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I N T E R V I S T E

Conversation with Greg Currie

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Greg Currie is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of York and a fellow of the British Academy and of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. He is a leading figure in debates in the philosophy of mind and language and in aesthetics on a wide range of topics, including imagination, fiction, narratives, cinema, photography, irony and much more. His most recent book is Imagining and Knowing *(Oxford University Press, 2020). He is the editor-in-chief of the journal* Mind & Language. *Here I interview him about his philosophical research, experiences, and career.*

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1. Hello Greg, thank you very much for accepting my invitation to be interviewed for the readers of APhEx on your work and philosophical career. Let's start from the beginning. How did you become interested in philosophy in the first place?

GC: Thanks to you, Anna, for this invitation. For my two last years at school (we call it "sixth form") I went to a grammar school, a much more academic place than where I had been before that. We did some philosophy as an add-on to the subjects we were taking exams in; some Greek philosophy, and something on Marx's theory of value are the things I recall. I found all this terribly interesting but planned to study economic history at university, which is what I was accepted to do when I went to the London School of Economics. It turned out that the school had a small philosophy department, very much the product of Karl Popper, who had arrived there after the war, having spent some years in New Zealand. I read some of Popper's essays and thought they were rather wonderful. Popper wrote in a straightforward and engaging manner, though unfortunately one which discouraged a hard look at the details of his often not very strong arguments. Popper also thought himself deeply misunderstood and undervalued by his academic peers, who he often accused of adherence to false gods – a view I was at that time too willing to accept. Anyway, I persuaded my economics tutor to allow me to move to philosophy.

2. And how was your first experience with academic philosophy?

GC: Popper had retired by that time and had become estranged from the Philosophy Department, being given to accusing anyone who raised even the most constructive criticism of his views as a traitor. The people who taught me for the next few years were certainly not blind to weaknesses in Popper's thought (or his personality, come to that); but there was a tendency to see philosophy, and especially the teaching of philosophy, in rather narrowly Popperian terms. As a result, we had a somewhat eccentric philosophical education. We never discussed the materialism of Armstrong (Popper was a dualist), or Gettier problems about knowledge, or causal theories of reference, or the relations between reasons and causes – all issues being energetically discussed in the wider philosophical world at the time. Philosophers like Austin, Grice and Strawson, if mentioned at all, were quickly put aside as advocates of ordinary language philosophy or conceptual analysis, and therefore very mistaken. Given this oddly narrow undergraduate curriculum

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and the fact that I did no MA before starting a PhD, the result is that, apart a set of lectures on 17th/18th century philosophy (Descartes to Kant), I have never taken philosophy courses in anything but logic and history and philosophy of science and mathematics.

3. So, do you have regrets about your philosophical start?

GC: I know what I just said sounds terribly negative. But the school as a whole was a wonderfully cosmopolitan place, located in the centre of London, with a huge proportion of students from overseas (much less common then than now). My teachers were generous with their time and very encouraging, so overall I am glad to have studied there; I would have done badly at Cambridge, which had turned down my application. Also, while the Popperian outlook was remarkably insular, there was in those days a good deal of acceptance of the idea of a commanding figure to whose project one signed up. Wittgenstein of course is the outstanding case here and seems to have been at least as self-indulgent as Popper in his attitude to criticism; Austin perhaps had tendencies in this direction, though much more constrained. Behaviour of that kind would not be acceptable now I think.

And the things I did study in logic and math seem to me as useful for philosophy as all the things I didn't. Topology teaches that things superficially very different may share deep properties. Analysis shows how the infinite can be finitely conceptualised. Metalogical theorems show the surprising limits of proof and definition. Set theory is a lesson in the difficulty (impossibility, it seems) of capturing an apparently simple idea in a theory. All very important ideas for a philosopher.

As will be evident in what follows, there are connections here to a political education of an at least practical kind. The year before I went to LSE was 1968, and the school was closed for part of that year because of the turmoil created by radical student protests which focused at large scale on the Vietnam war, but took in complaints about "bourgeois" teaching, the appointment of a disliked Director, and the School's installation of security gates in an attempt to limit the scope for student occupations. For my first couple of years at LSE this went on, though at a lower level. At first, I saw all this as refreshingly democratic; but that impression did not last. For many of the senior professors, often European immigrants, often Jewish, this must have seemed like the chaos and political dogmatism of the '30s returning. There was a radical left tradition at LSE long represented by Harold Laski and the School had been founded by Fabian socialists; but von Hayek and

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Popper had become influential voices against state intervention, and the economics department was dominated by free market Chicago-school thinkers led by the colourful Harry Johnson, whose early death was due to drinking and weekly flights between London and Chicago.

Because the School was so small (about two thousand students crammed into a tiny space in central London), there was always a feeling that politics was a matter of identifiable personalities one might see every day. Anyway, I graduated in 1972 with marks good enough to more or less guarantee several years of state support for a doctorate; I don't recall having to argue a case to anyone. Almost unimaginable now.

4. In the course of your philosophical career, you moved across three different continents – Europe (UK), USA, and Australia. Which philosophers/mentors/scholars have been more influential on your thinking?

GC: I had the opportunity to go to Cambridge for my doctorate but stayed at LSE; if there was any thought behind that decision I can't reconstruct it now. Imre Lakatos was my supervisor. He had fled Hungary in '56 after a period in the communist government and then in a camp for political prisoners (not an unusual progression in that environment). With virtually no English to start with, he wrote a PhD under Braithwaite at Cambridge, leading to *Proofs and Refutations*, an imagined debate between insufferably brilliant gymnasium students (Hungarian no doubt) who discuss various proofs of Euler's polyhedron conjecture, important for the development of topology. Apart from arguing for a kind of anti-foundationalism about mathematical knowledge, that book is an important precursor of work now familiar to us on conceptual engineering. I wish it were more widely read. Like many with his background, he was deeply hostile to the left, with a very unsentimental attitude to the need for covert action in world politics; the protection of democracy requires sometimes very undemocratic action, I think he would have said.

