

# How Is It Possible to Imitate Unconsciously a Desire of Another Person? <sup>1</sup>

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Desire and imitation are likely to be basic subjects of research on human practical activities. It might be uncertain that the theory of desire by Rene Girard is true, however it is quite revealing. He claims that our desires are the imitated desires of another person's ones and, importantly, in his theory this imitation is conducted unconsciously<sup>2</sup>. We want here to analyze how it becomes possible to imitate unconsciously a desire of another person.

## 1. Conscious imitation and unconscious imitation

### (1) Analysis of conscious imitation

In order to say that a person S imitates consciously 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 as 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 by some ground. To the end that a conscious imitation hold, ③ and ④ are necessary, because if ③ is lacking and only ①, ② and ④ hold, then an imitation holds but it is not a conscious imitation.

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<sup>1</sup> The first version of this paper was presented in 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. I thank esp. Paul Demouchel for his question about the existence of an unconscious intentional imitation.

<sup>2</sup> Girard pointed out this in many places, e.g. in René Girard, *Des Choses Cachées Depuis la Fondation du Monde*, Grasset & Fasquelle, 1978, Chap. 3. However he uses "ignorance" instead of "unconsciousness". In the 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.

And if ④ is lacking and only ①, ② and ③ hold, then it might be an accidental coincidence of desires between S and M.

Then, are ①, ②, ③ and ④ sufficient? No, they are not. Because even if ①, ②, ③ and ④ hold, we are not aware of the imitation without knowing that ④ holds. Then it is necessary to add the following condition.

⑤S knows that ④ holds.

That the conditions of ③ and ⑤ “... knows ...” are present means that if S is asked “Do you know ...”, then S can answer “Yes, I know”.

## (2) Analysis of unconscious imitation

Secondly let us the conditions for unconscious imitation. We analyzed the above five conditions where a person S imitates consciously a desire of another person M. If ③ is lacking, then S doesn't know that ④ holds, even if ④ holds actually, because S doesn't know that M desires O. Therefore ⑤ doesn't hold. That is, in the event that only ①, ② and ④ hold and ③ and ⑤ don't hold, an unconscious imitation is present. And as we considered before, in the event that only ①, ②, ③ and ④ hold and ⑤ doesn't hold, unconscious imitation would be present. We have two kinds of unconscious imitation.

Type 1 unconscious imitation.

①S desires an object O.

②M desires an object O.

③S knows that M desires the same (or similar) object O as S desires.

④S desires O because M desires O.

—⑤S doesn't know that ④ holds.

Type 2 unconscious imitation

①S desires an object O.

②M desires an object O.

- ③S doesn't know that M desires the same (or similar) object O as S desires.
- ④S desires O because M desires O.
- ⑤S doesn't know that ④ holds.

As to the type 2 of unconscious imitation we can think of the following type. A desire which is similar to desire of other person could be evoked by mirrorneurons without beliefs as to perception. Therefore it is possible that we can imitate other persons unconsciously. E.g. a person saw a person eating a cake at the next table and desired to eat the same cake but she was not aware that the cake she desired to eat is the same as the cake which the person at the next table was eating. In this case, “because” in ④ means a natural causation and doesn't express an intentional relation between a reason and result. We can call such unconscious imitation type 2 “natural imitation”.

As to the type 1 unconscious imitation, we can think the following type. A desire of S is caused by mirrorneurons and S doesn't know it, but S is aware of the coincidence between the desire of S and one of M and S doesn't think that S has imitated a desire of M. In the case of the above example, S knows that the cake S wants to eat is the same as the cake M is eating, but S doesn't think his desire for the cake is 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 it type 1 “natural imitation”.

“Natural imitation” seems to occur by mirrorneurons; therefore we would like to look at the relation between mirrorneurons and natural imitations.

### **(3) Natural imitation by mirrorneurons<sup>3</sup>**

Monkeys and humans have mirrorneurons and if they perceive behaviors of others, then the neural network which work when they engage in the same behaviors are also activated. E.g. when a monkey sees that humans have a meal, their motoneurons which work for eating is activated. When a monkey sees that another monkey tries to catch a fruit, then his neural network to catch something is also activated. However, even if motoneurons are activated by mirrorneurons, the motion does not always start. That means that after activating of motoneuron another mechanism to constraint or foster a motion works and it decides whether the motion starts actually or not, because we don't always imitate behaviors of others automatically. In this aspect there might be a difference between actions and

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<sup>3</sup> Giacomo Rizzolatti & Corrado Sinigaglia, *So Quel Che Fai*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2006.

feelings. We might always have feeling if our neural network of feeling is activated. If our neural network of desire is activated, then we might feel a desire. (This is only my conjecture at this time. If it is true, then we could explain why human desire is always mimetic.)

