

# Self-Involving Imagination

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# The Actor

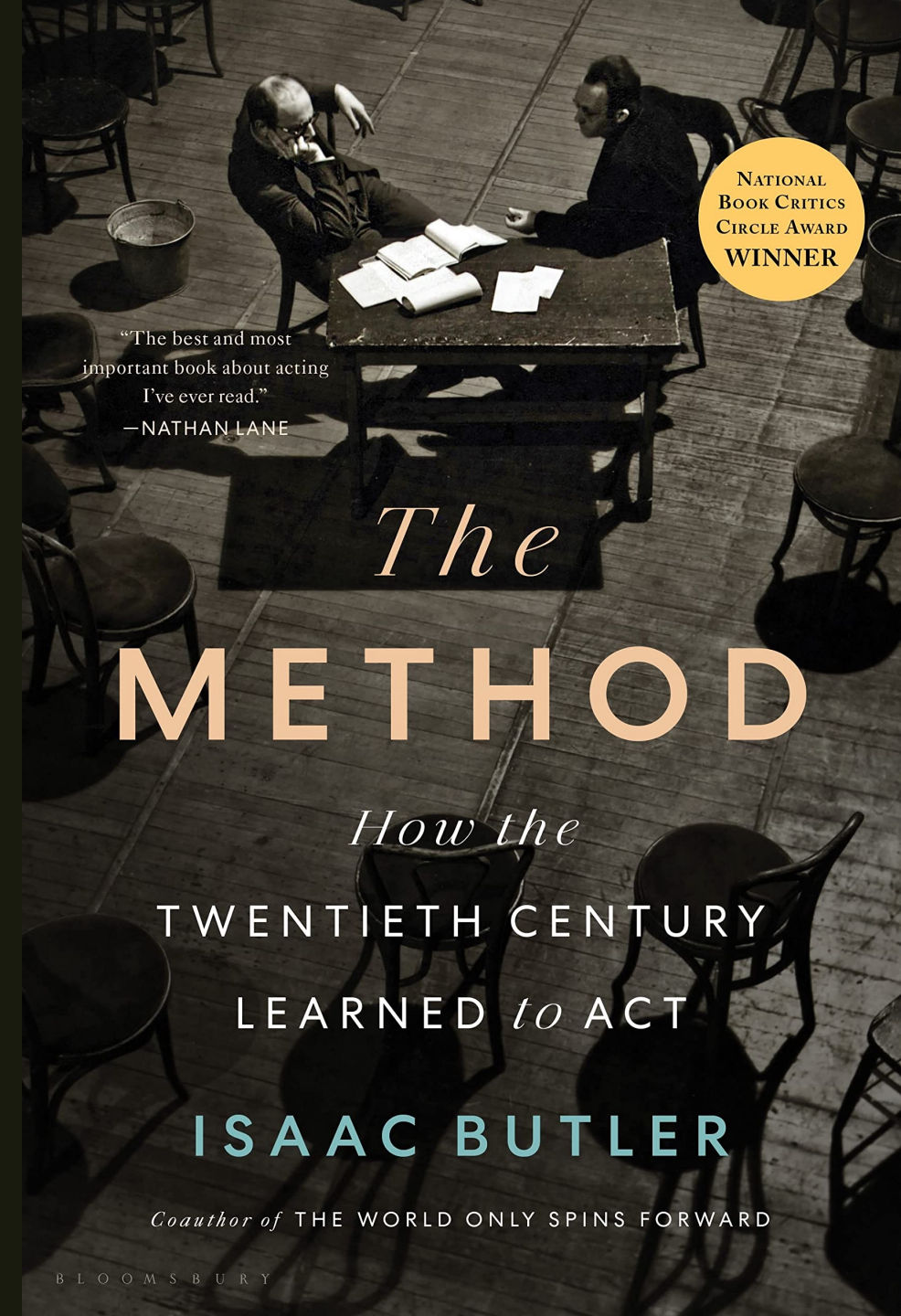
“[W]hile working on another play in college, I retreated so deep into the recesses of my own personal darkness that I had trouble emerging.

After performances, I would stare at a wall in my dorm room for hours trying to come back to normal. [...]

I hated the person I became during rehearsal as the nastiness of the character bled into my own personality, and I was not tough enough to manage the emotions my performance dug into.”

– Isaac Butler, *The Method*.

