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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Acting as Process

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Abstract: What is acting? What type of action does an actor perform when portraying their character? Is it possible to conceptually distinguish acting from other types of activities? This paper aims to answer these types of questions about defining acting. My work involves two aspects. On one hand, I argue that the three current popular theories defining acting (the pretense theory, the display account, and the game model) are implausible; namely, acting cannot be reduced to a simple state or event. On the other hand, I argue that acting should be understood as a process and try to clarify the distinctive characteristics of this process.

Keywords: Acting; theater; process; pretense; display; game.

1. Introduction

Consider an actor portraying Oedipus, Hamlet, Dom Juan, Willy Loman, or any other character. To successfully play the roles, the actor should say and do what the character says and does—to act as if they were the character; moreover, the actor also often enters the inner world of the char-

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acter or becomes emotionally involved in the character's situations. Generally, this type of behavior—portraying another individual—is called "acting." What is the nature of acting? What is it to portray the character? What type of behavior is acting?[1]

Currently, three competing theories aim to answer these questions about defining acting. One is the pretense theory proposed by John Searle and his adherents. According to this theory, acting is a kind of pretense: actors pretend to do and say what their characters do and say or pretend to be their characters (Searle 1975, Lewis 1978, Austin 1979, Walton 1990, and Alward 2009). Another alternative is David Saltz's game model: onstage acting is like a game: actors' onstage actions are derived from the goals associated with the roles they occupy (Saltz 1991). The most recent theory is James Hamilton's display theory of acting, according to which acting is a kind of demonstration: actors display and hide their own features to enable the audience to figure out the content of the narrative (Hamilton 2009, 2013).[2] [3]

[1] Does acting always occur in the context of theater? I do not think so. I admit that acting is typically embedded in the context of theater. However, this does not apply to all types of acting. Film actors also portray their characters. In role-playing therapy, the therapist plays a role to treat patients. In mental health education, students simulate patients to explore their feelings and attitudes. Indeed, most books about actor training or acting techniques mention issues unrelated to theater and script, such as body postures, private emotions, and respiration.

[2] Alward (2009) argues that Gregory Currie's account of fictional utterance can be applied to the context of theatrical illocution and implies a *sui generis* account of dramatic acting. According to this, the actors on stage perform *sui generis* illocutionary actions; that is, actors intend their audiences to imagine or make-believe the proposition expressed by their utterance. The point I defend also implies that acting requires a communicative intention; however, the actor does not intend audiences to imagine the relevant proposition but to imagine that the actor is identical to the character.

[3] Recent philosophy of theater in the analytic tradition concerns the nature of theatrical performance (Bennett 2020, Osipovich 2006, Stern 2014, Stern ed. 2017, Hamilton 2007, Krasner & Saltz eds. 2006, and Woodruff 2008). This involves acting-related issues. However, these issues are more closely related to the context of theater. Acting is discussed to better understand theater as an art form rather than

The first goal of this paper is to show that the three above-mentioned theories (the pretense theory, game model, and display theory) fail to explain some cases of acting, such as those occurring in a group rehearsal or preparation. Hence the three theories are not a plausible account of dramatic acting. The paper's other goal is to provide an alternative account of the nature of acting. I argue that acting should be understood as a process and characterize this process to distinguish acting from other human activities. In Section 2, I use real examples to clarify my position and explain how my point differs from other theories. In Sections 3 and 4, I rebut the three popular theories of acting and clarify my point that acting is a process.

2. Four ways of understanding

2.1 Sui generis understanding versus reductive understanding

We are curious animals and always attempt to understand, define, theoretically grasp, and interpret the external world. Generally, two popular methods—*sui generis* understanding and reductive understanding—help define and grasp a thing or concept.

First, consider reductive understanding. Understanding something reductively involves placing it in a well-known category and using characteristics of this category to interpret this thing. For instance, attempting to interpret archaeological objects often involves a reductive method: they are placed in a familiar category of artifacts and thereby accounted for. The understanding of a "*jue*," an ancient Chinese vessel, is an obvious example. A *jue* is a major archaeological find in Chinese history. It has an ovoid body supported by three splayed triangular legs, with a long curved spout on one side and a counterbalancing flange on the other side, one or two handles on the side, and two columnar protuberances on the top.[4] Generally, a *jue* is considered a traditional Chinese vessel used to warm wine and drink. That

acting as an intentional act. Yet, I suggest acting is a special type of activity occurring not only in the context of theater but also in other cases, such as filmmaking, psychotherapies, and teaching techniques.