By the way our desire doesn't always cause our action; it is different from the case of intentions. Intention always causes our action after it. When we recognize an intention of other person and a neural network of intention is activated, then the intention doesn't always become an actual intention. In this aspect intention is closer to action than to desire.

When we recognize feelings and desires of other persons, we have similar feelings and desires automatically by the mirroneurons. Therefore natural imitations of feelings and desires seem to be possible. But the natural imitation of actions might be more difficult, because the activation of motor neuron doesn't cause an action immediately. But as we have an experience like a transmission of yawning, the natural imitation of actions might be possible to some extent.

#### **(4) Intentional imitation**

As above we can explain the unconscious imitation of desires and actions by mirroneurons. That is "natural imitation" and "because" in ④ means natural causation. But imitation which we think in many cases is an intentional action and the "because" in ④ doesn't express a natural causation but intentional reason. E.g. in the case that one says "I will buy a 3D TV, because my neighbor bought it", this "because" expresses the intentional reason. We want to call such case "intentional imitation" Next we explore what intentional imitation is and how the unconscious intentional imitation becomes possible.

## **2 Analysis of intentional imitation**

### **(1) General classification of imitations of others**

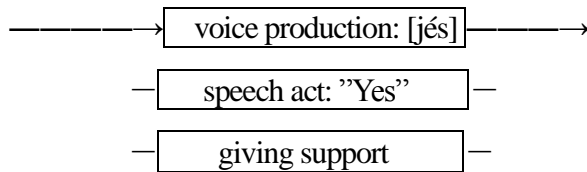
We divided "conscious imitation" and type 1 and type 2 "unconscious imitation". Here we would like to classify imitations considering the distinction between "intentional imitation" and "natural imitation" We gave attention to imitation of desires, but here we want to make general classification including imitations of actions and judgments and etc. as follows.

Conscious imitation      ——Intentional imitation (CIM)

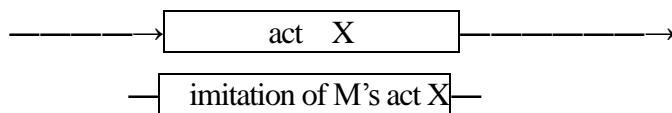
- Natural imitation (CNM)
- Unconscious imitation 1 ——Intentional imitation (UIM1)
- Natural imitation (UNM1)
- Unconscious imitation 2 ——Intentional imitation (UIM2)
- Natural imitation (UNM2)

**(2) Analysis of intentional imitation**

I would like to explain here intentional imitation. Intentional imitation is a kind of intentional action. As is well known we can make plural descriptions of one behavior. E.g. we make speech by voice production and we give someone support by speech act “Yes”



These three actions, i.e. 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 product and the support cannot hold without the speech act. Generally speaking, there are cases where we can give two or more descriptions like “the act 1” and “the act 2” to one and the same behavior and the description of act 2 depends on the description of act 1. In this case we want to call the act 2 “a meta level act of act 1”. An imitation as act is a kind of meta level action.



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

Given that the act 2 is a meta level act of act 1 and we are aware of act 1. Then we are not always aware of the act 2. In the above example a person who said “Yes” might be not aware that it gives

someone supports. This applies to an imitation, S is acting X, but S is not aware that by doing it S is imitating an M's act. This is type 1 unconscious imitation (UIM1). Furthermore it is possible that S is acting 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 kind of intentional action, by the way, what is an intentional action? According to G. E. M. Anscombe<sup>4</sup> an intentional action is an action such that when a person is asked "What are you doing?" then she can answer immediately without observation and inference e.g. "I am making coffee" and furthermore when she is asked "Why are you doing so?" then she can answer immediately without observation and inference e.g. "Because I want to 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 of the action)

According to this definition of intentional action whenever we are asked an intention of action, we can always answer immediately. That should mean that unconscious intentional action is impossible. Our question was however "How is an unconscious intentional imitation possible?" Do we need a different definition in order that this question remains meaningful? No, we don't, because it is sure that an intentional action has always a conscious intention, but we could have simultaneously an unconscious intentional action. J. Searle raised a following hypnosis experiment.

