

Yukio IRIE (Osaka University)

Exploring the Possibility of the Unconscious Imitation of Others' Desires¹

Desire and imitation are popular subjects of research in the field of human activities. René Girard's theory of desire may not be entirely accurate, but it is revealing, nonetheless. He claims that our desires are the imitated desires of others, and that this act of imitation is an unconscious one². This paper provides an analysis of the plausibility of this type of unconscious imitation of another person's desires.

1. Conscious imitation and unconscious imitation

(1) Analysis of conscious imitation

In order to say that a person S consciously imitates a desire of another person M, the following conditions would be necessary:

- ① S desires an object O.
- ② M desires an object O.
- ③ S knows that M desires the same (or similar) object O that S desires.
- ④ S desires O because M desires O.

If only ① and ② hold, then we can say only that the desires of S and M are identical, coincidentally or for some other reason. For the identical desires to be a conscious imitation, ③ and ④ must also hold true; if ③ is not true, and only ①, ② and ④ hold, then the imitation is substantiated, but it is not a conscious one. And if ④ is not true, and only ①, ② and ③ hold, then it may merely be an accidental coincidence of shared desires between S and M.

Are ①, ②, ③ and ④ sufficient, then? The answer is “no”, because even if ①, ②, ③ and ④ hold, we are not aware of the imitation without knowing that S knows that ④ holds. It

¹ The first version of this paper was presented at the second meeting of IMITATIO JAPAN (the Japan Girard Association) on the 18th of December in 2010 at International Christian University, and I rewrote it in the wake of the discussion after the presentation. In particular, I thank Paul Demouchel for his question about the existence of an unconscious intentional imitation.

² Girard pointed this out in many places, e.g., in René Girard, *Des Choses Cachées Depuis la Fondation du Monde*, Grasset & Fasquelle, 1978, Chap. 3. He uses the term “ignorance,” however, instead of “unconsciousness.” In Chapter 2 of *Les Origines de la Culture* (Desclée de Bourwer, 2004), he uses “ignorance” against Freudian “unconsciousness,” because he opposes the “essentialism” that “the inconsciouness” exists in our mind.

is therefore necessary to add the following condition:

- ⑤ S knows that ④ holds.

That the conditions of ③ and ⑤ are present regarding S' knowing means that if S is asked "Do you know ...?", S will answer, "Yes, I know."

(2) Analysis of unconscious imitation

Let us now explore the conditions for unconscious imitation. We analyzed the above five conditions whereby a person S consciously imitates a desire of another person M. If ③ is lacking, then S does not know that ④ holds, even if ④ does indeed hold, because S does not know that M desires O. Therefore, ⑤ also does not hold. That is, in the event that only ①, ②, and ④ hold, and ③ and ⑤ do not hold, an unconscious imitation is present. And, as we discussed, in the event that ①, ②, ③ and ④ hold and ⑤ does not hold, it can still be classified as an unconscious imitation. Therefore, we have two kinds of unconscious imitation.

Unconscious Imitation Type 1

- ① S desires an object O.
- ② M desires an object O.
- ③ S knows that M desires the same (or similar) object O that S desires.
- ④ S desires O because M desires O.
- ¬⑤ S does not know that ④ holds.

Unconscious Imitation Type 2

- ① S desires an object O.
- ② M desires an object O.
- ¬③ S does not know that M desires the same (or similar) object O that S desires.
- ④ S desires O because M desires O.
- ¬⑤ S does not know that ④ holds.

Unconscious imitation type 2 can be thought of as a desire that is similar to the desire of another person being evoked by mirror neurons, without beliefs regarding perception being present. Therefore, it is possible that we can imitate other people's desires unconsciously. For example, a person might see another person eating a slice of cake at the next table and

desire to eat the same cake without being aware that the cake she desires to eat is the same as the cake that the person at the next table is eating. In this case, it is the “because” in ④ that indicates a natural causation and does not express an intentional relationship between a cause and result. We can call unconscious imitation type 2 “natural imitation”,

Unconscious imitation type 1 can be thought of as a desire of S that is being caused by mirror neurons without S being aware of the process; S is aware of the coincidence between the desire of S and of M, but S does not believe that S has imitated a desire of M. Using the above example for type 1, S knows that the cake S wants to eat is the same as the cake M is eating, but S does not think his desire for the cake is being evoked by seeing a person eating the cake at the next table. In this case, the “because” in ④ expresses a natural causation. We can call this “natural imitation”.