[4] For a photo of a jue, visit https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jue_(vessel)

is, this archaeological object is categorized as a drinking vessel. It follows that every component of a *jue* can be understood to be used to serve drinks: the flange catches the poured wine, the spout is used to take a sip, and the handles are for grasping. The characteristics of a drinking vessel are used to understand the *jue* as an archaeological find.

Many similar examples exist in biology. Faced with unidentified or newly found animals, a biologist must classify them—find their places in the system of biological classification. A relevant example is the debate about the classification of the Tully monster, an extinct genus of soft-bodied animal that lived during the Pennsylvanian geological period about 300 million years ago. Some studies show that the Tully monster is a vertebrate close to a lamprey. Yet, other biologists reject the identification of the Tully monster as a vertebrate, calling it a mollusk.[5] This suggests that the biologists appeal to a reductive understanding of this type of animal; the essence of this debate is to categorize the Tully monster as a vertebrate or a mollusk, two types of known phyla.

A *sui generis* understanding also exists about certain things. Understanding something in a *sui generis* way involves constructing a *sui generis* category and attributing it to a *sui generis* type rather than placing it in a known category. For example, in linguistic studies, languages unrelated to any other language are called "language isolates." Such language isolates, such as Basque, Korean, Sandawe, and Haida, are often not classified into well-known language families but made the only language in their own language family. Similar examples exist in biology. The platypus is a mammal native to Australia. Unlike other typical mammals, the platypus is egg-laying, duck-billed, beaver-tailed, otter-footed, venomous, and senses prey through electrolocation. These features make it difficult to classify into a well-known mammal family. Hence biologists no longer attempt to classify the platypus into well-known mammal families and genera but propose an Ornithorhynchidae family and Ornithorhynchus genus including only the platypus. The two examples appear to suggest that, apart from the reductive understanding, people also often appeal to a *sui generis* understanding

[5] For relevant debate, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tullimonstrum#Classification.

to interpret some things: they do not place them in a well-known category but propose *sui generis* categories to classify them.[6]

2.2 State-approach understanding versus process-approach understanding

People sometimes use a distinctive state to explain certain things; however, people also sometimes use a distinctive *way* of combining different states to explain something. I call the former "state-approach understanding" and the latter "process-approach understanding."

Consider process-approach understanding. An obvious example is proposed by Peter Goldie, who claims that when trying to understand what cheque-writing is, you cannot use any single state to define it (Goldie 2012, 61). For example, one cannot say that cheque-writing is only a set of ink marks on paper—a publicly observable state. The latter is only an output of cheque-writing and can be reproduced by photocopying; yet photocopying is not called "cheque-writing." Thus, cheque-writing should be viewed as a dynamic process involving different states and unfolding over time.

Unlike process-approach understanding—using a distinctive process to understand something—state-approach understanding means that a kind of distinctive state defines and distinguishes something. For example, when seeing a red apple, the red conscious experience should be understood as a distinctive state—a visual state with qualitative feeling. It is certain that red conscious experience involves many parts: a memory trigger, visual attention, and an action tendency. However, the visual experience itself, a distinctive mental state, defines the nature of red conscious experience (Goldie 2012, 60–61).

Regarding human conscious experience, a debate exists concerning how to understand the nature of grief—a particular emotion—showing the differences between state-approach understanding and process-approach understanding. Traditional accounts imply grief is a distinctive mental state. For instance, the feeling theory identifies emotion with a feeling (James

[6] Evidently, one can place Basque in a category of language or the platypus in a category of animal, but that is too trivial and cannot help understanding and define something.

1884); the judgment theory identifies emotion with evaluative judgments (Nussbaum 2001); the perception-based theory identifies emotion with a particular perception (Roberts 2003). Yet, regardless of whether emotion is a perception, judgment, or feeling, all these theories imply that grief is a distinctive mental state (perception, judgment, and feeling are different types of mental state). Conversely, Peter Goldie (2012) argues that grief should not be understood as a distinctive state but a process with distinct stages that unfolds over time because grief has characteristics classifying it as a mental process rather than a mental state.

