

Overactive (and Underactive) Imagination

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Abstract

What do we make of someone who claims not to believe something, and yet whose behaviours suggest belief – such as someone who claims not to believe in ghosts, yet refuses to walk through the graveyard at night, or someone who claims to know that they have switched off the oven, yet feels the need to go and check? Some have proposed treating cases like these in terms of states of ‘half belief’ or ‘in-between’ belief. We propose that sometimes these cases are best understood not as an epistemic matter concerning such compromised belief states, but rather as an aesthetic matter concerning imaginative states and what they enable us to appreciate about the actual world. Anxiety over the graveyard, or over the oven, can be characterised in terms of the explanatory structures the person is disposed to imagine – explanatory structures which the person knows are non-actual, but which would explain were the world to work differently. Overactive imagination is where one’s preoccupation with imagining a non-actual explanatory structure takes priority over things that it should not. Underactive imagination is where a person is insensitive to how aspects of the world support the imagining of non-actual explanatory structures.

1. Introduction

What are we to make of somebody who claims not to believe in ghosts, yet refuses to walk through the graveyard at night? What are we to make of somebody who claims to know that they have switched off the oven, yet cannot stop worrying about the oven being on and feels the need to go and check? Are these people best characterised as believing *both* that ghosts exist and that they do not, or believing both that the oven is on and that it is off? Or should we say that they *partially* believe, having a ‘half-belief’ or being in a state of ‘in-between believing’? Despite these natural characterisations, we shall

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Philosophy 100 2025

781

argue that the behaviour of these people is not a matter of what they *believe*, but of how they *imagine*.

Let us consider our two cases in more detail.

Graveyard: Shirley professes not to believe in ghosts. Yet Shirley also confesses to finding the graveyard ‘spooky’. In fact, she finds the graveyard so spooky that she takes the longer walk home at night, rather than through the graveyard. One common thought is that somebody like Shirley is disingenuous, self-deceived. She believes in ghosts a little more than she is letting on. Or perhaps a little more than she realises – maybe Shirley is not conscious of what her beliefs really are.

Oven: Kelvin professes to know that he has switched off the oven. Yet Kelvin also confesses that he cannot stop thinking about the oven being on. In fact, he returns home in order to see that the oven is off. One common thought is that Kelvin’s behaviour is a case of checking or confirming, reflecting either that he is simply not as confident as he makes out, or that he is in a state of epistemic dissonance, unable to make his degree of belief in the oven being off match what he believes his degree of belief should be.

Both *Graveyard* and *Oven* invite a diagnosis in terms of the subject having beliefs that are irrational by the subject’s own lights or being in a state that falls short of full belief. But an alternative is to treat cognitive states that appear to fit uncomfortably with a subject’s sincere belief-reports not as *doxastic* states (that is, states of *belief*) but as *imaginative* ones. In a similar vein, a number of philosophers have recently argued that imagination, rather than belief, does the work in explaining various interesting cases. For instance, Ema Sullivan-Bissett (2018) argues that implicit biases are not unconscious beliefs, but unconscious imaginings. Anna Ichino (2020) argues that both superstitious attitudes and confabulations are not belief-like but imagination-like in their functional profile (2020, p. 212). Gregory Currie and Jon Jureidini (2004) propose that some cases call for a view of mental states that dissolves a firm boundary between belief and imagination. Neil Levy (2016) proposes that, rather than having conflicting, discordant, or partial beliefs, an anxious thinker such as Kelvin ‘imagines that he has left the stove on’ (2016, p. 8, italics in original).

Our proposal will be that what imagination does in cases like *Graveyard* and *Oven* is identify certain non-actual scenarios in which aspects of the actual world *would* belong. This is not a matter of

being credulous about the actuality of those non-actual scenarios. Rather, it is a matter of identifying *commonalities* between our world and the alternative world that is imagined. We shall argue that this can be used to characterise both Shirley's anxiety about walking through the graveyard, which involves thinking about the supernatural, and Kelvin's anxiety about the oven, which involves thinking about naturalistic possibilities.