“Natural imitation” seems to occur by mirror neurons; therefore we would like to look at the relationship between mirror neurons and natural imitation.

(3) Natural imitation by mirror neurons³

Monkeys and humans have mirror neurons whereby, if they perceive behaviors of others, and they engage in the same behaviors, the related neural network is also activated. For example, when a monkey observes humans having a meal, their motoneurons for eating are activated. Or, when a monkey observes another monkey trying to catch a piece of fruit, this neural network for catching is also activated. However, even if motoneurons are activated by mirror neurons, the motion does not always activate. That means that after activating a motoneuron, another mechanism that can constrain or foster a motion activates and decides whether or not to execute the motion, as we do not always automatically imitate the behaviors of others. In this regard, there may be a difference between actions and feelings. If our neural network for feeling is activated, we may always experience the feeling. Or, if our neural network for desire is activated, then we may always experience the desire. (This is only a conjecture at this time. If it is true, then it could explain why human desire is always mimetic.)

Additionally, our desire does not always lead to action; in this way, it is different from intention. Intention always leads to our subsequent action. Thus, when we recognize the intention of another person, and a neural network of intention is activated, the intention does not always become an acted intention. In this respect, intention is more similar to the properties of imitated action than to those of desire.

³ Giacomo Rizzolatti & Corrado Sinigaglia, *So Quel Che Fai*, Raffaello Crocina Editore, 2006.

When we recognize the feelings and desires of other people, mirror neurons automatically evoke similar feelings and desires in ourselves. Therefore, natural imitations of feelings and desires may exist. Natural imitation of actions, on the other hand, may be more difficult, because the activation of motor neurons does not immediately cause an action. Experiences like the transmission of yawning, however, indicate that the natural imitation of actions may be possible to some extent.

(4) Intentional imitation

As discussed above, we can explain the unconscious imitation of desires and actions through mirror neurons. This is an example of “natural imitation”, and the “because” in ④ indicates natural causation. In many cases, however, we believe imitation is an intentional action, and the “because” in ④ does not express a natural causation but, rather, intentional reason. For example, in the case where one says, “I will buy a 3D TV, because my neighbor purchased one,” this “because” expresses intentional reason. We label such cases “intentional imitation”. Next, we will explore what intentional imitation is and how unconscious intentional imitation becomes possible.

2. Analysis of intentional imitation

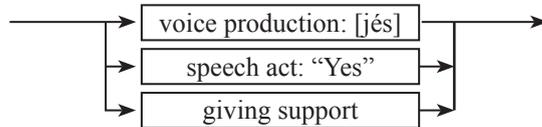
(1) General classification of imitations of others

We have classified imitation into “conscious imitation” and Type 1 and Type 2 “unconscious imitation”. Here, we would like to further classify imitations based on the distinction between “intentional imitation” and “natural imitation”. We previously focused on the imitation of desires, but here we attempt to make general classifications that include imitations of actions, judgments, and such like, as follows.

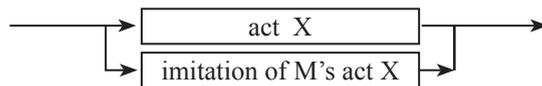
Conscious imitation	—— Intentional imitation (CIM)
	—— Natural imitation (CNM)
Unconscious imitation 1	—— Intentional imitation (UIM1)
	—— Natural imitation (UNM1)
Unconscious imitation 2	—— Intentional imitation (UIM2)
	—— Natural imitation (UNM2)

(2) Analysis of intentional imitation

Intentional imitation is a type of intentional action. It goes without saying that we can make multiple descriptions of one behavior. For example, we engage in speech through voice production and we give someone support through the speech act of saying, “Yes.”



