination that is purported to explain implicit bias.

19 This combine-and-conquer method will not work here because even if we do know quite a lot about imagination, we do not know quite as much about the way the unconscious functions—let alone the unconscious imagination. In fact, it might even be the case that the explanandum (implicit bias) is understood much more—because of its more robust empirical data—than the explanans (unconscious imagination); this would be counter-intuitive.
Let us look at one more potential candidate for unconscious imagination that has not gotten as much attention: dreams, which are arguably the closest we can get to approximating the unconscious imagination. Ichikawa (2009, 2016) has argued that dreams are constituted by imaginations that are typically not under our voluntary control. If we extend this model for our purposes, the case for unconscious imagination is apparently straightforward: (1) dreams are imaginations; (2) while dreaming, we are “unconscious”; thus, dreams are unconscious imaginations. While Premise 1 is plausible, Premise 2 rests on an ambiguous use of “consciousness.” Consciousness in the context of dreams has to do with wakeful versus non-wakeful states (i.e. dreams); in the former, we have agential capacity over our mental lives; in the latter, we do not (O’Shaughnessy, 2002; Windt, 2020). However, the question we are concerned with is whether there can be non-phenomenal imagination, not simply whether there can be imagination that is not subject to our will. Thus, as long as dreams are phenomenally experienced (which they are), they cannot be candidates for unconscious imagination. Furthermore, while dreams are affectively charged, they are typically functionally inert such that they rarely lead to the kind of systematic behavioral outputs that proponents of unconscious imagination claim (Windt, 2021). Nevertheless, dreams are the closest at offering us a glimpse into what unconscious imagination could look like—if we could subjectively experience them. For now, I shall set aside this issue.21

Recently, Kind (2021) has offered arguments against several of the aforementioned theorists. In response to Nichols (2004), she argues that no such state called tacit imagination needs to be posited: 20

Recently, Whiteley (2021) has pressed that dreams are constituted by a lack of our ability to perform mental acts. This has optimistic implications for those with aphantasia, who claim to visually dream but cannot visually imagine.

Perhaps another candidate for unconscious imagination is nondeclarative memory—a kind of memory that is involved in skill (like riding a bike) and not consciously retrievable to the subject (Squire, 2009). In contrast, declarative memory is the kind involved in knowledge—that and can be brought to consciousness. If memory is constituted by imagination, and there is a strong precedent for this (see De Brigard, 2014), nondeclarative memory should be unconscious imagination. While this is a case worth pursuing, this is beyond the scope of my thesis.
it can easily be explained by either our background beliefs about how fictions work or simply that we do not imagine the purported “tacit” things from the text. Against Church (2008), she offers alternative explanations—that normative beliefs and conscious imaginings can explain the cases that Church presents just as well as unconscious imagination. I take Kind’s assessment to be quite persuasive but limited. I think that instead of playing whack-a-mole with explanations appealing to unconscious imagination, it is more fruitful to take a different argumentative strategy—one that directly deals with the cognitive architecture concerning imagination and our understanding of unconscious cognition. The latter is what I attempt to do in this chapter. My argument is directed at all the appeals to unconscious imagination generally.

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22 Currie (1995) also argues against the possibility of dispositional imagining such that all imaginings are occurrent (156). He argues that being disposed to imagine \( X \) does not mean the same as dispositionally imagining \( X \); we can have the former but not the latter. See Kind (2021) for more detailed discussion of the arguments.

23 Furthermore, Brogaard and Gatzia (2017) make an argument from the case of unconscious perception claiming that vision-for-action (vision that guides movement rather than normal visual processing, namely, vision-for-perception) requires a postulation of unconscious visual imagination. However, as Kind (2021) rightly points out that the kind of unconscious imagination they are positing, which is in principle accessible to the conscious mind, is not the kind that figures in the standard conception of the unconscious. Moreover, even if their argument succeeds, they make a case for unconscious mental imagery and not unconscious imagination.
CHAPTER IV

AGAINST UNCONSCIOUS IMAGINATION

My argument rests upon two criteria that I believe to be central to establishing the unconscious imagination as a distinctive mental state.

1. If there is unconscious imagination, (a) it must be sufficiently functionally similar to conscious imagination (Conscious Similarity Requirement); and (b) it must be sufficiently functionally dissimilar to other unconscious mental states (Unconscious Dissimilarity Requirement).