It may be that some people in such situations do have contradictory beliefs, or partial beliefs. However, the responses and behaviours do not demand this. They can be explained in a way that is compatible with the subjects having *full* belief in the things they claim to believe (that ghosts do not exist, and that the oven is off). This will also offer us a new way to articulate the difference, at least for some cases, between anxiety that is appropriate and anxiety that is problematic. Anxiety that becomes problematic – *e.g.*, if Shirley's taking the long route is highly inconvenient, or Kelvin's pre-occupation interferes with his doing the activities he wants to do – is literally a case of having an 'overactive imagination'. To see what exactly this overactivity amounts to, let us first explore *Graveyard* in more depth.

2. Sensitivity to the Supernatural: A Doxastic Phenomenon?

A number of philosophers have proposed the view that when self-declared non-believers nevertheless exhibit sensitivity to the supernatural – ghosts, God, superstition, *etc.* – this manifests doxastic states. An early version comes from H.H. Price (1964), who treats graveyard-avoiding behaviour such as Shirley's as a case of 'half-belief that the churchyard is haunted' (1964, p. 154). Similarly, Price treats as half-belief the state of somebody who denies believing in the content of superstitions, but nevertheless touches wood or avoids walking under ladders, and feels uneasy if they cannot engage in these behaviours, though they do not engage in them in all circumstances (*e.g.*, they do not avoid running under a ladder if racing to catch a train) (Price 1964, pp. 158–159).

Initially, Price appears to treat half-belief either as a matter of degrees of credence, or as a doxastic state which is belief-like but characterised by a greater degree of behavioural inconsistency and variation across circumstance. Later in his discussion, though, he tends away from treating half-belief as a persistent state and comes closer to treating it as belief that is temporarily held:

A half-belief, then, seems to be something which is ‘thrown off’ when circumstances alter. In some ... contexts one is in a belief-like state with regard to a proposition, but in others one disbelieves it or just disregards it. ... In both sorts of contexts, the evidence for the proposition – if there is any – remains the same, and the probability of the proposition is as great, or as little, as it was before. But with the change of context your belief-like attitude to the proposition disappears. (1964, p. 159)

Thus, what exactly half-belief is, whether it is belief or ‘belief-like’, and in what way precisely it is ‘belief-like’ is not fully resolved in Price’s account. The important point for our purposes is that, for Price, it is a belief-like state of some kind which explains the behaviour. A further way that Price expresses the idea is by saying that the varying and apparently inconsistent behaviours of half-believers may be best understood in terms of the fact that persons are not ‘integrated’:

...a half-believer is in some degree a dissociated or disintegrated personality. To put it very crudely, with one part of his mind, the part which is operative in circumstances *A*, *B* and *C*, he believes such and such a proposition: with another part of his mind, which is operative in circumstances *D*, *E* and *F*, he does not believe it or even disbelieves it. There is nothing very shocking in this suggestion. No one, perhaps, is a completely integrated personality in all respects and in all circumstances. (1964, pp. 160–161)

On this version of the view, half-belief could be understood as a function of the full beliefs held by different parts of the person. Whilst this might be a good characterisation of somebody in the state of half-belief, our argument will be that we do not need to think of people as being in this state at all in order to make sense of cases where people seem to behave contrary to what they claim to believe, like *Graveyard* and *Oven*.

Another philosopher, Eric Schwitzgebel (2001), characterises states of ‘in-between believing’ in terms of the subject’s partial, imperfect satisfaction of the ‘dispositional stereotype’ of believing – the cluster of dispositional properties that are stereotypical of believing. Schwitzgebel draws on Gilbert Ryle’s dispositional account of belief, and he illustrates the view with Ryle’s example of what it is to believe that the ice is thin (Ryle 1949, pp. 134–135). It is to have a cluster of dispositions including, amongst other things: dispositions to confidently assent (*e.g.*, agreeing when others say that

the ice is thin, and being prepared to tell people, without hesitation, that the ice is thin); dispositions to experience certain affective or emotional responses (*e.g.*, to shudder when stepping onto the ice), and aversions to performing certain behaviours (*e.g.*, skating warily). Schwitzgebel's suggestion is that when somebody has some, but not all, of the dispositions stereotypically associated with belief, or has them in some contexts but not others, they are in a state of in-between believing. He gives the example of somebody who has 'in-between belief' in the existence of God. He is not inclined to defend belief in God when the question arises among his work colleagues, but he does go to church on Sundays. And whilst some of what is said there leaves him unmoved, when certain topics are raised (*e.g.*, nature or new life) or certain events take place (*e.g.*, a death), he will sometimes say, do and feel the kinds of things a believer would say, do and feel, yet will sometimes think (and perhaps say) it is all foolish. According to Schwitzgebel, such a person imperfectly satisfies the dispositional stereotype of belief in God. The question of whether he really believes in God has no 'yes or no answer' that is not 'misleading', for the fundamental facts are that he is an in-between believer (2001, p. 78).