My time with Lakatos was brief; he died suddenly in my second year of graduate work. I was by then his research assistant and eventually helped to edit two volumes of his collected papers. I have long since moved to distant areas of philosophy, but the importance he placed on the idea of heuristics in science has influenced the way I think about appraisal in art. Lakatos argued that two theories might be empirically equivalent yet supported by the evidence to different degrees because their histories were different; I hold (as

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do some others) that two pictures can be visually indiscriminable yet have different aesthetic values because of their different histories.

5. Then you studied in the US for a while…

GC: Yes, for the last year of my doctoral studies I went to the University of California, Berkeley, as a Fulbright Scholar. This was a very lucky move. I had by then settled on Frege as my topic and I was able at Berkeley to work with Hans Sluga, who was finishing a book on this extraordinary figure, perhaps the greatest philosopher of the nineteenth century. Grice and Searle were there, and also Burt Dreyfus and Barry Stroud. Davidson, Lewis and Nozick visited, and John Earman gave wonderful lectures on space-time. I quickly realised that seeing oneself as a member of a school of thought is a bad idea, as is complaining that others do not see things the way you do. One should see every other philosophical position as a way to help you do the work you want to do; only rarely does that prove impossible.

6. Very nice. And then New Zealand and Australia – which you've always been describing as a very important time in your career…

GC: Indeed. At the end of my scholarship I was looking for an academic job. My US visa didn't allow me to apply for posts in the US; and in the UK there were virtually no academic jobs at that time, the late seventies. But I was offered a postdoctoral fellowship in New Zealand, at the University of Otago. It was another very lucky move. It was a small but strong department with a great deal of emphasis on research. It was also a time when workloads were much lighter, mostly because the vast amount of administration we have to do now was unthought of. It's true that in those days, certainly in New Zealand, it was very difficult to get research grants that bought you research time. But I didn't feel much need to buy extra time, and university-funded research leave was generous. Subsequently I have gained a number of research grants in Australia and in the UK, but also spent a vast amount of time applying for them.

I was at Otago for fifteen years, apart from one important year early on when I had a junior post at Sydney University. By that time, Philosophy at Sydney had become so politically divided that the University split it into two departments, with entrances next door to one another near the Jacaranda tree in the Quad – a central and very lovely place on campus. The issue had originally been the Vietnam war, but this had broadened into a dispute over

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many things that included university governance. The leftist department – "General Philosophy" – had adopted participatory democracy, with students able to vote on what and how to teach and on everything else. In this atmosphere, getting any work done was difficult, and several faculty fled to the other department ("Traditional and Modern Philosophy", an amalgam of conservatives and those on the liberal left), amusingly describing themselves as boat people. My post was in "Trad and Mod". By the time I arrived, perhaps the most surprising thing was how peaceful and well-functioning things were, given the very hostile environment there had been not long before. Students made their own choices about which department to study in – how, I don't know – but could take courses in both, and there was a good deal of friendly feeling between people across the divide. There were regular Sunday bush walks in the countryside outside Sydney (New South Wales is one of the most beautiful places on earth) with folk from both departments cheerfully walking together. David Armstrong, certainly a conservative, was a great worker for reconciliation at this time, despite having been through a good deal of vilification; and many in General Philosophy seemed hardly different in outlook or temperament from those in Trad and Mod. But reunification did not come for many years.

7. Who were the greatest influences on you during these years – and what were these years' highlights more generally?

GC: Armstrong was very impressive intellectually and a great believer in philosophy as a co-operative activity. He was always generous to more junior scholars and I gained an enormous amount from knowing him as he extended his materialism from mind to metaphysics. David Lewis was his great friend and a frequent visitor. While he initially seemed odd and forbidding, Lewis was marked by great intellectual generosity and good humour. As others have said, you could write down his comments on a paper and send them straight to the printer. Criticism was often accompanied by three or four suggestions about how you could repair the damage. Also astonishing was the breadth of his work. He did everything, aesthetics and philosophy of religion included. Scott Soames was right to call him the greatest systematic metaphysician since Leibniz.

I had only a temporary post at Sydney and moved then back to Otago, where I was eventually promoted to full professor and served as head of department. I also wrote *The Nature of Fiction*, a book I remain reasonably happy with, though I don't now believe all that I wrote in it. It appeared at the

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same time as Walton's *Mimesis as Make Believe*, and probably gained some attention for that reason. From 1994 I spent six years in Australia – at Flinders University, Adelaide. The Department there had been a byword for seventies-style political radicalism and some of my colleagues there were from that period. But things had quietened down. My predecessor had been Brian Medlin, one-time leftist firebrand but by then gentler ecological activist and – surprisingly – great friend once again of David Armstrong; the two had been bitter political foes. Adelaide is sometimes regarded as amusingly genteel by Sydney-siders and Melburnians ("Sydney or the bush", said Armstrong) but it was excellent for people like us with very young children and, like other Australian cities, has wonderful food. Our doctoral program was joint with the University of Adelaide, and I was often at the Research School of Social Science in Canberra where Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit had fashioned one of the best philosophy departments in the world. In those years I organised a series of workshops that brought together philosophers and cognitive scientists. That set the tone for my work over the next twenty years.

8. To conclude this first part of the interview exploring the roots of your philosophical journey, can you share with the readers of APhEx the titles of the three books that most influenced your thinking?