In a typical hypnosis experiment (and this one was actually performed), the subject was told that after he comes out of the hypnotic trance, when he hears the word "Germany," he will go to the window and open the window. 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

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<sup>4</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Oxford, 1957.

window?”<sup>5</sup>

So we would like to accept Anscombe's definition and change our question. "How is it possible that an intentional action has simultaneously another intention of imitation unconsciously?"

Here we meet another problem. That is that an intention has a causal self-preferentiality as Searle pointed out.

"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 case, then, that the conditions of satisfaction of the intentional state are *causally self-referential*."<sup>6</sup>

Our intention must always function as a cause of intended result. Therefore if we have an unconscious intention in action, then we have two intentions, i.e. unconscious one and 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 function actually and it would be a kind of self-deception.

We suppose it possible that both intentions become causes of an action. Suppose that when we put the weight A or weight B on the right pan of a balance, then the right side sinks down. If we put weight A and B at the same time on the right pan, then the right side will sink down. In this case we can think that both weights A and B as all become a cause or that they cause relatively the sinking down of the right side. Analogically thinking it would be possible that two intentions cause relatively an action.

Even if to this extent we can solve two objections against unconscious intentional action, we have not yet proved that unconscious intentional imitations are possible and that an unconscious intentional imitation exists.

### **3 Possibility of unconscious imitation**

#### **(1) Reanalysis of the conditions of an unconscious imitation**

In order to consider the possibilities of unconscious intentional imitation, let us reanalyze the above

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<sup>5</sup> J. R. Searle, *Mind*, Oxford, 2004, p.157.

<sup>6</sup> J. R. Searle, *Rationality in Action*, MIT, 2001, p. 42.

mentioned conditions of the Type 1 and Type 2 of unconscious imitation.

#### Type 1 unconscious imitation

- ①S desires an object O.
- ②M desires an object O.
- ③S knows that M desires the same (or similar) object O as S desires.
- ④S desires O because M desires O.
- ⑤S doesn't know that ④ holds.

#### Type 2 unconscious imitation

- ①S desires an object O.
- ②M desires an object O.
- ③S doesn't know that M desires the same (or similar) object O as S desires.
- ④S desires O because M desires O.
- ⑤S doesn't know that ④ holds.

The cases when the condition —③“S doesn't know that M desires the same (or similar) object O as S desires” is present is distinguished into two cases. If S is asked “Do you know the M desires the same (or similar) object O as S desires?”, then S answers “Exactly. I was not aware of that.” in one case and S answers “No, I don't think that I desire the same (or similar) object O as M desires” in another case.

This applies equally to the condition —⑤. When —⑤ “S doesn't know that S desires O because M desires O” is present, we can distinguish two cases. If S is asked “Do you know that you desire O, because M desires O?”, then S answers “Exactly. I was not aware of that.” in one case and S answers “No, I don't think that I desire the same (or similar) object O as M desires” in another case.

In the natural imitations by mirrorneurons we can distinguish the two cases, when the condition —③ is present. One case is the case where S becomes aware of that immediately after being asked. Another case is the case where S doesn't become aware of that immediately. If the thing is unexpected or difficult to be recognized, then it takes time to be aware of it. What is more important in the latter case is the possibility of “oppression” to prevent the awareness of it. Therefore we could have two possible cases relatively in the type 1 and type 2 of natural unconscious imitations. One case is



where S is unconscious simply, and another case is where S is unconscious by some “oppression”. In type 2, if  $\neg$ ③ is caused by some oppression, then  $\neg$ ⑤ would be also caused by oppression, and vice versa. Because a reason or cause which oppresses an awareness in one condition would become a reason or cause of oppression in another condition.

In like fashion, we have two possible cases relatively in type 1 and type 2 of unconscious intentional imitation. However that the “oppression” here is different from the above mentioned oppression. As to the condition  $\neg$ ⑤ “S doesn’t know that S desires O because M desires O”, the part “because M desires O” doesn’t express a natural causation, but a relation of reason and result. In such  $\neg$ ⑤, is it possible to be unaware of an intention in an intentional imitation? As to the suspicion which might arise from the definition of “intentional action” by Anscombe, we have found a possibility that one is unaware of an intention of her intentional action. Therefore when S is asked “Do you know that you desire O because M desires O?”, it is possible that S answers “No, I don’t believe that I desire O because M desires O”. If S answers in this way, the “oppression” which works in this case is different in kind from the “oppression” in the natural imitation. The condition  $\neg$ ③ of type 2 of unconscious intentional imitation could be also caused by an oppression. If an oppression works in  $\neg$ ③, it would be caused by the same reason or cause which causes an oppression in  $\neg$ ⑤. Therefore the oppression in  $\neg$ ③ of unconscious intentional imitations is different in kind from one of unconscious natural imitations. The oppression against recognition of intention is different in kind from the oppression against other recognition, because to be unaware of an intention would demand a stronger oppression than to be aware of a fact.