Invoking such accounts, Aaron Smuts (2010) goes so far as to suggest that even cases of engagement with the supernatural that seem uncontroversially not to presume belief – namely, responses to horror *fiction* – recruit a background of half-belief or in-between belief. Speculating that the emotional power of horror narratives tends to vary according to consumers' cultural background – *e.g.*, that we find spookier those ghosts with which we are culturally acquainted – Smuts proposes as an explanation that 'audiences harbor partial beliefs in their native supernatural tradition' (2010, p. 234). These partial beliefs are 'perhaps variations on previous beliefs that still linger in our minds' (p. 228), such that the varying emotional efficacy of fictions about the supernatural across communities of adult consumers is a matter of variation in childhood beliefs that consumers did not entirely 'shake off' (p. 232).

Whilst Smuts wishes to avoid 'psychoanalytic baggage' (p. 229), this idea echoes an aspect of Sigmund Freud's treatment of *das Unheimliche*. Freud characterises (one class of) experiences of the uncanny in terms of a sort of reactivation of dormant belief: 'We ... once believed that these possibilities were realities Nowadays we no longer believe in them ... but we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation' (Freud 1976, p. 639). This idea is developed by Mark Windsor (2019), who proposes that experiences of

the uncanny are characterised by ‘an anxious uncertainty about what is real caused by an apparent impossibility’ (2019, p. 60). In the uncanny, experiences that seem supernatural in character conflict with a person’s existing beliefs about what is possible in a world like theirs. For example, suppose I believe that ghosts are impossible, and yet I have an experience which presents the world to me as containing a ghostly apparition, such as a face peering in at the window of a room on the second floor. Ordinarily, in such conflicts, ‘Either the relevant belief about what is possible must be revised, or the incongruous experience of the object must be disavowed as false’ (p. 62). That is, according to Windsor, these two states (the doxastic and the experiential) are incongruous, and incongruities such as these demand resolution: we can either change our doxastic states (e.g., amend my belief about the laws of nature), or decide that the experience is misleading (perhaps categorising it as a trick of the light, an hallucination, a manifestation of the human tendency to see faces where there are none, and so on). To the extent that the person fails to perform either resolution, they have, according to Windsor, an experience of the uncanny. What this involves, Windsor argues, is being put into a state of *uncertainty* because the incongruity cannot be resolved. And, since the person is no longer able to be certain of the belief system that would exclude the experience that they seem to be having, they experience anxiety (p. 62). This anxiety reflects the fact that ‘[the uncanny is] a psychological threat: a threat to one’s grasp of reality’ (p. 62). Thus, we arrive at Windsor’s overall characterisation of the experience of the uncanny as ‘an anxious uncertainty caused by an apparent impossibility’ (p. 60).

As such, Windsor endorses Edgar Allan Poe’s suggestion that the *aesthetic* character of the uncanny – its captivating ‘thrill’, or the way it engages our attention and makes itself an experience befitting appreciation – is associated with its supposed *epistemic* profile. The aesthetic impact of the uncanny experience is linked to its impact on what we *believe*. Poe himself invokes a notion of half-belief when he writes, of spooky coincidences:

There are few persons, even among the calmest thinkers, who have not occasionally been startled into a vague yet thrilling half-credence in the supernatural, by *coincidences* of so seemingly marvellous a character that, as *mere* coincidences, the intellect has been unable to receive them. (Poe 1994, p. 199; quoted in Windsor 2019, p. 64).

Poe's reference to 'calm thinking' illustrates well the similarity between his claim and Windsor's. On an account like Windsor's, susceptibility to the uncanny compromises one's claim to be firm in one's convictions that the world is a naturalistic place. And this point generalises to other doxastic approaches. Treating sensitivity to the supernatural in terms of partial belief means that sensitivity compromises the subject's naturalism.