GC: First is certainly Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, which has so much of value and is a model of philosophical thought about the arts. While I suppose it figures mostly on aesthetics reading lists, it offers a theory of human representational activity with wide application. My two other choices were given initially as lecture series around the same time: Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*, and Grice's *Logic and Conversation*. Read at different times, both, in their different ways, gave me a sense of a fog clearing. Of course, with Grice I am cheating because *Logic and Conversation* has not appeared as a book – I don't know why. It is, just about, book length and appears in Grice's collection *Studies in the Way of Words*.

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9. Your first monograph, in 1982, was on the philosophy of Frege; then you progressively shifted to aesthetics and philosophy of mind – dealing with a variety of topics such as fiction, film, photography, imagination, empathy and the emotions, irony, anthropology, archaeology, and more. Is there a fil rouge (or a few of them) connecting all these themes?

GC: For the first few years after doctoral work I did focus on Frege. This was a time dominated by Michael Dummett's work. As others have noted, Dummett had a rather eccentric view of Frege's place in the history of philosophy, arguing that he was reacting against idealism. I wrote about that, about Frege's late ideas on the "reality" of propositions, his theory of inference. A long paper I wrote on his theory of real numbers might be the first on that topic. But it was clear I would want to move into some other field for the long term. It was suggested I might teach an aesthetic course when someone retired from our department. I thought this an interesting opportunity, but contact with the available literature reduced my enthusiasm a good deal. Aesthetics had a very high place in nineteenth century philosophy and there had been interesting (though often rather obscure) work combining philosophy and psychology through the last years of the nineteenth century. But by the seventies it had largely fallen out of the mainstream and there seemed to be little in the way of interesting work or even interesting problems to work on. Reading Walton's "Categories of Art" changed all that for me, and I saw how systematic thought could be brought to bear on problems that had significance for how we actually approach a work of art. Eventually it was Walton's work on the place of make-believe in fiction that influenced me most; oddly, "Categories of Art" is almost the only thing he has written that does not discuss make-believe or imagination. I suppose I came to the philosophy of the arts rather late, but that was a good thing: it is a subject that draws heavily on other parts of philosophy.

10. I was indeed expecting you to mention the imagination in answering my question about a fil rouge in your work…

GC: Indeed! The work I have done since moving out of Frege studies is on a variety of topics, but they are nearly all connected by the idea of the imagination. And certainly my move towards areas of philosophy that join hands with psychology and other empirical human sciences began with the recognition that there is much to be learned about the imagination by looking at studies of psychological development and psychopathology – I think it was

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a remark by Andy Clark that made me see this, so I owe him a great deal. Nowadays, when I begin a paper I hope that I shall get to the end without mentioning the imagination. But that rarely happens.

11. Would you mind briefly explaining to the readers of APhEx what is imagination in your view, and what is it for?

GC: I certainly don't claim to have a theory that would cover everything that we commonly call "imagination" or for which we use related terms. The area I carve out for investigation concerns the ways in which we disengage from the immediate stream of perception and urgent beliefs and desires to consider alternatives, to plan our actions, and to figure out what others think and want when that isn't obvious. As my reference to planning indicates, this capacity to take thought and perception (via imagery) "off line" is not irrelevant to action; on the contrary, it makes for more thoughtful and hence (in the right situations) more successful action. I have been rude about Popper but he did say that human beings are able to let their hypotheses die in their stead, and that seems to be true.

12. In your 2002 book with Ian Ravenscroft, Recreative Minds. Imagination in Philosophy and Psychology, *you articulate an account of imagination which has been extremely influential. Some aspects of the view you present there have become widely accepted, consolidating into what is now the "orthodox view" of imagination that few authors question. Other aspects of your view were way more controversial, and sparked live debates which are still ongoing. If you were to re-write that book now, what (if anything!) would you change?*

GC: I'm glad you think this is orthodoxy. The last thing I should want to do is go back and write the book again, but overall I think that what we said in the book was worth saying. I'm not sure that I would change very much. This said, one thing I slightly regret is that I think we had things to say about certain psychopathologies that were probably not as well empirically supported as they ought to have been. I'm now less inclined to engage in that kind of speculative psychological theorizing than I was at the time. Perhaps it's fair to say that the things we said about psychopathologies like autism and delusional states have not really been taken up by anybody. It is true that we were writing against a background of what you might call "high theory" in this region; "theory of mind" accounts of autism were popular, challenged by

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simulationist accounts deriving from the work of Jane Heal and Robert Gordon (Heal may well not think that is the right approach to autism). I'm still for high theory in psychology, but its virtue is often to be a catalyst for empirical refutation. I suppose this also has a suspiciously Popperian ring: one measure of strength in a theory is testability. Perhaps Popper was not such a bad thing after all.

Another thing that would have been worth doing in the book but we weren't inclined to do at the time was to explore aspects of the imagination that don't fit well into the kind of theorizing that we were adopting – the recreative offline simulation model. That models has its limitations, and it might have been useful to explore some of them in the book, which we didn't do. In particular, a question that we should have addressed is what is it that makes a person's mental activity *imaginative*? The imagination as we described it is something that you could use imaginatively but also unimaginatively. By contrast there's an adverbial way of thinking about the imagination, which has a clear link with creativity – as when you say "that's an imaginative thing", or "an imaginative person", or "an imaginative way of developing an idea": what does it mean to be *imaginative* in this sense? We never touched on that at all.

13. Perhaps you should write a second volume entitled Creative Minds*...*

GC: Right. Though I suppose the problem is that we do not have the conceptual resources to write that second volume. We were not really in a position to say anything much about it, which is probably a fault.