In this paper, I first suggest that acting should be understood in a *sui generis* way, not reductively. In Section 3, I defend this point and explain why other human activities such as pretense, display, and games cannot help understanding the nature of acting. Second, I suggest that acting should be viewed as a distinctive process involving distinct states rather than a single state. In Section 4, I defend that point and aim to explain what characterizes the process of acting.

3. Pretense, display, game, and acting

3.1 Preparation and rehearsal

Consider the following three cases:

Preparation: *A* is an actor ready to portray Hamlet, a tragic character, whom he has never tried to act out. After reading and analyzing the script, *A* attempts to imitate Hamlet's facial expressions and postures using a mirror, recite his lines, and, alone, act all the scenes in which Hamlet appears as if he were on stage with other actors.

Group Rehearsal: After *A* and other actors have prepared everything necessary for their performance and memorized their lines, they meet to act out the scenes as if they were on stage with their audiences. On encountering a difficulty, they stop their actions and repeat this scene several times to improve and perfect their acting.

Performance: When actually stepping onto the stage and facing the audience, via the routine developed and built in preparation and rehearsal,

A and other actors successfully portray these characters in *Hamlet* and show audiences the content of the play.

These cases can be distinguished. The case of preparation refers to what an actor does when preparing the roles; it involves imitating the character's expressions, repeating the lines, or acting out the scenes alone. Group rehearsal is a collective activity undertaken by a group of people; it involves all actors meeting to act out the scenes as if they were on stage. Performance is what actors do when they actually face audiences on stage. The aim of preparation and rehearsal is to build a model or routine to help actors successfully portray their characters and attract audiences in performance.

Preparation, rehearsal, and performance should all be viewed as acting because what actors do in all the three cases are to portray the character, to play the roles, and to act the scenes. They are doing and saying what other individuals say and do; they act as if they were their characters. For instance, when *A* repeatedly says and does what Hamlet says and does, such as fighting with Claudius or drinking poisoned wine, *A* neither believes he is Hamlet nor actually performs these actions. He aims to act out Hamlet rather than become Hamlet. Another reason for my point is that no qualitative distinction exists between preparation, rehearsal and real performance. Some actors say, "I didn't do well on stage. When I prepared the roles alone, I did it even better." Indeed, actors' actions in rehearsal and preparation may be better than in real performance (perhaps due to the pressure and stress). This also suggests rehearsal, preparation, and performance are types of acting.

In rehearsal and preparation, the actor's intentions differ from those in onstage performances. In performance, the actor could intend to display, pretend, and attract audiences, as stated by the pretense account, display theory, and game model. Yet, when preparing roles and rehearsing the scenes, the actor intends to find and remove imperfections, become familiar with the scenes, arouse emotions, overcome shyness, or do something else that aims to improve his portrayal of the character. The difference concerning the content of the intention reveals that these popular theories of acting incorrectly identify acting with performance but ignore rehearsal and preparation. I explain and defend this point in the next section.

3.2 Pretense, display, and game

Currently, three theories of acting (the pretense account, display theory, and game model) address the problem of the nature of acting. First, consider the pretense account and display theory. Both face the same problems. The pretense account is a family of theories that regard acting as a pretense (Searle 1975, Lewis 1978, Austin 1979, Walton 1990, and Alward 2009). The earliest version of the pretense theory is supposed to originate from John Searle's account of illocutionary actions in fictional discourse, which implies a point about theatrical discourse: onstage actors do not actually perform illocutionary acts but pretend to perform them. For example, when the actor says, "The king is dead," the actor pretends to assert this. Searle's point implies that acting is viewed as pretending-to-do; actors pretend to do and say what their characters do and say (Searle 1975, see also Walton 1990 and Alward 2009). Another version of the pretense theory says that acting is "pretending-to-be." That is, when actors portray their characters, their behaviors can be viewed as "pretending to be someone" (Osipovich 2006, 468). For example, when Hamlet sits down in the play, the actor can actually sit down. Here the action the actor performs is not pretending-to-do but pretending to be someone: the actor does not pretend to sit down but pretends to be Hamlet sitting down. Briefly, the pretense account implies that acting is understood as pretend play.