Such an account has attractions. Subjects' emotional and behavioural responses, *e.g.*, anxiety and avoidance, are explained in terms of their credences concerning whether the world contains supernatural entities and phenomena. On this view, Shirley is anxious and avoidant because she is not sufficiently doxastically committed to the graveyard's being unhaunted; if she were so committed, her emotions and behaviours would not distinguish graveyards from more mundane places.

Yet on reflection, this attraction is a limitation. One need not choose between claiming (or retaining) one's place amongst the 'calmest thinkers', and being fully and consistently mindful that the graveyard is a spooky place. Rather than taking somebody's sense of the uncanny as evidence that their naturalism is compromised, we suggest taking invulnerability to the uncanny as an *aesthetic* insensitivity – effectively, a lack of imagination.

3. Sensitivity to the Supernatural: An Imaginative Phenomenon

Suppose lottery numbers, drawn at random, come out in some interesting sequence – perhaps the date of your birthday, or the count-down '6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1'. What reaction is appropriate? Amusement is one appropriate reaction, as is calling the event 'amazing', 'weird', or 'cool'. Finding this outcome funny and extraordinary, in a way other outcomes are not, is (we think) an entirely legitimate way of appreciating the world.

What makes the outcome extraordinary is not that it is distinguished from alternatives by its probability. Consider the 'Lottery Bore', who thinks the only basis for these reactions of amazement must be a misjudging of probabilities. The Lottery Bore points out to the amazed person that '6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1' is no less probable an outcome than '19, 4, 57, 12, 42, 26' with the expectation that this would and should deflate their experience. But the amazed person we are considering knows, as most people do, that '6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1' is no less probable an outcome than '19, 4, 57, 12, 42, 26'. Rather, the basis for

their amazement lies in the *distinction* between these (equally probable) outcomes, namely that ‘6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1’ *looks like* a countdown, whereas ‘19, 4, 57, 12, 42, 26’ is a rather unremarkable selection of numbers. It is *this* – not a (mistaken) judgement about probability – which is the basis of their amazement.

The Lottery Bore thinks astonishment mandates a correction of erroneous beliefs about probability, when, in fact, astonishment is *compatible* with correctly believing how things are concerning the actual probabilities. Appreciation of the extraordinary outcome (‘6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1’) consists not in a mistake about probabilities but rather in a recognition that whilst one knows that it has been brought about by a random selection process, it is, nevertheless, something that *would* be explained by a process distinct from the one that *actually* explains it – such as there being an intervention by some kind of agency which intentionally brings about recognisable sequences (e.g., countdowns) as outcomes. Similarly, the lottery numbers being one’s significant dates (birthdays, whatever) brings to mind an explanation other than the one we take it to have – namely, the lottery (or some other agent) being in some way sensitive to the particulars of one’s life.

Such cases fit David Lewis’s characterisation of a ‘quasi-miracle’ as an event in which an actual process ‘happen[s] to simulate the traces which would have been left by quite a different process’ (1986, p. 60). Unlike a miracle, a quasi-miracle does not involve any actual departure from the laws of nature as they are presupposed to be. It is nevertheless a noteworthy feature of the world, for the way it simulates such a departure. Building on this idea, we suggest that things that are experienced as peculiar or extraordinary are those which bring to mind explanatory structures other than the ones we believe actually to obtain.

Windsor’s account of the uncanny stresses the concept of incongruity (2019, pp. 58, 62, 63 & 65); specifically, between our naturalistic beliefs concerning reality and the experience that threatens these beliefs. Whilst we agree that incongruity is key to the experience of the extraordinary, we say that the incongruity is, rather, between two *explanatory* structures: the one which we take *actually* to explain events, and one we identify as being what *would* explain, were the world to be other than it actually is. Regarding something as extraordinary in this way is *aesthetic but not epistemic*; it is an appreciation of the incongruity, neither requiring nor imposing any change to beliefs or to confidence. For our recognition of what *would* explain (but does not) makes no difference to our level of confidence in what *does* explain. The Lottery Bore’s mistake is to think that the astonished

person's response must be entirely driven by what they (mistakenly) believe about the actual world. We might say that what the Lottery Bore suffers from is an *underactive* imagination – either lacking the imagination to see what the 'countdown' outcome brings to mind or lacking the sensitivity to see that it has aesthetic significance, despite having no epistemic significance. This is what our astonished person gets right.