14. One question you leave somewhat open in Recreative Minds *concerns imagination's motivational power. You and Ravenscroft present various arguments in favour of the idea that imaginings can directly motivate us to act, but eventually you express some doubts, writing that "the position is more like a stand-off. Further arguments might decide the matter, but for now making a choice seems more a rhetorical move than a rationally dictated one." (*Recreative Minds, *pp. 130-131). Are we now – after more than two decades of debates on this topic – in a better position to tell whether imagination has the capacity to motivate pretence action, or indeed other sorts of actions?*

GC: That is a good question. I guess I am not much more confident about the answer now. Some people, I think, regard it as analytic, or close to, that

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motivating states have to be beliefs and desires. Most of the objections to the Humean theory (as formulated by Michael Smith) concern the role of desire, which opponents say is not required because certain beliefs play a motivating role independently of desire. My concern was with beliefs, and the possibility that in some cases the role of belief might be taken by an imagining. In particular, the thought was that pretend behaviour in the form of pretending that P, could be motivated by imagining that P. The natural response is to say that what motivates in this case is the belief that it is pretence or fictional that P, together with the desire to act in accordance with the pretence. David Velleman has argued against that view. But you, Anna, have taken this much further and argued that imagining is as motivating as believing is, and that cases where imagination fails to motivate are explicable as cases where some other mental state acts as a defeater to the imagining's motivational power. It's a very interesting view. I don't know whether it is true.

You also argue for the motivational power of imagination in domains like superstitious thinking, conspiracy theorising, and religious observance. Neil Van Leeuwen has a similar view, and Ema Sullivan Bissett sees imagination as driving implicit bias, while Tamar Gendler has argued for its role in self-deception. For me the question is whether these influences of the imagination ought to fall under the heading of motivation. This is something else I am unsure about. Standardly, motivation in this context is connected to the idea of a motivating reason: something which reveals the agent's actions as reasonable, given their beliefs and desires (something different from a normative reason). Motivating reasons explain how one acts—what change one brings about in the world—by reference to how one thinks the world is and how one wants it to be. But it is hard to see how an imagining, which does not describe either how one thinks the world is, or how one wants it to be, could provide a motivating reason. One might argue (as I think you do) that seeing it that way depends on a too narrow conception of a motivating reason. It may well be that we can develop a more inclusive conception that sees a role for imaginative states.

15. Let's talk about imagination and desire. To my knowledge, you were the first one who argued for the existence of imaginative desires (in The Nature of Fiction, *you call them "make-desires"; in* Recreative Minds*, "desire-like imaginings"). Over the years, you have articulated a detailed view of how such states work, and defended them against many criticisms. What are imaginative desires, and why do we need them?*

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GC: Meinong said that imagination is half the mind, because for everything in the mind that is not imagination – belief, desire, perception, etc. – there is something which is like that thing but belongs to imagination. So, for belief there is propositional imagination, for perception in its various modes there is imagery in the same modes. What about desire? Is there a kind of imagination which corresponds to desire? We might think there is just on the general grounds that we find this with belief and perception, so why not with desire? But it would be nice if we could show that there is independent reason for postulating "desire-like imaginings". I have argued that there is, and that the best illustration of this occurs in the context of engaging with fiction. Does the play-goer want Othello to kill Desdemona? Well, surely not. But the playgoer would be outraged if the end of the play was changed and Desdemona survives. What is happening there, then? The sense of outrage is explained by supposing that the play-goer wants it to be true in the play that Desdemona dies – she is outraged that this does not happen. Does she also want Desdemona to die? If we say yes, we seem to lose out ability to explain our sense of distress at the ending of the play, the appalling waste, the evil that Iago has wrought, etc. No, surely we want Desdemona not to die. But wait. We don't believe there is any such person as Desdemona, and we know that no one is in danger of being murdered by the equally non-existent Othello. Can I really desire safety when I don't believe anyone is in danger? Perhaps there are ways round that, but think for a moment of another case, where we have a fiction concerning a real person. You are watching a play about the chaos in recent British politics, and the effective rhetoric of the drama makes you long for defeat of the Tories. Do you really desire that defeat? No! You are a committed conservative. So why are you sitting there laughing as more calamities fall on the party you love? A plausible answer: you don't really desire the party's defeat; you have a desire-like imagining that they be defeated. And that is consistent with really desiring they win, just as imagining it is raining is consistent with believing it isn't. If that works for cases where the object of my desire is real, won't it work also for cases where the object is unreal, as Desdemona and Othello are? I say it will.

16. Do arguments analogous to those you defend about imagination and desire apply also to emotion? As far as I can tell, your view on this has somewhat changed over the years. In Recreative Minds *(and perhaps, again, also in* The Nature of Fiction*) you seem to deny the existence of an imaginative counterpart of emotions, arguing that "imagination is transparent to emotions" (p. 192); while in your 2020 book* Imaging and

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Knowing. The Shape of Fiction *you acknowledge the existence of emotion-like imaginings. Is that right? If so, what did lead you to change your mind on this issue?*