2. Unconscious imagination is neither sufficiently functionally similar to conscious imagination nor sufficiently functionally dissimilar to other unconscious mental states.

3. Therefore, there is no unconscious imagination.

Any defender of unconscious imagination would have to agree with the premise (1a). Since our understanding of unconscious mental states is dependent on our understanding of conscious mental states, we would have a difficult time talking about the unconscious states without any reference to the corresponding conscious states. Farkas (2008) convincingly argues that “our understanding of the unconscious is parasitic on our understanding of mental states that are available to conscious reflection” (p. 47). Thus, unconscious imagination must be functionally similar to conscious imagination, for it to plausibly count as imagination at all.
However, there is a question about how similar they have to be. I do not think demanding maximal similarity is quite reasonable; thus, the question about what features are salient here is an important one but I will say more about how similar they have to be in the next subsection.

Moreover, a defender of unconscious imagination would also have to agree with premise (1b). The reasoning here is that if we are to demarcate a distinct unconscious state, it must perform a distinct function from the other unconscious states with their own functional profiles. This holds for any state, whether conscious or not, including belief, imagination, and emotion. If a posited state doesn’t have a distinctive enough functional profile, then it would not figure in the best explanation for affect, thought, and behavior. This is because a more parsimonious explanation would be available, namely one that appeals to an already posited state. Thus, if unconscious imagination does not perform a distinct function, it risks collapsing into other unconscious mental states.24 It’s worth stressing that, while I argue that unconscious imagination fails both the Conscious Similarity Requirement and the Unconscious Dissimilarity Requirement, the argument goes through even if only one of them fails. That is, unconscious imagination is in trouble if either (1a) or (1b) does not hold.

4.1 The Conscious Similarity Requirement

How similar does unconscious imagination (hereafter “UI”) need to be to conscious imagination (hereafter “CI”) to meet the Conscious Similarity Requirement? On the one hand, too coarse-grained an approach risks making the requirement too easily met. On the other hand, too fine-grained an approach risks making it too hard to meet. Sullivan-Bissett’s (2019) employs such a coarse-grained

24 Also, the standard view in philosophy of mind is that the distinction between imagination and other mental states like belief should be drawn at the functional level rather than at a representational level. This is why I am leaving aside the question of whether imagination needs to meet the Conscious Similarity Requirement in terms of its internal representational structure. For more, see Liao & Gendler (2020); Sinhababu (2013). I will discuss more about this on Section 4.2.
approach. Among the aforementioned features of imagination, she argues that (i) distinctive cognitive attitude (DCA), (ii) intentional content & (iii) unconstrained by truth are the core widely accepted features. So as long as the unconscious imagination adheres to these three conditions (while not honoring the rest), she argues that tokening imagination as “unconscious” is a warranted move (Sullivan-Bissett 2019: 632). The problem with this approach is that it could potentially pick out unconscious supposition rather than unconscious imagination. While some theorists argue that supposition is a species of belief-like imagination (Nichols and Stich, 2003; Goldman, 2006; Weinberg and Meskin, 2006), others like Arcangeli (2014) have argued that it is sui generis non-cognitive (not belief-like) type of imagination.

On the other hand, a fine-grained approach runs the risk of making the case against UI also trivially true. If we demand maximal similarity between these states, my condition that CI and UI are not sufficiently similar is easily met. For instance, it is obvious that a subject’s justification of their behavior (of why they did what they did) is going to be different depending on whether they are conscious or unconscious. While my argument goes against the coarse-grained approach, it does not rely on a stringent fine-grained approach either—such that any small deviance in the features would easily frustrate the Conscious Similarity Requirement. A right level of grain is crucial here. I argue here that the right level of grain has to address the feature of voluntariness. In other words, since unconscious mental states have to be non-phenomenal and non-voluntary, both are relevant variables in discussing the functional output of a mental state; thus, any discussion of UI has to also consider, along with (i), (ii), and (iii), its non-phenomenal nature and its non-voluntary relation with action and affect.