As the lottery 'countdown' looks like what it isn't, so too the graveyard looks like what it isn't – a haunted place, or the place where the dead live. And it can look like this – and be experienced in a certain way, owing to what it looks like – regardless of whether one actually believes in ghosts. It looks like this because we are familiar with narratives that represent graveyards in particular ways, and this equips people, including those whose beliefs are entirely naturalistic, to recognise aspects of the actual world as things that *would* belong within the structures of a non-actual world. The graveyard can be recognised as an environment that would play an explanatory role in a different, non-actual explanatory structure. In a supernatural world with ghostly agents, it is a locus for spectral activity. The graveyard is distinguished as a 'spooky' environment because we recognise it as a point of commonality between our naturalistic world and those supernaturalistic worlds that we are equipped to imagine.

People are (often) intrigued by things that look like what they are not. We do not deny that sometimes this is because we think things actually *are* what in fact they are not – or because we are not sure either way and need to find out. But this is not the only possible reason for our being intrigued or fascinated by such things. Sometimes, it is because we know very well what they are, and we appreciate the incongruity with what they would have been, were the world different from how it in fact is.

We also do not deny that sometimes sensitivity to things that look like what they are not is a matter of pre-reflective cognitive processes, as may be the case for, *e.g.*, noticing anything 'vaguely face like' as if it were a face (Currie & Jureidini 2004, p. 413). But, as Currie and Jureidini say, it is not plausible to extend this diagnosis to cases demonstrating our 'tendency to elaborate ideas about supernatural agents and other manifestations of over-coherence over lifetimes and cultural histories, where decisions are not time-pressured and the evidence could be reviewed and challenged' (p. 413). Our proposal is that one reason a review of evidence need not be made in such cases, or may not change the experience even if it is, is that certain objects, events or environments are striking

not because we perceive them as failing to fit with the explanatory processes and naturalistic laws of the actual world, but because we perceive them as something that would *also* fit with alternative processes and laws. They would not be out of place in a quite different world. This provides a nuanced understanding of the ‘unhomeliness’ of the uncanny: not as something’s *un-belonging* in our world, but as its *equally belonging* in another world, quite unlike ours.

We are not claiming that the notion of partial belief has no application. There may be numerous cases of human engagement with the world, and with practices of making sense of it, that are best described in this way. Our suggestion is that by overproliferating the appeal to partial belief, we miss a fact that is often overlooked: naturalistic commitments do not disable the ability to distinguish between the peculiar and the mundane. Sensitivity to the peculiar or the extraordinary is not in itself evidence of doxastic compromise – of some kind of instability in what we believe about the actual world. Indeed, naturalistic belief enhances, rather than prohibits, the experience of the extraordinary. It is precisely because we believe the actual world works in a certain way that we are so struck by it appearing like a world which would work in quite a different way.

4. Emotion, Action and Imagination

But what could explain the emotional response of supernaturalistic *anxiety* – as manifested in, *e.g.*, the *avoidance* of the graveyard – if not an evaluation of the object, event or environment as actually posing some supernatural threat? The first thing to say is that when events stand out as salient to us, this, as we have argued, need not be connected with their making demands on what we are to *believe*. This extends to the emotional significance of those events. One thing that properly elicits emotional response is the *suitability* of aspects of the actual world to feature in alternative explanatory structures. Consider the following scenario: the time of death of a beloved family member happens to coincide with the time of birth of a new family member. One need not believe that the timing of one is in any way owing to the timing of the other – say, through a metaphysical process of replacement, or an ordering on the part of the world or some other agent sensitive to its significance – in order for it to be emotionally *moving* that the way things have just happened to

work out is suitable to the existence of such a process. The ‘meaningfulness’ of events to us, and thus their emotional resonance, is a function partly of recognising how they are suitable *both* to our world and to others (such as those where metaphysical replacement or sensitive agents operate).¹

We might also here be put in mind of the idea that the content of one’s imaginings can itself be emotionally affecting. For example, the basis of the so-called ‘paradox of fiction’ is that situations and characters we imagine (without believing them to be actual) provoke what seem to be emotional responses in us. There is extensive debate over this – covering whether these responses are genuine emotions and what their object is – and our aim here is not to resolve these issues.² What is important for our purposes is that whatever one makes of responses to the contents of imaginings in their own right, having those responses might be enjoyable or not, and somebody might take, or avoid, opportunities to engage in the relevant imaginings for that reason. Nevertheless, our primary aim is to highlight an additional reason, which is that imagining allows us to identify a feature of the actual world to which we can respond emotionally – namely, the fact that something belongs in it that would also belong in the kind of world we are imagining.