These three actions - voice production, speech act and support - are three descriptions about one behavior. These three descriptions are neither independent nor equal. The speech act cannot hold without the voice production, and the support cannot hold without the speech act. Generally speaking, there are cases where we can give two or more descriptions like “act 1” and “act 2” to one single behavior whereby the description of act 2 depends on the description of act 1. In this type of situation, we call act 2 a “meta-level act of act 1”. An imitation as an act is a type of meta-level action.



When S imitates an act of a person M by performing an act X, we can describe it in two ways: “S is performing act X,” and “S is imitating M’s act”. These are two descriptions of one and the same behavior on the part of S, and the imitation of M’s act holds through the same act X.

Given that the act 2 is a meta-level act of act 1, we are aware of act 1. We are not always aware, however, of act 2. In the above example, a person who says, “Yes,” may be not aware that the act is giving someone support. This applies to imitation in that S is performing act X, but S is not aware that by doing it, S is imitating M’s act. This is Type 1 unconscious imitation (UIM1). Furthermore, it is possible that S is performing act X, but S is not aware that S’s act is similar to M’s act. This is Type 2 unconscious imitation (UIM2).

As we mentioned above, an intentional imitation is a type of intentional action. What exactly, however, is an intentional action? According to G. E. M. Anscombe⁴, an intentional action is an action such that when a person is asked, “What are you doing?” she can answer immediately without observation and inference, by saying something like, “I am making coffee.” Furthermore, when she is asked, “Why are you doing so?” she can answer immediately without observation and inference with something like, “Because I want to

⁴ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Oxford, 1957.

refresh myself.”

“What are you doing?”

“I am making coffee” (an action)

“Why are you doing so?”

“Because I want to refresh myself” (an intention/reason for the action)

According to this definition of intentional action, whenever we are asked about the intention of an action, we should always be able to answer immediately. That should mean that unconscious intentional action is impossible. Our study questions the possibility of unconscious intentional imitation; so, does that mean we need a different definition in order for this question to remain meaningful? The answer is no. An intentional action always possesses a conscious intention, but we could simultaneously have an unconscious intentional action. To support this notion, J. Searle conducted the following hypnosis experiment.

In a typical hypnosis experiment, the subject was told that upon coming out of the hypnotic trance, he should go to the window and open the window when he hears the word, “Germany.” In this experiment, as soon as the subject heard the word “Germany,” he invented a perfectly rational-sounding reason for opening the window. He said something like, “It is awfully stuffy in here. We need some fresh air. Do you mind if I open the window?”⁵

We accept Anscombe’s definition and adapt our question accordingly to “How is it possible that an intentional action simultaneously possesses another unconscious intention of imitation?”

Here, we encounter another problem; as Searle has discussed, intention has a causal self-referentiality.

Thus, in the case of intentions, unlike desires, the intention is not actually carried out unless the intention itself causes the very action that is represented in the content of the intention. If the action has a different cause, the intention is not carried out. We may say in such cases, then, that the conditions of satisfaction of the intentional state are *causally self-referential*.⁶

⁵ J. R. Searle, *Mind*, Oxford, 2004, p.157.

⁶ J. R. Searle, *Rationality in Action*, MIT, 2001, p. 42.

Our intention must always function as a cause of the intended result. Therefore, if we have an unconscious intention in action, then we have two intentions: the unconscious one and the conscious one, and both must function as causes for an action. If that were impossible, we would have no unconscious intention; or, our conscious intention would not be the true function of the act, but rather, a kind of self-deception.

We suppose it is possible that both intentions become causes for an action. Suppose that when we place a weight A or weight B on the right side of a scale, the right side sinks down. If we simultaneously place weights A and B on the right side, the right side will again sink down. In this case we can think of both weights A and B together as a cause, or that they both relatively contribute to the cause of weighing down of the right side. Theoretically, then, it would be possible that two intentions can contribute relatively to the cause of an action.

At this point, we have countered two objections against unconscious intentional action, but we have not yet proven that unconscious intentional imitations are possible and that an unconscious intentional imitation exists.