GC: I still may not have a definite view on this issue, but perhaps I can say something of marginal usefulness about the connections between belief, desire and emotion. I think there is a strong tendency among most people who have thought about it to distinguish imagining and believing; the very words we commonly use mark that distinction. (Jake Quilty-Dunn, in a contrarian spirit, has argued that it is a mistake to think that we need to invoke the imagination to explain our engagement with movies; what he calls "unendorsed perceptual belief" is all we need. I am not sure whether, in his view, that leaves any work for the imagination to do). But we don't commonly distinguish between desires and "desire-like imaginings", or between emotions and "emotion-like imaginings". Lots of philosophers think we should not seek to make that distinction for desires and emotions. Now, in various ways, beliefs, desires and emotions are different. So one might look for differences that put desire and emotion together, and distinguish them from belief, and then see if those differences tell in favour of *not* making the "State/State-like" distinction for desire and emotions. A start on this would be to notice that belief differs from emotion in the former's more direct connection to behaviour: it plays a role in motivating reasons that emotions don't play. But that puts desires on the belief side, not on the emotion side, since (at least according to the Humean view, which I favour), it is only ever in conjunction with desires that beliefs motivate. A next move would be to say: well, beliefs differ from desires in that, while both have satisfaction conditions, only beliefs have correctness conditions; your desire that it rain is not "incorrect" if it does not rain. But that puts beliefs in the same class as emotions! For the satisfaction conditions for emotions are correctness conditions. Your resentment against your friend is incorrect if in fact your friend has done nothing to merit resentment. There may be other ways to classify desires and emotions together and to separate them from belief, but these two obvious ways won't work. Personally, I would be happiest with a way of putting beliefs and desires together and distinct from emotion, in some way that then justified us in saying that the "State/State-like" distinction applies to beliefs and desires but not to emotions. But I don't have a way to do that.

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17. In Recreative Minds *and some related papers, you have defended a "disorder of imagination" view of delusions, according to which at least some delusions in the context of schizophrenia are imaginings miscategorised as beliefs. I know you are now less sanguine about this view than you previously were. Still, whether or not it is true, this view raises two important questions: what are the objective criteria that set imaginings aside from beliefs, and what are the subjective criteria that make such distinction possible from the first-person perspective?*

GC: This takes us back to the issue of motivation we discussed earlier. If imaginings don't motivate, or do so only in restricted contexts or under psychological pressure (Velleman offers examples that suggest this in "The Aim of Belief"), we can distinguish them from beliefs that way. If, as you hold, motivation does not distinguish imaginings and beliefs, we can distinguish them at the input level. We don't expect the perceptual inputs that make us believe it is raining will make us imagine that it is—otherwise every perceptual belief would be accompanied by a perceptual imagining with the same content. Subjectively, of course, this would not always be a very reliable criterion as we do not keep a firm record of our perceptual experiences. Where else might we look for a subjective criterion for recognizing belief?

You raise the issue of subjective criteria presumably because saying that delusions are imaginings provokes the question: since people claim to believe their delusions, why would they think that what is in fact an imagining is really a belief? Now it seems that the most pervasive features of delusional states are their apparent self-evidence and the feeling of subjective conviction that goes with them (as Garety and Hemsley found). Normally, I think, we do not have that sense of conviction in what we imagine. But there are things it is wise not to imagine. If flying troubles you, it is best not to imagine the plane crashing while you take of; if you do imagine flying, you may find the imagining seizing hold of your consciousness, being elaborated in vivid ways. You may then say "I really believed we were going to crash". So, there is a direction that quite ordinary imaginings can take which, if pursued under conditions of pathology, might lead to firm subjective conviction. So, we have here something like the stereotype/essence distinction familiar from Putnam style views about natural kinds. Beliefs have a functional essence but a stereotype based on conviction. Just as there can be fool's gold, there can be fool's belief.

I know that you, Anna, take a different view and say that a feeling of conviction very often does accompany what we imagine, rather than saying, as I do, that imaginings have a capacity to move in that direction when things

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go wrong. Another way to explain our capacity to discriminate our own imaginings from beliefs appeals to the idea of self-monitoring, developed I think by Chris Frith, though Frith is not an advocate of the view that delusions are imaginings. If we think of imaginings as self-generated and beliefs as unwilled responses to evidence, failures to monitor our own mental actions would lead to a break down in our capacity to distinguish the two categories. One problem here is that imaginings often have at least the appearance of not being the product of the will. And one can argue (contra Williams) that beliefs are sometimes willed. I don't see a clear way forward on this question.

18. What about the normative differences between beliefs and imaginings?

GC: Right, there is more about the imagination/belief distinction that isn't visible at a purely causal level. For delusions seem generally to be irrational states, and it is common to say that they are distinguished from beliefs in that beliefs are rationally responsive to evidence whereas delusions are not. Thus, one might falsely but rationally believe something when the evidence itself is misleading, but this would not be a case of delusion. However, the issue is bound to be more complicated than this because rational responsiveness to evidence comes in degrees. Ordinary people, it turns out, are bad at estimating the probability of an outcome given the evidence they have been exposed to. They are not perfectly rational but they are not deluded either. This is exactly what we should expect given that human cognitive architecture is the product of evolutionary forces that trade accuracy for speed and make other compromises. People (I think of Tim Bayne, Elizabeth Pacherie and Lisa Bortolotti in particular) have used this point against me, suggesting that there is enough slack in the idea of rationality as a constraint on belief to allow that delusions still count as beliefs. I haven't argued that delusions are always and necessarily imaginings; only that some are. Perhaps the best cases for that are those delusions that are at an extreme end of the insensitivity to evidence scale. On the other hand, I'm inclined to think that we should allow there are states which are intermediates between what we would confidently count as beliefs and what is clearly imagination, and many delusions may lie in that space. I suggested that twenty years ago and we now have some developed proposals in line with that.

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19. You discuss cases in which we mistake our imaginings for beliefs; does the reverse ever occur as well – i.e. do we ever mistake our beliefs for imaginings?