25 Similarly, the functional role of unconscious bias is also different from that of conscious bias: measures of unconscious bias show more temporal instability than that of conscious bias. For more, see Brownstein, Madva, & Gawronski (2019).
One might think that there is no problem for the proponent of UI with non-voluntariness since there are examples of conscious imaginations that are non-voluntary, such as daydreams and dreams (Walton, 1990). Thus, one plausible route for the proponent of UI is to say: UI is like dreams but without the phenomenality part. If our criteria of unconscious mental states are sound, then UI must be very similar to dreams. As we discussed in Section 3, dreams can be conceptualized as non-wakeful but phenomenally conscious (and non-voluntary) imaginings. But if UIs are like dreams without the phenomenality part, their functional role is going to be very difficult to elaborate and defend. It is plausible that dreams do have some functional role by being part of our episodic memory, which are memories of our past experiences; this is only if we can recollect them at all. But can a non-phenomenal experience like UI, but unlike dreams, be part of our episodic memory? I hold that this is highly unlikely. My reason is this: how can we remember something that we did not even experience consciously? One could argue: well of course we remember things we were unconscious of; think of mis-rememberings! We constantly make mistakes during recollection of what happened in the past and sometimes, in doing so, we remember something we did not experience. However, this is about the factivity of our rememberings. Misremembering an experienced event is not the same as remembering an unexperienced event; the former is more plausible than the latter (for more, see De Brigard, 2014). Nonetheless, even if it is possible to recollect UI, the functional-explanatory work will be done by “episodic memory” (which is constituted by conscious occurrent imaginings) and not UI itself. No matter how much we try to defend the UI as a plausible mental state, it is hard to see how it can serve any functional role (at least in terms of output) similar to CI.

Now, let’s look at the third feature of CI which says that CI is unconstrained by truth, meaning I can imagine p even if it was not true that p. In other words, conscious imagination (unlike belief) is

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26 This seems to be a standard view of memory. See Berninger & Ferran (2022).
not governed by the “norm of truth,” which roughly means that the truth of \( p \) is important to the success or correctness of an attitude towards \( p \) (Shah, 2003). Suppose I daydream (non-voluntarily but consciously imagine) that \( p \) “my house is on fire.” Daydreaming that \( p \) does not necessarily motivate me to jump out and reach for a fire hose because I also possess an inhibiting meta-cognition that I do not really believe \( p \) or that I desire not to act upon \( p \) (Ichino 2019).\(^{27}\) Now, if I unconsciously imagine \( p \), arguably I do not possess meta-cognition such that I am aware that I do not believe \( p \) or desire to act upon \( p \). This would mean that UIs would be rather uninhibited from executing behaviors salient to the content of UI. In the conscious form, it is we who do the pretending. In the unconscious form, we are the puppets of the unconscious pretense. If UI was built into our cognitive architecture, deviant functional outputs would be far more common than we encounter in otherwise “normal” humans. So, in a naturalistic picture of human cognition, this sort of phenomenon would be epiphenomenal at its best and evolutionarily detrimental at its worst.

In a nutshell, here I have argued that the functional profiles of conscious and unconscious imagination do not look sufficiently similar because of how non-voluntariness interacts with the (lack of) norm of truth.

### 4.2 The Unconscious Dissimilarity Requirement

In this section, I will argue that the implausibility of quarantining UI, without conscious reflection, massively undermines the conceptual legitimacy of UI. Quarantining is a feature of imaginative episodes that keeps track of whether a mental representation is real or imaginary, and depending on whether we are successful at quarantining will determine whether we act a certain way.\(^{28}\) For instance,

\(^{27}\) On meta-cognitions Ichino (2019) says, “When we have a daydream with content \( p \), we are often aware that \( p \) is something that we merely imagine and do not believe to be true. And – partly because of this – we desire not to act upon \( p \), since we know that the best chances to satisfy our desires rest on our representing reality accurately, and we want our actions to be realistically purposive” (1525).

\(^{28}\) Nonetheless, any successful imaginative episode or pretense game will not necessarily abide by the quarantining norm; it could also allow contagion, in which “some things do come to be believed—or treated as
a child does not expect that (pretend) “spilling” a teapot will make the table really wet. Keeping track of what is real and what is imaginary is an important feature of our conscious imagination. Any defender of UI would have to justify this sort of high-level cognitive task (of metacognition; and quarantining) occurring independently in our unconscious. Otherwise, a lack of such inhibiting mechanisms during UI would lead the way to rogue, unbridled functional outputs of non-voluntariness and stubbornness (irresponsiveness to evidence). Think of acting as if my house is on fire (through UI) even after being shown all the evidence that it is not the case.