3. Possibility of unconscious imitation

(1) Re-analysis of the conditions of an unconscious imitation

In order to consider the possibilities of unconscious intentional imitation, let us re-analyze the conditions discussed previously of Type 1 and Type 2 unconscious imitation.

Type 1 unconscious imitation

- ① S desires an object O.
- ② M desires an object O.
- ③ S knows that M desires the same (or similar) object O that S desires.
- ④ S desires O because M desires O.
- ¬⑤ S does not know that ④ holds.

Type 2 unconscious imitation

- ① S desires an object O.
- ② M desires an object O.
- ¬③ S does not know that M desires the same (or similar) object O that S desires.
- ④ S desires O because M desires O.
- ¬⑤ S does not know that ④ holds.

Cases when condition ¬③ “S does not know that M desires the same (or similar) object O

that S desires” is present can be distinguished into two cases. If S is asked, “Do you know that M desires the same (or similar) object O that you desire?” S answers, “I was not aware of that. But you are correct,” in one case, and S answers, “No, I do not think that I desire the same (or similar) object O that M desires,” in another case.

This applies equally to condition \neg ⑤. When \neg ⑤ “S does not know that S desires O because M desires O” is present, we can distinguish it into two cases. If S is asked, “Do you know that you desire O because M desires O?” S answers, “I was not aware of that. But you are correct,” in one case, and S answers, “No, I do not think that I desire O because M desires O,” in another case.

In the natural imitations by mirror neurons, we can distinguish between the two cases when condition \neg ③ is present. In one case, S becomes immediately aware of the imitation after being asked. In the other case, S does not become immediately aware of it. If the imitation is unexpected or difficult to recognize, then it takes time to become aware of it. What is more important in the latter case is the possibility of “repression”, preventing awareness of it. Therefore, we may have two possible cases in types 1 and 2 of natural unconscious imitations. In one case, S is simply unconscious, and in the other case, S has been kept unconscious by some “repression”. In type 2, if \neg ③ is caused by some repression, then \neg ⑤ would be also caused by repression, and vice versa. A reason for or cause of something that oppresses awareness in one condition would also become the reason or cause of repression in another condition.

Similarly, we have two possible cases in types 1 and 2 of unconscious intentional imitation. The “repression” here, however, is different from the “repression” in the example above. As for condition \neg ⑤ “S does not know that S desires O because M desires O”, the part “because M desires O” does not express a natural causation, but a intentional relation of reason and result. How is it possible to be unaware of an intention in an intentional imitation? Although doubts might arise from the definition of “intentional action” by Anscombe, we present a possibility where one is unaware of the intention of her intentional action. When S is asked, “Do you know that you desire O because M desires O?” it is possible that S answers, “No, I do not believe that I desire O because M desires O.” If S answers in this way, the “repression” that is at work in this case is different from the “repression” in the natural imitation. Condition \neg ③ of type 2 unconscious intentional imitation could also be caused by a form of repression. If an repression is effective in \neg ③, it would be caused by the same reason or cause of an repression in \neg ⑤. Therefore, the repression in \neg ③ of unconscious intentional imitations is different in kind from one of unconscious natural imitations. The repression against recognition of intention is different from the repression against other recognition, because to be unaware of an intention would demand a stronger repression than

to be unaware of a fact.

We investigated how it is possible to become conscious in cases of unconscious intentional imitation, keeping in mind the above investigation of supposed objections that might arise from Anscombe's definition of intentional action and Searle's indication of "causal self-referentiality". The problem here is whether or not it is possible that a natural imitation and intentional imitation remain unconscious by some "repression" and, if it is possible, how exactly is it possible. Let us consider these points next.

(2) Is it possible to oppress the consciousness of imitation?