Unlike the family of pretense theories, the display theory of acting claims that dramatic acting is more like the display behaviors of individuals or collectives rather than pretend play because actors portray their characters *for their audiences* to observe their performances in particular ways. According to Hamilton, when portraying characters, actors display and hide their own features to enable the audience to figure out the content of the narrative. That is, actors choose some of their own features that are relevant to the characters and present them to the audiences so that they can grasp the content of a play. Acting is viewed as a display for audiences.

The pretense and display theories face the same problems. Neither theory explains why preparation and rehearsal are acting because these are neither pretense nor display. In preparation and rehearsal, actors intend to repeat the lines and become familiar with the play, find the problems and perfect their performance, and arouse emotions and overcome shyness.

Simply, actors intend to improve and perfect their performances. It is difficult to say that actors are conscious of pretending in such cases. They intend to neither pretend to do what the characters do nor pretend to be the characters. Additionally, actors do not want to display to their audiences at that moment. When someone approaches them, actors may even stop their acting since they do not want to show their imperfections or create spoilers for audiences. In preparation and rehearsal, actors focus on improving their performance—the technical aspect of acting—rather than consciously pretending or displaying for audiences.[7]

Finally, consider Saltz's game model, according to which, when portraying the character, what an actor does is to play a game; they adopt the goals associated with the roles of the character. Saltz considers that agents sometimes act on behalf of someone else: a secretary acts on behalf of a boss, and a ticket inspector acts on behalf of the public transport company. A secretary apparently has no personal reason to place an order to buy certain equipment, and an inspector has no personal reason to check tickets. The reasons for their action derive from their desire to fulfill the function of their roles within the organizations. When a person occupies the role of an inspector, she or he adopts the goal of the transport company—to check tickets and ensure no loss; when a person occupies the role of secretary, her or his goal is to convey the boss's ideas. Saltz calls the intentional states adopted by the agents acting on behalf of someone else "borrowed intention"—this derives from the goals associated with the roles they occupy (Saltz 1991, 38). Hence, Slatz claims that when portraying the characters, actors act on behalf of their characters; their intentions for acting derive from the goals associated with the roles of the characters they portray.

[7] Proponents of the display theory might suggest a distinction between display and display preparation. While acting in performance is display, acting in preparation and rehearsal is display preparation—actors are not displaying but preparing for their display. However, this revised theory might be less parsimonious. It separates acting into two types of actions (actions in performance and actions in preparation) and uses two concepts (display and preparing for display) to interpret acting. Conversely, according to the theory I endorse, acting is a complete process rather than two distinct cases. Whether acting occurs in performance or preparation, it is at least a representation (Guo 2022). In this sense, my theory is more parsimonious.

Yet, the characters are fictional entities; unlike the boss of a company, the characters do not exist in the real world. Therefore Saltz further introduces "game intentions" to explain dramatic acting (Saltz 1991, 38-39). He claims that actors are more like game players rather than secretaries and inspectors. An example is chess. A chess player has no desire to actually fight with their opponent's king; they are aware that it is only a game and not the real king. Since they have a desire to play chess, they adopt the goals associated with the roles of the pieces and act on behalf of the pieces. Moreover, the pieces, such as the king, queen, or knight, are fictional and not real individuals. Therefore, Saltz suggests that in the context of playing a game, "to act on behalf of the game" should be interpreted as "to simply play according to the rules." The player's intentions derive from the rules of a game. Similarly, when actors portray characters, what they do are like what a game player does in a game. "Actors act on behalf of the characters" is interpreted as "to act according to the rules concerning the drama." The intentional states adopted by the actors derive from the rules governing the practice of dramatic acting. Briefly, according to Saltz, acting is viewed as a game; actors adopt the goals associated with the roles of the characters they portray, which is equivalent to the fact that actors act according to the relevant rules.