Zooming out a bit, recall that in some cases of CI, there are functional outputs (of behavior and affect) like in the case of pretense, spatial reasoning, and engagement with fiction. In others, there are no such functional outputs like in the case of daydreaming or modal reasoning. Correspondingly, there must be cases of UI, where some instances have functional outputs and others do not. Now, recall that our only way of positing unconscious mental states is through inference to the best explanation of functional outputs. Thus, cases of UI that have no functional outputs serve no purpose; whether or not UI occurred is unknowable. The cases of UI that we are interested in are those that do lead to functional outputs. Of the ones that lead to functional outputs, a proponent of UI must give an account of how these functional outputs differ from the other unconscious mental states like unconscious beliefs. I argue that they cannot. In other words, here is a dilemma for the defender of UI: either UIs are constrained by truth or they are not. If they are, they are going to be too functionally similar to unconscious beliefs to claim that they are distinct; they fail the Unconscious Dissimilarity requirement. If they are not constrained by truth, we are going to have to explain the sort of runaway functional outputs that is unlike conscious imagination; they fail the

if they were believed—merely because they were pretended (or imagined)” (Gendler 2003: 130). Gendler also argues that the quarantining/contagion processes are largely autonomous and can function without conscious reflection.

Note, that a proponent of UI must also affirm the existence of unconscious beliefs, as beliefs are ontologically prior to imagination.
Conscious Similarity requirement. Ultimately, to avoid such a problem one has to argue for a highly robust and cognitively rich processing happening at the unconscious level. Next, I shall argue what this would look like with the literature concerning unconscious inferential processes and why this approach would be unsuccessful.

4.3 Worries about unconscious inference

In contemporary cognitive science, the “two-systems” or the “dual-process” view has been a prominent model for mapping our mental processes (Evans & Stanovich, 2013; Kahneman, 2011; Sloman, 1996). According to this view, our “System 1” cognition is fast, automatic, unconscious, and associative; whereas our “System 2” cognition is slow, deliberate, conscious, and logically structured. While this model has its fair share of critics (see De Houwer, 2019; Quilty-Dunn & Mandelbaum, 2018), it serves as an insightful background debate concerning our cognitive architecture concerning belief, imagination, and inference. Against this backdrop, one could argue for the possibility of unconscious imagination as a System 1 process. Here I will first expound our understanding of inference and how belief and imagination participate in inference and surmise what this means for unconscious imagination.

Broadly speaking, inference is a non-associative transition or a movement from one mental state (for instance, mental states of beliefs) to another mental state. On the one hand, rationalists concerning inference like Boghossian (2014) and Broome (2013) want to say that inference proper needs to be rationally evaluable, conscious, and deliberate. Most notably, Boghossian (2014) has argued that inference involves “taking” the premises as supporting the conclusion and drawing the

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30 Someone like Sullivan-Bissett would say that this is exactly why UI is best for explaining implicit bias, which is in a way irrational. But if UI exists, it must affect not only the instances of implicit bias but also our everyday lives. If it’s exclusive to bias, we would need an explanation why. Opening up the possibility of UI without proper theoretical defense means opening the floodgate of conceptually possible but psychologically implausible instances of human behavior.
conclusion because of the taking state. This is in contrast to many other kinds of mental transitions, like “mental jogging” (Broome, 2013) and thought transitions through association, rhythm and rhymes, and attention shifting (Siegel, 2017). The taking condition for inference is controversial as evidenced in Siegel (2017), Smithies (2023), and Wright (2014). Moreover, this sets the standard for inference too high and faces the problem of over-intellectualization (Quilty-Dunn & Mandelbaum, 2018). Thus, this sort of rationalism about inference will not serve our purposes here as it narrowly maps onto only System 2 kind of cognition.

On the other hand, the dominant literature in psychology and cognitive science views inference as a token functional algorithm that takes representational states like beliefs and imagination as inputs and produces certain representations as outputs (Nichols, 2004). In other words, inference is a functional marker for any system that takes premises as inputs and conclusions as outputs (Siegel, 2017). This sort of analysis, at least in principle, can accommodate both System 1 and System 2 kinds of processes. Consider this quote from Weinberg & Meskin (2006), who endorse the “single-code view” (concerning belief and imagination) of Nichols & Stich (2000):

First, imaginative states and belief states … are functionally similar insofar as they interact with (largely) the same mental mechanisms. That is … if the belief system takes input from or produces output to a cognitive mechanism, then the imagination system does as well (and vice versa). For example, the belief system drives various inferential mechanisms, and the imagination system does too—the same is true with respect to the affect systems. Second, the relevant cognitive mechanisms treat representations from both systems in roughly the same way (178).