In the sense of the "preconsciousness", in the terminology of Freud, it is possible that we are not aware of a natural imitation or an intentional imitation. For example, we may know that the earth is round, but we are not always conscious of it. We *can* say, however, that we know when we are not conscious of it. This is unconscious knowledge. This applies equally to intentions. For example, suppose that you go to a train station on foot and it takes fifteen minutes. During this time, you are not constantly thinking of going to the station, and you may think about other things as you walk. But if you are asked, "What are you doing?" on your way, you could answer immediately, "I am going to the train station." The intention of "going to the station" was not conscious until you were asked. This is also an example of Freudian "preconsciousness". Let us consider condition ③ of conscious imitation, again. In ③, "S knows that S and M desire the same (or similar) object O." The part "... knows ..." means that if S is asked, "Do you know ...?" S can answer immediately, "Yes, I know ...". This means it is unnecessary for S to be constantly conscious that S and M desire the same (or similar) object O. S can answer, if asked, but when S is not asked and unconscious of the fact, S possesses a "preconsciousness" of it in the Freudian sense.

Let us take a case where S is asked, "Do you know that you and M desire the same (or similar) object?" and S answers, "I was not aware of it, but I understand now that what you said is exactly correct." In this case, there is no preconsciousness of the knowledge, because the knowledge has taken place after being asked. A Freudian might consider the possibility that S knew it unconsciously before being asked, but S repressed it after being asked.

Incidentally, what we are considering is neither "preconsciousness" nor simple ignorance, but "unconsciousness" that is difficult to turn into consciousness, especially in cases where the unconsciousness is caused by repression. To become conscious is not principally impossible, but it is difficult, due to certain circumstance. What is truly occurring in the repression of consciousness of a fact (an action, feeling, or knowledge, etc.)? Most likely, some desire or intention wants to keep it unconscious. If so, what is truly occurring in that

case? If such a person is asked, “Do you know that you are P?” then she will answer, “No, I don’t.” If she is then asked, “Are you repressing the knowledge that you are P?” S will also answer, “No.” If she actually knows that she is P, however, and is repressing her awareness of it, then she is deceiving herself. Repression is therefore a type of self-deception. Whether or not repression of unconscious imitation is possible depends on whether or not self-deception is possible.

On a side note, “unconsciousness” and “self-deception” are not sufficiently analyzed within the context of this paper due to limited time and the lack of sufficiently extensive research. In conclusion, we would like to explore two possible mechanisms of “repression” or “self-deception,” though it may extend beyond the scope of this paper.

(a) The case where an imitation remains unconscious through different and inconsistent descriptions of an action

As described above, one behavior can be described as an action in multiple ways (this applies to both human social actions as well as communal actions). Furthermore, in some cases, the multiple descriptions lie within the relationship between an action and a meta-level action, and in other cases, they exist within inconsistent relationships. For example, suppose that a person S performs an act of kindness toward a person A. When we describe the action of S as an action intended for others to believe that S is kind, this is not altruistic, but rather, selfish. Given that S intended to be altruistic on one level and at the same time, selfish on another level, it becomes disputable whether an altruistic action and a selfish action are truly inconsistent. If S thinks that they are inconsistent, however, then S thinks that S is inconsistent. So, if S pays attention to an altruistic intention and tries to ignore a selfish intention, then S could be aware of an altruistic intention while being unconscious of a selfish intention.

Similarly, in the case where an unconscious intention is an intention of imitation, if S thinks that an unconscious intention and a conscious intention are inconsistent, the same idea holds, such as in a case where S simultaneously possesses an intention to be original and an intention to imitate a person of originality, and S thinks that the intentions are inconsistent.

(b) The case where an imitation of a judgment causes an imitation of a desire

An intention or an action in a human relates to a context of many beliefs and judgments. For example, suppose that a person M intends to get an object O because M believes that O is good, and S imitates the judgment of M that O is good, and the desire and action of M to get O. In this case, it is possible that S is conscious of imitating the judgment of M, but not conscious of imitating the desire and action of M, because S can decide that her action is

based only on her own voluntary judgment.

When we are able to explain our actions rationally while repressing being conscious of our intentions, it is likely that the above mechanism is at work. Other mechanisms like these may exist. The exploration of such mechanisms still remains to be carried out. More importantly, the question of whether repression and self-deception is possible remains to be answered.

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