GC: It is said that Perky's experiment shows that we sometimes take what is in fact a perception to be a mental image. Perky displayed an image of a banana just above the threshold of visibility without making that clear to the people in the experiment. She then asked subjects to project a mental image of a banana onto the screen and describe how it moved; their descriptions fitted the movement of the actual image. If people were reporting what they saw but understood it as reporting their mental images, there is some encouragement to think that we can also take a belief for a propositional imagining – though I should say that Robert Hopkins argues that Perky's experiment does not support the conclusion commonly attributed to it. Generally, though, it seems rather plausible that we may take what we believe for something we imagine. Perhaps there are things we believe that we would prefer not to believe, and people worried by a thought often say "Perhaps I am simply imagining this". Sometimes I suppose that is true. But it could also be, as in *Gaslight*, that someone tries to convince you that you are merely imagining things, and so something you believe gets misidentified by you as an imagining. And, of course, you could be persuading yourself that this is just imagining. One complication here is that, on some views, one can imagine what one also believes, as Walton has suggested in connection with fiction. If that's right, imagining something does not imply that you don't believe it. You could be confident you are imagining something, and still not know whether you believe it.

20. In the last decades the philosophy of imagination has thrived – with live debates on imagination-related issues in the philosophy of mind, epistemology, aesthetics, moral and political philosophy – and beyond. What are in your view the most promising new directions in these debates? Are there any neglected or under-explored questions about the imagination that would deserve more attention?

GC: There has been interesting work on learning from imagination by Amy Kind, Tim Williamson, and others. There is more attention now to the role of mental imagery in our cognitive lives. There are proposals for acknowledging states which have similarities to both imaginings and believings but don't fit naturally into either camp. These are good things. It would be wonderful to

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have a picture of the brain circuitry that realises the functions of the imagining. I suppose that is some way off, except for mental imagery, which is much better understood. Perhaps because, as Fodor suggests, perception is organised into well behaved modules while belief is a chaos where everything influences everything else, so identifying relevant brain circuits is much harder.

21. "Imagination, Yes – Knowledge, No". Introducing your 2020 book Imagining and Knowing. The Shape of Fiction *you say that this might be the slogan with which a superficial reader summarizes the book. No doubt, it would be a misleading slogan; but it does capture something true about your views on imagination and knowledge. Can you help us to get a more accurate picture of such views? What knowledge can we get from our imaginings, and in particular what can we learn, if anything, from our imaginative engagement with fictions?*

GC: I agree with Williamson that the role of imagination is providing knowledge, often very useful knowledge. What I am less enthusiastic about is the idea that the rather simple cases described by Williamson, where imagination gets a lot of help from the immediate environment, can be extended to support the idea that complex literary fictions can teach us stuff about mind, action, and moral motivation. Williamson might not disagree with that, but certainly people have argued that great literature has this sort of capacity. While I have never claimed categorically that it doesn't, I see lots of objections in the way of establishing that it does.

22. I know you think that empirical evidence in this area is crucial. Have you done anything towards locating the evidence?

GC: When it comes to learning from fiction, I think we are squarely in the realm of the empirical, though philosophical thinking can play an important role here in helping us decide what, for example, should count as learning. It puzzles me that people have discussed this without serious reference to empirical facts. I suspect that it is assumed that in this area introspective reports substitute for empirical results gained by experiments and statistically controlled surveys. But we would never accept this sort of "evidence" when it comes to whether school pupils learn from the lessons they get. With colleagues in philosophy and psychology, I recently looked at a very large number of studies which have been done on the cognitive effects of reading

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fiction, mostly over the last thirty years. We reanalysed data from 130 studies that together involved over thirty thousand participants in a variety of experiments. I believe this study, just now in print, is the best picture we have of the current evidential situation. I should say at once that I was a very junior partner in an exercise that involves sophisticated statistical methods I barely understand.

Our headline conclusion is that there is "robust evidence for a small-sized positive relationship between reading fiction and cognitive benefits". More particularly, we concluded that "short fiction reading assignments cause small cognitive benefits and that lifetime exposure to written fiction is related to small cognitive enhancements". Though small, the effects were shown to be larger than the effects of reading nonfiction, both expository and narrative.

This summary hides a lot of important qualifications. One is that the relation we noted between lifetime reading and cognitive effects may be only correlational. Secondly, as concerns experiments where people read fictional stories and then undertook tests, we acknowledge that the (small) positive effects on performance may be just transient priming responses. Still, it is not worthless to find a positive correlation; if we had not found at least that, the case for fiction's capacity to effect change in outlook would look very bleak. And transient effects are also not worthless, especially if they are refreshed by habits of regular reading.

23. What about the potential negative effects of fiction?

GC: Very few of the studies we analysed sought to assess the negative effects (if any) of reading fiction. While I suppose it will be widely agreed that certain particular fictions or kinds of fictions have a capacity for causing harm, a more contentious issue is whether there are harmful effects of reading fiction in general: a tendency perhaps to disengage from the world, to direct one's emotions and one's agency towards imagined beings, with correspondingly less left over for the real people who deserve your support and concern. Other worries include evidence that readers often fail to distinguish between what is true in a story and what is actually true, picking up false factual beliefs in this way with some ease. Empathy itself is said by some to be a compromised vehicle for moral thought, more easily deployed when thinking about people like ourselves than about those culturally more distant, and focusing us unrealistically on individual cases at the expense of the overall balance of welfare. I don't rule out these possibilities, though we should recall that negative tendencies often go along with positive and countervailing ones. We

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might believe in the possibility of such effects while at the same time thinking that the overall impact of fiction tends to be positive. As it was, very few of the studies we examined looked at negative effects, and we could draw no real conclusions.

24. In my questions so far, I've been focussing mostly on your philosophy of imagination and fiction. But you also have several specific interpretive projects. Where do they come from?