The main takeaway here is that “belief systems” and “imagination systems” both participate in inference and that the inferential mechanism treats both representations of belief and imagination similarly. Furthermore, Sinhababu (2013) argues that “while we might not be able to tell which mental states are beliefs and which are imaginings based on their inferential properties, their inferential properties differ in that they primarily produce states of their kind, and not the other”
Call this the “inferential symmetry” view, which holds that while belief and imagination share the same inferential pathways, they are run separately in relation to their own kinds. In other words, input-beliefs lead to output-beliefs and input-imagination leads to output-imagination.

However, this is not necessarily true. Beliefs do mix in with the inferential process of imagination. Therefore, in response to this issue, Van Leeuwen (2014) argues for an “inferential anti-symmetry” view concerning the belief-imagination divide. He says, “If I believe that $p \rightarrow q$, imagine that $p$, and reflect properly, then I will imagine that $q$ (I won’t believe that $q$). But if I imagine that $p \rightarrow q$ (without also believing it), believe that $p$, and reflect properly, then I will not believe that $q$ (I will imagine that $q$)” (Van Leeuwen, 2014: 795). Van Leeuwen’s argument is persuasive because it fits in coherently with our intuitions about beliefs and imaginations, namely that imagination has a broader informational background than beliefs. Both beliefs and other imaginations can feature in the inferential process of any given imaginative episode but only beliefs can feature in the inferential process of beliefs. For instance, if I imagine that a dragon is breathing fire, my beliefs about how fires are supposed to work, and my imaginations about what dragons are like in part govern what I imagine next. Whereas if I believe that my car is on fire, my beliefs about cars and fires (but not my imaginings) are supposed to govern what I believe next.

Now, although these models do not require conscious reflection for imaginative inferences, they are, nevertheless, far from arguing that imagination can map onto System 1 processes. There are two main reasons for excluding imagination from System 1 cognition. First, as briefly touched upon in Chapter 2, if System 1 cognition requires associationism (which is not based on propositional structures), it cannot accommodate the sort of predication and attitude required for imagination (see Mandelbaum, 2022). If one were to argue that the concept of imagination need not necessitate predication or an attitude, they would be stretching the concept of imagination too thin to be explanatorily significant; imagination would be everything and nothing at the same time. Second,
while System 1 processes are by themselves usually unconscious and spontaneous, this does not necessarily mean that the functional inputs and outputs are also unconscious. Given that we can only infer an unconscious state from the functional outputs, the associative process itself cannot specify whether a functional output is caused by unconscious imagination or unconscious belief. This means that even if we assume that imagination can be computed by unconscious associative processes, associationism is not more helpful (than propositionally-structured representationalism) in showing that unconscious imagination plays any functional-causal role.

4.4 Worries about over-proof

Here let me address an important worry that my argument will also rule out other unconscious mental states of beliefs, desires, emotions, perceptions, etc. If it applies to all unconscious states and all of them fail the similar conditions of Conscious Similarity and Unconscious Dissimilarity, my argument would over-prove and be significantly undermined by empirical data on unconscious states. However, if I hold that none but UI fails the conditions (1a) and (1b), then I would have to say more about what makes it special. Why is it the case that unconscious beliefs, emotions, and perceptions are more plausible than UI? One straightforward answer is that, unlike other unconscious states, no empirical research has yet focused on UI. However, this does not mean that UI is therefore definitely ruled out. For now, the theoretical question of its psychological plausibility remains open. Nevertheless, we have reasons to grant more plausibility to other unconscious states than UI. So let us briefly look at unconscious emotions and unconscious beliefs. The aim of these passages is twofold: first, to show that these unconscious states are sufficiently like their conscious counterparts (Conscious Similarity), and they play distinctive (primitive) functional roles (Unconscious Dissimilarity); second, to show that these states undermine the abductive force of unconscious imagination.
**Unconscious Emotions.** There is a wide consensus in psychology and philosophy that emotions can occur both consciously and unconsciously. Unless we insist that emotions are necessarily constituted by phenomenal consciousness, unconscious emotions are theoretically plausible. While conscious emotions are amenable to a strong cognitivist view like that of judgmentalists and belief-desire theories of emotion, unconscious emotions are commonly construed as non-cognitive mechanisms. In this non-cognitive picture, unconscious emotions seem to be largely autonomous and independent from high-level cognitive processes; thus, these emotions are thought to occur (and elicit corresponding reflexes) without the phenomenality of the eliciting stimuli. Ultimately, unconscious emotions also make sense from the evolutionary perspective because requiring consciousness or subjective experience to be a necessary condition for emotion puts an unrealistically high bar on having emotion; it would mean only creatures with high-level cognitive capacities are candidates for emotions, which is arguably not the case (Gelder & Tamietto 2018). Most importantly, the feature of non-voluntariness and inferential automaticity is built into the conception of conscious emotions (such that we cannot simply choose what to feel and how to change how we feel). Among other features of emotions, these features remain unchanged in both the conscious and the unconscious form. Now, if unconscious emotions can trigger action-tendencies and, non-voluntarily, influence other mental states like conscious emotions and remain a distinct enough