Nevertheless, the game model faces three serious difficulties. First, we can ask whether an actor should adopt the goal of the character (on behalf of the character) or merely act according to the theatrical rules. Which is more important to act the scene? The two interpretations conflict. Agents sometimes act according to the rules but do not adopt someone else's goal. Saltz imagines the following example (Saltz 1991, 44, Note 25). An employee believes making a phone call will result in making their boss unhappy but still does this because making requested phone calls is part of their job. Here, the employee acts according to the rules concerning their job but does not adopt the goal of the boss (their boss does not want to answer the phone). Similar examples exist in theatrical contexts. Suppose the actor portraying Romeo says to audiences, "Please look at me, Romeo, so pitiable and doomed!" Such an expression might produce excellent aesthetic effects and induce compassion in audiences. This conforms to the current theatrical conventions and rules (if this is what the script requires). However, at this

moment, the actor does not adopt Romeo's goal; Romeo does not say this because he believes no audience exists to observe him. The actor's acting is determined by the rules governing theatrical conventions and not by the character's goal.

Agents sometimes act on behalf of someone else but not according to the relevant rules. For example, Diego Maradona hit the ball into England's goal with his hand in the 1986 FIFA World Cup. This was named "The hand of God"—a famous event in the history of football. Maradona's action was illegal according to football rules. Yet, he acted on behalf of the Argentine football team, and what he did conformed to the interests of the Argentine team. In theatrical contexts, the actor's improvisation is a persuasive example. For example, in a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, an actor portraying Romeo kisses the letters Juliet sent to him before his death. This could move audiences through Romeo's love. However, this behavior does not appear to conform to theatrical rules. It is inconsistent with the content of the play. Shakespeare's texts contain no such plot. Additionally, we could suppose that the script does not indicate that Romeo kisses the letters and that actors do not prepare for that event in rehearsal. Specifically, this behavior is improvised: the actor kisses Juliet's letters only because he has a sudden brilliant idea during the performance. Therefore, actors do not do this according to the rules governing the performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. However, the actor's behavior can satisfy Romeo's goal. It is reasonable to imagine that Romeo kisses Juliet's letters in the play to express his love.

Two other difficulties concern rehearsal and preparation. If the actor uses the "trial and error" method when preparing the roles, he intends to do something inappropriate for the character. For example, in *Hamlet*, when Hamlet drinks the poisoned wine and begs Horatio to live on and retell his story, he feels a sense of relief. The actor portraying Hamlet might struggle to show Hamlet's relief to audiences. Thus, when preparing the roles, he might attempt to act the scene with an entirely negative emotion excluding relief to understand why the latter is essential in this scene. Here the actor does not intend to act on Hamlet's behalf; Hamlet does not act with negative emotions excluding relief. Moreover, the actor does not act according to the rules governing the play. The play requires the actor to feel a sense of relief, not merely negative emotions. Unlike a game player, the actor in

rehearsal and preparation can intend to act the scene wrongly via the "trial and error" method, according to neither the theatrical rules nor the character's goal.

The final difficulty stems from the repetitiveness of dramatic acting. Actors often live and experience the same scene many times in rehearsal and performance. Although group rehearsal sometimes involves something imperfect, actors appear to portray the same characters, play the same roles, and act out the same scenes during a rehearsal and a performance. The actor portraying Romeo needs to see Juliet's death many times, whether in rehearsal or performance; the actor playing Hamlet also "kills" Claudius and "dies" in Horatio's arms countless times, whether in rehearsal or performance. The actors often experience and re-experience the same events in rehearsal and performance. However, players do not experience the same scene in most games. Consider basketball or chess. In rehearsal and preparation, the players do basic training, and they do not actually fight with another team or player. Two teams or two players may become familiar with each other via a warm-up match. However, warm-up matches still differ from real matches. They involve different results, players, formations, and procedures. No two matches are identical. Therefore, the events occurring in rehearsal (training) cannot be viewed as a replication of those occurring in the final performance. Based on this difference, a game is not an appropriate concept for understanding acting.