Having recognised how the graveyard *would* be (though is not) a site of hauntings, Shirley is positioned to imagine *of* the graveyard what it would be like for it to be located within that alternative explanatory structure. Put in Kendall Walton’s terms (*e.g.*, Walton, 1990), aspects of the actual graveyard can be recruited as *props* in a game of make-believe: things that prescribe, within the remit of the imaginative project in which Shirley is engaging, imagining certain things. A typical time to engage in such an imaginative project would be on exposure to those props. Walking through the graveyard, I can imagine that *this* time (midnight, say) is when ghostly activity begins, that *that* noise (*e.g.*, wind in the leaves) is the stirring of an unrestful spirit, that I am currently intruding, that I am currently being watched, and so on. In this way, our identification of points of commonality between this world and others becomes more fine-grained.

¹ It might be objected that what is moving is that the event is simply a good *metaphor* for, say, the actual continuation of a family or of life. But what *makes* it a good metaphor is that it recognisably would be explained by non-naturalistic processes of ‘continuation’.

² See Friend (2016) for an overview.

This also explains why behavioural responses – *e.g.*, avoiding the graveyard – are entirely intelligible without credence in the supernatural. We can understand such behaviours as attempts to *curate* aspects of our experience, by controlling our exposure to features of the world which support or undermine the imaginative experience. By managing our exposure, we can exert control over three things: first, our experience of the extraordinary and our perception of the world's suitability to be other than how it is; second, the imaginative projects in which we engage, which we may enjoy more or less; third, the associated emotional responses, which may in themselves be desirable or undesirable ways to feel at a given time. Avoiding the graveyard in some conditions but not others is equally explicable in these terms. Some environments provide more in the way of props than others, and more properties which are recognisable as shared between our world and supernatural worlds. Mist, night, Christmas Eve, and so on, may all be things a given subject identifies as something that would belong in a non-actual, supernatural explanatory structure.

In general, we can appreciate a place and its features partly by appreciating certain 'modal' properties that the place has – not just how it *is*, but how it *would* or *could* have been.³ Environmental features of places (together with cultural features of us) facilitate experiences in those places which we identify as experiences that would be explained by supernatural activity. Explicit narratives can also be invoked, as part of our practices of 'curation', to reframe features of a place as things that would be suitable to play certain roles in supernatural explanations. Seeking things out for their modal properties is compatible with being confident in a non-supernatural explanation, as is avoiding them for their modal properties.

To what extent is it appropriate to seek things out, or avoid them, for their modal properties? Somebody who thinks that the fact that there are no such things as ghosts should *deflate* the experience of the graveyard as spooky makes the same mistake as the Lottery Bore. This amounts to undersensitivity to the aesthetic experiences the graveyard might offer. We said the Lottery Bore suffered from an underactive imagination; we say the same here. On the other hand,

³ For this reason, it wouldn't be quite right to describe our account as 'non-doxastic', since although we deny that the cases concern beliefs about how things *are*, beliefs about what *would be* (but isn't) the case play a central role.

Overactive (and Underactive) Imagination

an overactive imagination is exhibited when somebody allows their imaginative engagement with the graveyard to take priority over other things when it should not. Somebody who misses a train to an event which matters to them because they refuse to cut through the graveyard (despite not believing in ghosts) has an overactive imagination. Equally, someone who *insists* on going through the graveyard, because they enjoy the experience of the spooky, and thereby misses a train to an event which matters to them, has an overactive imagination. Both people give the wrong priority to curating their experiences.

Places and events that bring to mind supernatural explanatory structures provide a particularly striking example of the ways in which aspects of our world can be experienced as ones that would belong in other worlds. But the alternatives that are brought to mind are not always supernatural. This brings us back to the case of naturalistic anxiety.

5. Naturalistic Anxiety as a Case of (Over)imagination

After watching *Psycho*, some of us may behave warily when using bathrooms with a shower curtain. After watching *Jaws*, some of us may be reluctant to swim in the ocean. How might this ‘*Psycho* effect’, the unwillingness to be in environments which certain fictions have represented as threatening, be explained?