We can find how it is possible to become conscious when we asked in cases of unconscious intentional imitation, when we remember the above investigation of supposed objections which might arise from the Anscombe’s definition of intentional action and the Searle’s indication of “causal preferentiality”. The problem here is whether it is possible or not that a natural imitation and intentional imitation remain unconscious by some “oppression”, and if it is possible, how it is possible. Let us consider them next.

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

In the sense of “preconsciousness”, in the terminology of Freud, it is possible that we are not aware of a natural imitation or an intentional imitation. E.g. we know that the earth is round but we are not

always conscious of it. However we can say that we know it when we are not conscious of it. This is unconscious knowledge. This applies equally to intentions. E.g. suppose that you go to a train station on foot and it takes fifteen minutes. During this time you don't think always of going to the station and you walk thinking about other things. But if you are asked "What are you doing?" on your way, you could answer immediately "I am going to a station" The intention of "going to a station" was not conscious till you were asked. This is also an example of the Freudian "preconsciousness". Let us consider the 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 ...?", then S can answer immediately "Yes, I know ...". This means it unnecessary for S to be always conscious that S and M desires the same (or similar) object O. S can answer, if asked, but when S is not asked and unconscious of the fact, S has a "preconsciousness" of it in the Freudian sense.

Then suppose the case where if S is asked "Do you know that you and M desire the same (or similar) object?", then S answer "I was not unaware of it. But I understand now what you said exactly correct". In this case there is no preconsciousness of the knowledge, because the knowledge has taken place after being asked. If one is a Freudian, she might think the possibility that S knew it unconsciously before being asked but S oppressed that after being asked. We will consider the oppression including this case.

Incidentally, what we should consider is neither "preconsciousness" nor simple ignorance, but "unconsciousness" which is difficult to become conscious and esp. the case where the unconsciousness is caused by oppression. To become conscious is not principally impossible, but difficult due to some circumstance. What is really going on in an oppression of becoming conscious of a fact (an action, feeling, knowledge, etc.)? It is probably that a desire or intention which wants to keep it unconscious is working. If so, what is really going on in that case? If such person is asked "Do you know that you are P?", then she will answer "No, I don't". Then if asked "Are you oppressing to know that you are P?" S will also answer "No". However, if she actually knows that she is P and is oppressing to be aware of it, then she is deceiving herself. Therefore oppression is a kind of self-deception. Whether oppression of unconscious imitation is possible or not is up to an answer to the question whether a self-deception is possible or not.

By the way "unconsciousness" and "self-deception" are still not sufficiently analyzed in our time and in order to argue it I need therefore more careful preparations. At the last I would like only to show

two kinds of possible mechanisms of “oppression” or “self-deception”, though it might be making an unnecessary addition.

**(a) The case where an imitation remains unconscious by different inconsistent descriptions of an action**

As we say above, one behavior can be described as an action in plural ways (This applies to human social actions and communal actions). Furthermore the plural descriptions are in the relation between an action and a meta level action in some cases and in relation of inconsistency in some cases. E.g. suppose that a person S does good to a person A. When we describe the action of S as an action to intend to be rendered as a kind person, this is not altruistic but selfish. Given that S intend to be altruistic on the one hand and intends at the same time to be selfish on the other hand. It is disputable whether an altruistic action and a selfish action are inconsistent or not, however if S thinks that they are inconsistent, 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 and be unconscious to a selfish intention.

Also 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 similar thing holds. E.g. in the case that S has an intention to be original and an intention to imitate a person of originality at the same time and S thinks that they 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 combines with a lot of beliefs and judgments as its background. E.g. suppose that a person M intends to get an object O by thinking the O is good and S imitate the judgment of M that an object O is good and the desire and action of M to get O. But 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 her action only on the basis of her judgment voluntarily.

When we could explain our act rationally while we oppressed to be conscious of our intention, it would be likely that the above mechanism function. There might be other mechanisms like these. The exploration of such mechanism still remains to be carried out. More importantly, the question whether

oppression and self-deception is actually possible or not also still remains to be solved.