Certain states may appear appropriate for explaining the nature of acting; for example, a pretense, display, and game appear obvious candidates for understanding acting. However, the whole process of acting, including preparation, rehearsal, and performance, is not best characterized by reference to these distinctive states. As demonstrated, in rehearsal and preparation, actors' behaviors should not be viewed as pretense and display, and the game concept cannot explain certain characteristics of theatrical rehearsal, such as repetitiveness. Hence, these distinctive states are unsuitable candidates for understanding the nature of acting. Acting involves many states, some of which can be viewed as a pretense or display, with others resembling a game; however, the acting, since it involves different types of states, cannot be reduced to a certain distinctive state. Therefore, I conclude that the reductive understanding of acting is implausible. A *sui generis*

account of acting is required: acting is a *sui generis* human activity. Then, what characteristics does acting have? The next section answers this question.

4. Acting as a process

In Section 3, I argue that acting should not be viewed as a pretense, display, or game. Then, what is the nature of acting? I suggest using a process approach to consider the nature of acting: acting should be viewed as a distinctive process, not a distinctive state. That is, acting, as a *sui generis* human activity, is a long-term process comprising the input and output states, the operation and transitions between states, and the laws or rules. Therefore, the input, output and relevant rules or laws of acting should be characterized to understand what this distinctive process is. In this section, I explain the distinctive characteristics of the acting process.

First, I consider why acting is a process. Answering this question requires understanding what being a process is. Here, I do not want to provide a necessary and sufficient definition of a process but aim to understand what a process is by considering the distinction between a process and a state or event.

Peter Goldie (2012) provides a detailed account of the distinction between a state or event and a process. According to him, a process differs from a state or event based on three aspects. First, a process is something that persists by perduring, as "its identity is not determined at every moment of its existing," and a state or event is something that persists by enduring, as "its identity is determined at every moment at which it exists" (Goldie 2012, 61). For instance, red conscious experience is a mental state and not a process because it endures over time and is fully determined by what the subject feels during every moment it exists. Writing a cheque is a process because its temporal parts, such as depositing the drop of ink, are insufficient to determine which type of process it is. In this sense, cheque-writing, as a process, involves distinct states, and none of these states continue throughout the process. Second, a process, unlike an event, can be interrupted and restored. Yet, an event or state can only be stopped (Goldie 2012, 63). For instance, the process of writing a cheque can be interrupted

by a concern that the recipient is a cheat and is restored by dispelling this concern. Third, we appeal to a causal explanation to understand a state or event. For example, for red conscious experience, we look for the cause as whatever it was triggered, such as the fact of seeing a red apple. Yet, with a process, we seek "what sustains it, what keeps it on course, what prevents it from ceasing or disintegrating" (Goldie 2012, 63).

Acting appears to satisfy the three features. First, acting is not determined at any moment of its persistence. Every moment of acting is different; it is sometimes a preparation or rehearsal and sometimes an onstage performance. Actors have distinct intentions at different moments. In rehearsal, they intend to improve their onstage actions; in preparation, they intend to memorize the lines; in performance, they intend to attract audiences. Each single moment cannot determine it is acting. For instance, when preparing the roles, actors can repeat the lines aloud. This behavior cannot be determined as acting because other behaviors, such as foreigners reading English aloud, have similar characteristics. Second, acting can be interrupted. When tired, actors can walk off the stage and rest. At this moment, actors do not engage in dramatic acting. However, they can restore their acting after resting well. Third, the question of why actors give a fascinating performance does not imply a causal explanation. We do not explain that actors do the final performance only because they step out on the stage; many elements determine the actors' performances. We prefer to claim that not only the actor's long-term preparation and rehearsal but also their energy and emotional experience determine whether they can give an attractive performance. We can even consider the role of audiences: it is said that the audience's attention gives actors a vital force to act.

The thesis of acting as a process implies that mere pretense and display cannot determine what acting is. Pretense and display only occur during certain stages, such as onstage performance, not the whole process. Onstage performance can be viewed as a type of display; however, neither preparation nor rehearsal is display. Onstage performance involves pretense but also activities that are not pretense, such as basic actions—only raising one's arm, sitting down, or walking. That is, pretense and display are only episodes constituting the process of acting—they are not equivalent to the process of acting.