(See also Tinkler 2014; Liao&Doggett 2014, 259; Harold 2020, 29)



NATIONAL  
BOOK CRITICS  
CIRCLE AWARD  
WINNER

“The best and most  
important book about acting  
I’ve ever read.”  
—NATHAN LANE

# *The* METHOD

*How the*  
TWENTIETH CENTURY  
LEARNED *to* ACT

ISAAC BUTLER

Coauthor of THE WORLD ONLY SPINS FORWARD

BLOOMSBURY

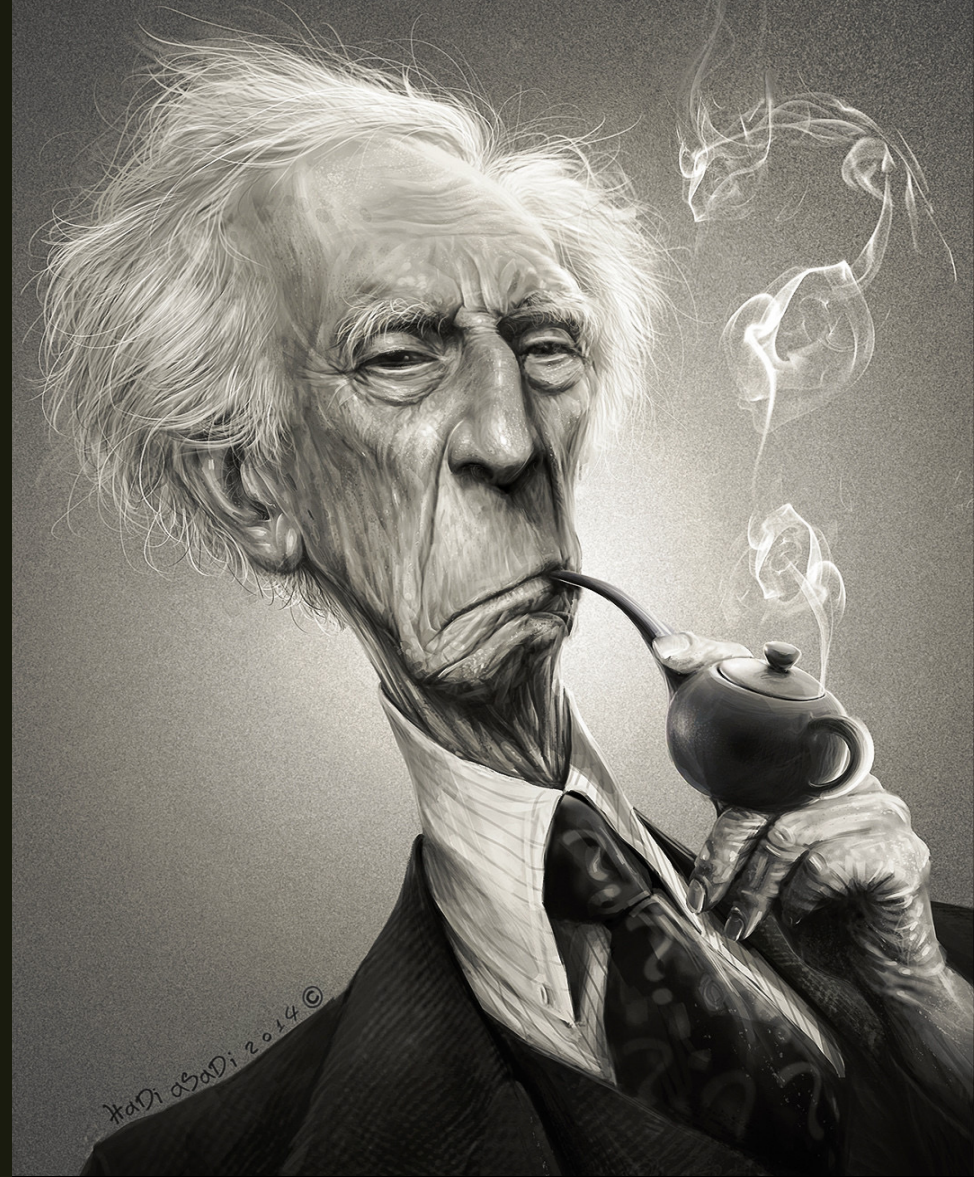


## The Smoker

In order to quit, the smoker imagines themselves as a non-smoker.

They pretend they dislike cigarettes, and have no craving for them.

Over time, the sustained pretence becomes self-fulfilling, and they are a smoker no more (Velleman 2002, 99–100).





# The Professor

Participants were shown a photograph of a professor and asked to write a “day in the life” either by taking their perspective or in an objective fashion.

Perspective-takers subsequently rated themselves as more analytical, methodological, logical, intelligent, and smart.

Further behavioural effects: those who took the professor’s perspective performed better on an analytic task than those who took the perspective of a cheerleader.