In their discussion of this effect, Currie and Jureidini (2004, p. 421) cite a proposal offered to them by Paul Noordhof. Whilst the *Psycho* effect may be taken by some as evidence that imagining *induces* belief about actual bathrooms and their shower curtains (p. 420), an alternative is to say that we are now primed to *imagine* differently when we confront actual showers, which brings about emotions that are unpleasant to have. Thus, ‘wishing to reduce the level of anxiety, and believing that avoidance of the shower will contribute to that, one avoids the shower’ (p. 421).

A similar proposal is Neil Levy’s (2016) account of ‘everyday anxiety’, which is designed to capture cases like Kelvin’s anxiety over the oven being left on. Levy aims to provide an alternative to models which treat such cases as involving conflicting, discordant, or partial beliefs. Whilst allowing (as we have) that such doxastic phenomena are genuine – and, indeed, maintaining that sometimes ‘Neither we, nor observers, may be able to tell whether we are in-between believers or anxious thinkers in particular cases’ (2016, p. 9) – Levy maintains that anxious thinking is a different species from doxastic

conflict or irresolution. The anxious thinker ‘imagines *that he has left the stove on ...* [b]ut his thought is not poised to cause behaviour in a belief-like manner’ (p. 8). If the anxious thinker ‘returns to his apartment, he does not do so *to check whether the stove is off*, I suggest, but rather *to assuage his anxiety*’ (p. 8). Thus, on Levy’s model, imagining causes the experience of anxiety, and behaviour serves to regulate the experience of anxiety.

The account that we have proposed can be invoked to reinforce this kind of approach to naturalistic anxiety. We suggest that one species of naturalistic anxiety involves overactive imagination in the sense we have specified: the over-sensitive recognition of commonalities between the actual world and alternative worlds. Consider Kelvin’s anxiety over the idea of having left the oven on. Kelvin’s experience whilst anxious is coloured by the fact that everything he encounters is compatible with his having left the oven on. On our proposal, Kelvin’s recognising this compatibility does not mean his belief that the oven is off is undermined. What it means is that everything is experienced in terms of the fact that it *would* belong in a world where the oven has been left *on*. Insofar as Kelvin is preoccupied, everything serves to make imaginable a world in which *this* (i.e., whatever event Kelvin is currently engaging with) happens *and the oven has been left on*. In this way, events are unhomely to Kelvin because he is continually aware that they belong equally well in a world which is disastrous for him.

We do not claim that all experiences of anxiety are like this. We offer it as an illuminating way to regard, whether third-personally or first-personally, at least some cases. It makes space for Kelvin’s returning home to see the oven, whilst agreeing with Levy that this is not checking behaviour. Kelvin is not addressing his credences concerning the oven but affording himself relief from the experience of the unhomely. What is significant about seeing that the oven is off is that this is the one thing that is not recognisable as a point of commonality with a world where the oven is on. The significance of apparent ‘checking’ behaviour is its providing respite from Kelvin’s continual exposure to grounds for imagining a disastrous world (and, accordingly, for recognising the modal properties of this one). Again, we do not claim this to be true of all cases. We do not wish to deny that there are ever cases of genuine checking. We just elucidate one way in which anxiety can occur without the need for doxastic correction. Naturalistic anxiety of this sort qualifies, we suggest, as a form of aesthetic engagement with the world, in that it is an appreciation of incongruity of the kind that we have identified; of confronting something that we are aware would belong

in a world that differs from ours in some respect we find noteworthy. This aligns with a sense of ‘anxiety’ as recognising everyday events as points of commonality with worlds where bad things happen.

Once we see that supernaturalistic anxiety need not be understood in terms of belief, there is also no reason to maintain that naturalistic anxiety need always be understood in terms of belief. Each is a kind of overactive imagining, involving the recognition of the suitability of events to belonging in other worlds. In such cases, strategies that attempt (for whatever reason) to change behaviour or outlook on the basis of correcting a pathology of belief are misplaced. What is to be addressed, if anything, is the subject’s imaginative range and/or how they prioritise the curation of their imaginative experiences and the sensitivity these engender to the world’s modal properties.⁴

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Craig Bourne and Emily Caddick Bourne

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