GC: I tend to turn things that interest me into philosophical projects. For example, Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* is a very puzzling play. It seemed to me that everyone writing about it misunderstood or ignored the pessimism in it, and especially in its final scene. I have tried to identify a philosophical idea running through the play about the conditions for moral change which makes sense of that ending. I've also written (sometimes with others) on the interpretation of films and novels in a way which brings to bear on them philosophical ways of thought. I am interested in the nature of adaptation in drama and other areas, and in meaning in poetry. I hope to write more on these things. I have also started to write on Greek drama and hope to have more to say, especially about Euripides, who has a lot in common with Shakespeare: compare *Winter's Tale* and *Alcestis*. Or perhaps this is just what enthusiastic amateurs are inclined to think. I am particularly interested in the use of verbal irony in ancient drama, and especially cases where the irony is meant to be missed by the character being addressed, though available to the audience. This raises interesting questions about how the audience conceive their relations to the drama and its characters. Should one imagine oneself in some sort of direct epistemic relation to the events of the play, perhaps even being spoken to by a character, or at least being what Herb Clark calls a "side participant" at the conversation? I think the answer involves two distinct kinds of imaginings on the part of the audience, kinds which are not supposed to interact, though in chaotic cases like pantomime the distinction can all but disappear.

25. Any other less-imagination-focussed bits of your work that have I been neglecting?

GC: Mmm… I've got a project on the relations between cognition and perception. It is hardly deniable that we see the colours and shapes in a

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picture. Do we see the beauty, elegance, balance of the picture? Many argue that there is "higher order" vision; that we see kinds such as elm, a computer, as well as moral and emotional qualities. If so, it is easier to think of ourselves as seeing aesthetic qualities. On the whole, philosophers have assumed that we do see these qualities. I am currently suggesting that whether we do or not is a matter for science to sort out and that an aesthetician should have no opinion on the topic unless that opinion has been formed in response to a detailed study of the science.

26. Your current book project, Signs of Agency, *is under contract with Oxford University Press. Can you give us a preview of it?*

GC: Back in the late eighties I wrote a little book on what art works are – the kinds of entities they are. It was rather ambitious in that I wanted to argue all works of art are of the same kind. The prevailing view (made explicit by Wollheim) was that they are of (at least) two kinds. Some – such as paintings and sculptures – are physical objects; while others – such as literary and musical works – are types which may have physical instances (copies, performances), but which are themselves abstract. I suggested that apparently "singular" arts like paintings are also type-arts, though this is obscured by the fact that the conditions for achieving correctness in an instance are very hard to arrive at. I also thought that the way types were identified when talking about literature and music was wrong. Here I was influenced by Jerry Levinson's brilliant article "What a musical work is" which suggested that that musical works are essentially historical – tied not merely to a score but to a maker and a time of making. I ended up developing that idea in a slightly different (perhaps more extreme) way. I think my search for a completely general account of the "ontology" of art works was a mistake. But I remain committed to the idea of art as essentially historical. Art works (and all sorts of artefacts that might not warrant the title "art") deserve to be enjoyed, appreciated and judged as the result of an act of making. Danto recognised that two "indiscernible" artefacts could be the outcome of different acts of making – think of *Brillo Boxes*. And he drew the conclusion that because one of them (Warhol) is a work of art and the other (item in a hardware shop) not, artistic and aesthetic status come apart. The two are aesthetically the same but artistically different, one not being art at all. But I would rather say that they differ aesthetically as well as artistically, and that aesthetic values are historical rather than confined to bare appearances.

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But there are difficult and unresolved problems here. What, exactly, is the connection between the aesthetic features of an artefact and its history of making? Which bits of that history matter aesthetically, and which don't? What do we then say about the aesthetics of nature, assuming that one can appreciate nature aesthetically without supposing it to be the creation of an intending agent? What about various forms of conceptual art, where conventional notions of skill have been deliberately excluded from the process of making? I am working on these questions as I write the book.

27. Why should we think that there is this connection between aesthetic appreciation and agency in the first place?

GC: Aesthetic values are in a sense arbitrary; they are at the mercy of our evolutionary history. There is no absolute sense in which it is right to enjoy a picture in one way and not in another. All one can say is that certain modes of enjoyment fit well with our nature – of course that means that a lot of different ways fit, given the plasticity of our natures; but there are limits to plasticity. Recently I have argued that we can see some sort of answer to this question in the conditions of our evolutionary past. Kim Sterelny has argued that it is crucial to understanding the emergence of culture in early humans that transmission of information across generations was accelerated by apprenticeship: those who wanted to acquire a skill were taught by those who had the skill in return for labour and social support. Now, in my view, the aesthetic sensibility of our ancestors goes back at least to the Acheulian culture of two million years ago, from which we have vast numbers of stone tools, many of which show signs of "over design": careful imposition of symmetry and occasional production of items too large, small or too finely pointed to be useful. The suggestion then is that this aesthetic refinement was a way of advertising one's skills as a maker, and thereby being able to attract high quality and reliable apprentices, a buffer against an unpredictable natural and social environment. In that way it is possible to see our aesthetic interest in artefacts evolving in a way that is linked to our capacity to detect skillful making. At the other end of the philosophical spectrum, the book develops a view about the metaphysics of aesthetic objects (pictures are what I focus on) that draws heavily on the idea of supervenience. Currently supervenience is a somewhat despised notion, said to have promised much more than it can deliver. I think that is wrong. Frank Jackson has done interesting work, using supervenience to argue for ethical naturalism, and I think something like this can be done for aesthetic qualities.

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28. I look forward to reading the book – which will be, if I'm counting correctly, your eighth monograph. To this we should add one book of essays, six edited volumes, and over a hundred papers – both single- and co-authored (rather often with empirical scientists). What is your writing secret?