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31 Except some “feeling” theorists of emotion (Panksepp 2005, Hatzimoysis 2007, Deonna and Teroni 2012), who have difficulty accounting for unconscious emotions. However, motivational and evaluative theories are better poised in this regard (Scarantino 2014). For a separate discussion, see Arnaud (2023) who gives a positive account of unconscious emotions. She argues that unconscious emotions can be understood in a following way: we are always consciously aware of something while emoting, but we do not experience the emotion itself. In other words, while unconscious emotions are underway, we have phenomenal consciousness of what the emotions are about (where the “feeling” aspect of emotions is preserved), but we do not have the phenomenal consciousness of being in those emotional states.

32 See Gelder & Tamietto (2018); Ohman, Flykt, & Lundqvist (2002); Smith & Lane (2016); Winkielman & Berridge (2004). In this subsection, I am using the locution “cognitive” very loosely in the way those in the cognitive sciences and psychology do. Here, the use of “cognitive” does not strictly pertain to beliefs.
mechanism, then they can satisfy both the Conscious Similarity and Unconscious Dissimilarity requirements.33

**Unconscious Beliefs.** While evidence for unconscious beliefs is contentious and is part of an ongoing debate, it has gained traction in psychoanalysis (Krickel 2018; Coleman 2022) and in the implicit bias (Mandelbaum 2015) literature. Before we proceed, let us briefly look at the distinguishing features of belief, especially from imagination. It is generally thought that belief shares many features with imagination. Both are inferential and have intentional content. However, they cannot be differentiated by the contents themselves—meaning that it is possible to both believe and imagine the same proposition. We can both believe and imagine that $p$ ("the ice cream store is open") and we can also believe $p$ and imagine not $p$ at the same time. Thus, belief and imagination are functionally distinguished in two different ways. First, at the cognitive input level, belief is governed by a norm of truth whereas imagination is not; beliefs are usually sensitive to evidence, stable, and consistent with one another whereas imaginations are not (Shah & Velleman 2005). The reason beliefs are candidates for rational evaluations like justification is that beliefs are not typically subject to our voluntary control like our ordinary physical acts (like throwing a ball, standing, speaking) and mental acts (like imagining, supposing). We cannot believe at whim because beliefs are supposed to track reality (Bennett, 1990; Hieronymi, 2006). For instance, I cannot simply will myself to believe that it is snowy outside if it is not snowy outside. I can pretend or imagine or act as if it is snowy outside, but I cannot simply believe, without compromising my psychological/rational capacity. In fact, this is one of the dimensions where beliefs and imaginations are traditionally demarcated such that we are free to imagine at will (to a certain extent), but we are not as free to believe at will. Beliefs

33 Yet again, this will depend on what kind of theory of emotion one subscribes to. The debate about what emotions are remains unsettled but it is safe to assume that any theory of emotion will have to accommodate these conditions.
are responsible for forming and sustaining our informational background—which is something that imaginations by themselves cannot do.