(See also Bargh, Chen, and Burrows 1996; Dijksterhuis and van Knippenberg 1998)

## Perspective-Takers Behave More Stereotypically

Adam D. Galinsky  
Northwestern University

Cynthia S. Wang  
National University of Singapore

Gillian Ku  
London Business School

Nine studies demonstrated that perspective-takers are particularly likely to adopt a target’s positive and negative stereotypical traits and behaviors. Perspective-takers rated both positive and negative stereotypical traits of targets as more self-descriptive. As a result, taking the perspective of a professor led to improved performance on an analytic task, whereas taking the perspective of a cheerleader led to decreased performance, in line with the respective stereotypes of professors and cheerleaders. Similarly, perspective-takers of an elderly target competed less compared to perspective-takers of an African American target. Including the stereotype in the self (but not liking of the target) mediated the effects of perspective-taking on behavior, suggesting that cognitive and not affective processes drove the behavioral effects. These effects occurred using a measure and multiple manipulations of perspective-taking, as well as a panoply of stereotypes, establishing the robustness of the link between perspective-taking and stereotypical behavior. The findings support theorizing (A. D. Galinsky, G. Ku, & C. S. Wang, 2005) that perspective-takers utilize information, including stereotypes, to coordinate their behavior with others and provide key theoretical insights into the processes of both perspective-taking and behavioral priming.





# Self-Involving Imagination



Self-involving imagination: we imagine about ourselves that we are otherwise.

(Robson and Meskin 2016)

We take on alternative mental states in imagination, and imagine that we are different.

## Examples:

1. Imagining that I am different (e.g. as a personal ideal).
2. Imagining myself as others in empathy/simulation.
3. Playing a character (acting, role-playing games, videogames, and virtual reality).

(Note: potentially not all virtual reality is imaginative – Chalmers 2017, 472–73)



# Two Mechanisms

Generally, we *quarantine* what we imagine from our actual attitudes.

Two ways in which we can be psychologically affected by self-involving imagination:

**Export:** we *export* imagined mental states into reality, because we take them to be fitting/applicable.

**Contagion:** imagined attitudes leak – we acquire them *despite* not taking them to be fitting.



# Mental State Export

**Export:** we *export* imagined mental states into reality, because we take them to be fitting/applicable.

Export offers an epistemic/ethical benefit of videogames/VR (and art/empathy/imagination more generally):

We take on different perspectives, attitudes, and values, and export ways we think are suitable for the real world.

(Kieran 2003, 63–71; Markey & Ferguson 2017, ch. 8; Langton 2019, 93; Bartel 2020, 154–55; Gualeni & Vella 2020, *xix*.)

Ethical concern about export: we take immoral attitudes to be fitting and export them.

Jack Thompson 2006 lawsuit: *Grand Theft Auto* made violence seem 'pleasurable and attractive', causing teenager Cody Posey to 'act out, copycat, replicate and emulate the violence', murdering his father, stepmother and stepsister.





# Mental State Export

**Export:** we *export* imagined mental states into reality, because we take them to be fitting/applicable.

But export doesn't explain The Actor, The Smoker, and The Professor...

The actor doesn't take the horrific attitudes of their character to be fitting.

The smoker *already* thought it'd be good if they didn't want to smoke.

The participant has no good reason to think of themselves as more intelligent once they've taken the perspective of a professor.

**Contagion:** imagined attitudes leak – we acquire them *despite* not taking them to be fitting.

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# Contagion

**Contagion:** imagined attitudes leak – we acquire them *despite* not taking them to be fitting.

Potential mechanisms:

- Habit-based – we form cognitive habits of thinking in certain ways, which are retained once we cease imagining. (Actor?)
- Priming – exposure to attitudes in imagination influences our own. (Professor?)

Effects will vary for different attitudes (beliefs/desires/perspectives), and persistence of effect will vary depending on sustained pretence.



# Contagion

**Contagion:** imagined attitudes leak – we acquire them *despite* not taking them to be fitting.

May seem more plausible for media like videogames and virtual reality, given:

- Interactivity
- Immersivity



# Contagion – Interactivity



Imagination is often characterised as having no (direct) connection to action, in contrast to regular beliefs and desires. (Currie 1995, 253; Goldman 2016, 20; Friend 2020, 414)

But in interactive fiction like VR (or theatre), our imagined states *do* directly connect to action. (Van de Mosselaer 2021)

Genuine action is performed (pressing buttons on a controller, making gestures), which is imagined to be virtual action.