GC: Looking back, I think I have done too much writing and perhaps not enough thinking. I am trying to get the balance better now. But I have always found writing quite hard, especially at the beginning of a project, and I look for reasons to put the start off. But it does help to try to write something each day, no matter how busy the day is with other things. If you have twenty minutes between other things, write for twenty minutes. It does not matter whether it goes in the bin; in fact, that is probably where it should go. Even writing something that you then delete is a victory.

29. Now a quick thought experiment (freely adapted from another contributor of APhEx, Michel Croce). An evil philosophy hater is seeking to destroy all traces of any currently existing philosophical works. You can choose only one piece of your work to be saved from this attack, while all the rest of your work and of philosophical works more generally gets irremediably lost. Which piece do you pick?

GC: I suppose it would have to be *The Nature of Fiction*, which is the basis of so much else I have written.

30. One question concerning your experience as the Editor-in-Chief of Mind & Language*. What are the best, and what the worst, parts of that job?*

GC: I have been an editor with M&L for twenty-four years and Editor-in-Chief for nearly ten. I first read the journal in the late eighties when I was thinking about the imagination as a topic for empirical inquiry, and the journal's bringing together of philosophy, linguistics and cognitive science seemed the way of the future. I did not then suppose I would have a role in how it would develop, and I'm glad to have that role. Generally, being editor-in-chief has been a very positive experience, due in considerable part to the fact that we have a community of distinguished editors, some of whom have been with us from the founding of the journal, and who work to ensure that the submissions we get from very diverse disciplines get a fair hearing. We have always seen it as part of our role to encourage interdisciplinary research and we often go to a lot of effort to see that work coming from one discipline

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ends up being an important and readable contribution for people in other fields.

One thing I find uncomfortable is that we take our role as editors to be one of final decision makers and sometimes we go against the judgement of our referees (not often, I should say). I think this annoys referees and (even more so) disappointed authors. We don't do this without care but I always find those to be difficult situations.

31. Many think that there is something deeply wrong with the current publishing system in academic philosophy, which combines "insanely low acceptance rates" with (too often) extremely long waiting times for editorial decisions on manuscripts. What is your view on this?

GC: I understand how difficult it is for early career researchers to establish the sort of publication record important for getting an academic post. But making publishing easier won't improve the situation unless there are more jobs; it will simply drive the thresholds for what counts as an acceptable record higher. Of course, securing employment is not the only aim of publishing among early career scholars; they want their contributions read and recorded. All I can say about this is that, over the last few years, we at *Mind & Language* have increased the number of papers we publish by about 25%. Long waiting times are another problem. If I say that we do our best to be timely in decision making at *Mind & Language* I can imagine the hollow laughter of people who have had a long wait with us – more than four months, say. Occasionally that is our fault. Mostly it is because we had so much trouble finding referees; ten refusals is not uncommon. Like some other journals, we do desk reject papers sometimes. That is surely the best thing to do when the chances of acceptance are low. It does of course mean that the author gets no feedback (occasionally we offer very brief comments from the editors but certainly not a full report); but the alternative is to put further pressure on the good will of referees which will then create longer delays. One thing puzzles me and that is that electronic systems don't seem to have made as much difference here as you would expect. I was editorial assistant on the *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* back in the seventies, when papers came in by post and had to be mailed to referees, whose agreement (or not) was managed by letter; they then wrote to us with a report. But I don't recall waiting times being much longer (or really any longer) fifty years ago. Perhaps the positive effect of electronic submission has been swamped by a much higher rate of submissions now (I hear that the quantity

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of academic publishing rose by 700% between 1980 and 2014). So, we need, but don't have, a lot more willing referees. Also, academics in the UK and probably in some other places have much more to do now, so they are less able to help with refereeing. Still, I hope no one will be offended if I say that refereeing is an obligation all of us academics (at least those with secure positions) ought to observe. I do, by the way, referee for other journals quite often.

32. In the course of your career, you've had many interactions with Italian academia. You are regularly invited to speak in Italian Philosophy (and not just Philosophy) departments and to write for Italian philosophy journals; you have supervised a number of PhD students coming from Italian universities (including myself!); you have been on a review panel of Italian philosophy programs; in 2021 you held a visiting professor position at the University of Turin… Based on all this, what do you think of Italian academia?

GC: I very much enjoy my association with the Italian philosophical scene, and with Italy more generally. Like many in the UK, I regard Italy as an inexhaustible source of cultural and natural beauty, which probably annoys those with a more intimate and realistic picture of life in the country. I don't feel very competent to talk about the conditions of academic life there, but there is a strong emphasis on internationalisation, and philosophy in the broadly analytical tradition is becoming well embedded in universities. Certainly, Italy is full of outstanding philosophers.

33. Finally, if I may, a couple of quick questions on "Greg Currie outside philosophy". What are your favourite extra-philosophical activities and what would you have liked to do if you had not become an academic philosopher?

GC: I am lucky to have made a life in universities, because I would have been a complete failure anywhere else. What little talent I have, has to go on philosophy. As I have said, other interests I have tend to get co-opted into philosophical projects: literature and the arts interest me but mostly from a philosophical point of view. Paleo-archaeology is something else I have taken an interest in, particularly concerning the wonderful artefacts of the Acheulean culture that goes back a million and a half years. If I had not done philosophy, I think that classics or archaeology might have worked for undergraduate study, but I would not have made even a competent academic

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in either discipline. A typically academic's interest I have is detective stories. I sometimes play tennis; my daughter has made it her business to see that I am pushed away from gentle and familiar activity of that kind into things a bit more strenuous; we will see how that goes. My only real non-philosophical enthusiasm is time wasting, which I am reasonably good at.

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