Second, at the behavioral/affective output level, belief and imagination do not motivate us to act in the same ways; and belief has a more direct influence on emotional elicitation than imagination.\(^{34}\) Now, the ordinary conception of beliefs is such that beliefs have representationality and are non-voluntary thought-, action-, and affect-guiding (Railton 2014). With this in mind, subtracting phenomenality from belief (i.e., rendering it unconscious) is not much of a problem, as long as it serves a functional role similar to conscious belief. The most pertinent defenses of unconscious beliefs are given within the Neo-Freudian discourse concerning repressed attitudes.\(^{35}\) Krickel (2018) offers an explanation of implicit bias (or unconscious bias) through the phenomenon of repression. She argues that during repression one is motivated to avoid an unwanted mental state, and through inattention, habituation, and miscategorization, one is successful at rendering the mental state unconscious or non-phenomenal.\(^{36}\) These repressed (unconscious) beliefs/desires are supposed to explain the impulsive (non-voluntary) actions in agents who are seemingly unaware, or have no phenomenal consciousness, of the mental cause of those behaviors. Thus, both functional inputs and outputs seem to be relevant features that remain consistent between conscious and

\(^{34}\) See Ichino (2019) for a recent position against differentiating belief and imagination in term of behavioral outputs. She argues that the behavioral outputs of imagination and belief are not that different; they both motivate us to act in the same ways. Thus, we need to pay more attention to cognitive input dissimilarity. On the contrary, Sinhababu (2013) argues that norm of truth is neither necessary or sufficient for differentiating imagination and belief. My argument does not rest on picking a side in the debate.

\(^{35}\) While the contemporary empirical models have not been kind to the notion of Freudian unconscious, Freud’s philosophical influence on our conception of unconscious cognition is considerable. For more, see Wakefield (2018). Also, recently Coleman (2022) has given a defense of fully “occurrent unconscious beliefs.” However, his view demands a positive defense of unconscious qualia (i.e., unconscious phenomenality), which is not a mainstream view. My explication here does not need to commit to this.

\(^{36}\) The classic example of this inner conflict is Anna Karenina who, despite despising Vronski, keeps attending his parties and shows these instances of repression of her desires. For more, see Farkas (2008). Krickel (2018) gives three different ways the unconscious can be conceptualized: (1) lack of attention to the mental state; (2) mis-categorization of the mental state; and (3) lack of deliberative control that leads to impulsive action. (3) is what we are most interested in here.
unconscious belief. So as long as there is an unconscious mental state that satisfies a similar functional role of conscious belief in terms of functional input (norm of truth) and output (non-voluntary behavior and affect guidance), unconscious beliefs can satisfy both the Conscious Similarity and Unconscious Dissimilarity requirements.\textsuperscript{37}

The main thrust of these passages is this: abductive explanations of behavior favor unconscious states of belief and emotion rather than unconscious imagination. This is because of two main reasons: (1) both belief and emotion are supposed to try to get things right (constrained by the norm of truth) while imagination is not; (2) both belief and emotion are non-voluntarily connected to affect and action while imagination is not. Thus, unconscious versions of belief and emotion are better suited for functional explanation than unconscious imagination.

\textsuperscript{37} See Egan (2008, 2011), Mandelbaum (2015), Schwitzgebel (2013) who argue that unconscious beliefs are sufficiently alike conscious beliefs. Nonetheless, the debate about unconscious belief is still not fully settled.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Let me recap the argumentative strands of this chapter. I start by identifying key features of the concepts of the unconscious and the imagination. I then present possible defenses of unconscious imagination and argue that all of them have to answer to the two conditions of Conscious Similarity and Unconscious Dissimilarity. Given the lack of voluntary control and evidential sensitivity, I argue that unconscious imagination cannot serve a rational functional role the way conscious imagination does; it is not sufficiently functionally similar to its conscious counterpart. Moreover, I argue that emotions and beliefs are more plaint to unconscious explanation because their conscious counterparts are already non-voluntary, aiming towards truth, and spontaneously connected to action and affect; the same cannot be said for unconscious imagination. As a result, if unconscious imagination is supposed to do the kind of explanatory work that its defenders want it to do, it will not look sufficiently dissimilar to other distinct unconscious mental states.

Nevertheless, there are still some limitations in the analysis that I have provided. One might worry that even if my argument is successful, it is not a constructive one—such that no better explanations of our (unconsciously caused) behavior have been constructed. I concur, but I hope to have shown the reader that the explanatory appeals to mental states are not straightforward. The upshot of this chapter is that the current issues surrounding unconscious imagination require proper sensitivity to the salient features of unconscious mental states and imagination.
Also, it might seem that what I have done here is contrive an unwinnable challenge for the proponents of unconscious imagination. However, this is not what I take to be the spirit of my arguments. My aim is to bring some consistency and clarity to the putative features of unconscious imagination (especially non-voluntariness and unconstrained by truth) and reconsider whether they are really compatible. Ultimately, this has led me to argue that unconscious imagination faces important theoretical problems and is, therefore, unjustified.
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