Mental states we imaginatively take on connect to action – they are far closer to regular belief and desire than imagination generally is.

**∴ more plausible that these attitudes might leak into our actual psychology?**

(vs other media like film/literature etc.)



# Contagion – Videogames

The worry: immoral attitudes we imaginatively take on in videogames leak into our actual psychology through **contagion**.

No empirical support in extreme cases of violence... Players do not imagine wanting to murder, and then *actually* want to murder.

Connections are far subtler, e.g. between violent videogames and:

- aggressive cognition – participants choose an aggressive word over a neutral counterpart in a word stem (Anderson 2004; Carnagey 2005; Drummond et al. 2021).
- aggressive behaviours of different kinds e.g. yelling and hair pulling (APA 2015).





# Contagion – Virtual Reality

The worry: immoral attitudes we imaginatively take on in videogames leak into our actual psychology through **contagion**.

Immersive media like virtual reality might make imaginative identification easier.

∴ Traditional worries about violent videogames may be heightened for VR – greater identification with character might increase effects on aggression.

(Tamborini et al. 2001; Huesmann et al., 2003; Persky and Blascovich 2006, 2007; Farrar&Krcmar, 2006, 2009; though see Drummond 2021 against.)





# Contagion

The worry: immoral attitudes we imaginatively take on in videogames/VR leak into our actual psychology through **contagion**.

- Imagined attitudes rarely, if ever, leak. What explains when they do/don't?

Two preventative mechanisms:

1. (Self-involving) Imaginative resistance – we resist imagining ourselves as immoral characters, and resist imagining holding their immoral attitudes.
2. Active quarantine – I imagine myself as the immoral person/character, and I imaginatively take on their immoral attitudes, but I am actively careful not to acquire them in reality.



# Imaginative Resistance



Imaginative resistance – we resist imagining certain sentences in fiction.

“In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl” (Walton 1994)

(Self-involving) Imaginative resistance – we resist imagining ourselves as immoral characters, and resist imagining holding their immoral attitudes.

Common in videogames: when my character acts wildly at odds with my own wishes, I dissociate from them and refuse to take ownership of these actions. (Bartel 2020, 84)

Maybe less common in VR?



# (Self-involving) Imaginative resistance

## Interesting features:

- More restricted than regular imaginative resistance – I can imagine that others, e.g. my character, want to shoot innocent civilians. I cannot imagine that *I* do.
- Morally asymmetric – we resist imagining holding highly immoral attitudes, but we do not face resistance to holding highly moral ones (e.g. personal ideals)
- Varies across people/genre/context (Miyazono&Liao 2016; Clavel-Vazquez 2018)
  - Those who already hold horrific attitudes won't face resistance to imaginatively taking them on.
- Possibly fails when we strongly identify with characters resembling us (Fischer 2010).
- Occurs in simulation of other minds – we cannot take on imaginatively the attitudes of highly immoral people, hence struggle to understand them. (This can be bad!)



# The Detective

The detective needs to mentally simulate and think like the criminal they are chasing in order to predict their crimes and catch them. (Cassam 2018)

Self-involving imaginative resistance is no good!





# The Ethnographer

The ethnographer studying Amazonian tribes which practice endocannibalism must imaginatively take on the mental states of tribe members to understand them and learn about these practices. (Conklin 2002)

They must imagine desiring to eat human flesh.

Other cases where imaginative resistance is no good (acting/teaching) or inapplicable (dreams).

# CONSUMING GRIEF

COMPASSIONATE  
CANNIBALISM  
IN AN  
AMAZONIAN  
SOCIETY

BETH A. CONKLIN



# Active quarantine



Active quarantine – I imagine myself as the immoral person/character, and I imaginatively take on their immoral attitudes, but I am actively careful not to acquire them in reality.

Part of the appeal of certain art and media (acting, crime documentaries, violent videogames, certain virtual reality experiences, some erotic fiction) is to imaginatively take on attitudes we don't want to acquire.

Whilst quarantining what we imagine is usually automatic, in these cases we often more *actively* quarantine.

This can occur during imaginative activity as we disavow attitudes, or after through *de-roling* where we relinquish our character ritualistically e.g. removing our character's outfit in LARPing, or the headset in VR. (Gualeni&Vella 2020; Burrell 2023)



# Conclusion

**Contagion** from self-involving imagination occurs (the actor, the smoker, the professor).

In virtual reality, it looks like a potentially significant ethical concern.

Yet in the worrying cases, it seems unlikely that we acquire highly immoral attitudes.

We generally *resist* imagining taking on heinous attitudes, or we succeed but are careful to *quarantine* them to the imagination.