The next task is to characterize the acting process. Initially, consider the concept of process. Generally, a process involves four key parts:

1) The inputs entering the process from outside
2) The operations and transitions between different states
3) The laws or rules governing transitions and operations
4) The output derived but distinct from the inputs

If it is possible to successfully characterize the main features of the inputs, outputs, operations and transitions, and the norms or rules of a process, this process can be successfully distinguished from other types. Consider the example of a cheque-writing process. Its inputs are interpreted as one's intention to pay. The operations of cheque-writing are characterized as depositing each successive drop of ink. The rules governing the operations are understood as the social conventions concerning the circulation of money and psychological facts such as believing writing a cheque is a means of paying and desiring to pay money. Finally, the output is viewed as the amount appearing on the cheque. Cheque-writing is distinguished from other processes by the contents of the input and output states and the characteristics of the operations and rules.

The distinctive features of the acting process can be considered similarly. The inputs of the acting process are parts of what actors do in preparation, such as analyzing the texts and scripts, understanding the mental states of the characters, and learning about the characters' world. These include objective knowledge actors can acquire by learning. Additionally, when preparing the roles, actors also need to imagine what they would do if they were in the character's situations, recall their sensory and emotional memories consistent with the characters' situations, and imitate the characters' expressions, postures, and behaviors. Here, actors adjust their mental and behavioral states to live the characters. Therefore, they acquire subjective experiences. I claim that both the objective knowledge and subjective experience are important for preparing for the roles. Yet, actors do not need to do all the things I listed; due to different social and historical contexts, characters, and acting techniques, actors make different preparations. I adopt a *disjunctive* explanation to specify the determinable features of the inputs of the acting process: actors acquire objective knowledge about the

character and play, *or* acquire subjective and personal experience, *or* acquire both.

The rules governing the transition from inputs to outputs are interpreted based on two aspects. The first is the aspect of the play. In the acting process, actors' actions should conform to the relevant conventions of the play. Suppose an actor is asked to portray Hamlet in Shakespeare's classic tragedy *Hamlet*. His behaviors on stage must be consistent with the relevant conventions of the classic tragedy. If actors broke the conventions and portrayed Hamlet as a licentious and brutal guy, they would fail to act out Hamlet.[8] The second is the aspect of the audiences. Actors should be bound by certain communicative intentions. I suggest that this intention is not to communicate the content of the play to audiences because mere storytelling also involves such intentions. The content of this intention is instead an imaginative identification; actors intend their audiences to imagine or make-believe they are identical to the characters (Guo 2022). For instance, when portraying Romeo, the actor intends his audiences to imagine him as Romeo. If the audiences fail to imagine this when watching his performance, his acting is unsuccessful.

Additionally, I do not think the imaginative identification intention is explicit in rehearsal and preparation. In the latter cases, actors might not consciously have such intentions; instead, they intend to improve their performances. Yet, here, the imaginative identification intention still affects the actor's acting. Instead, this intention is converted to a normative standard, which generates other intentions, such as memorizing the lines, improving the performance, and overcoming difficulties. Their aim is to make audiences better imagine the actor as the character.

[8] An anonymous reviewer suggests this explanation is circular: theater acting is a process involving theatrical conventions. I do not agree. These conventions can be understood in a way that does not concern the concept of theater. They can be viewed as texts involving instructions for actions. Alternatively, they can be viewed as suggestions teaching how people act, such as expressing emotions or adopting body postures. Moreover, given that acting can occur in non-theater contexts, the conventions can also be understood as rules of psychotherapy, education, or filmmaking. I cannot list all the conventions related to acting; therefore, I simply call them "the conventions of the play."

I still adopt a disjunctive explanation to specify the rules governing the acting process: actors act *either* according to the relevant conventions, *or* consistently with their imaginative identification intentions, or with both.[9]

The operation of the process of acting can be characterized as a representation; simply, actors represent someone else's features. When preparing the roles alone, actors do not intend to pretend or display to audiences; however, they are still representing the character's features. This type of representational relationship involves variants. First, actors use their own features to represent features they do not have but another individual—often a fictional character—would have in the fictional world. Second, actors attribute their own features to a different individual; namely, the actors and their characters have the same features. For example, when Hamlet raises his arm, the actor portraying Hamlet also raises his arm. Here the actor and his character Hamlet have the same feature; he attributes his own feature to Hamlet—a fictional character. Third, the actor and the character they portray are sometimes the same individual: actors play themselves on stage. I suggest that actors use their own features in this case to represent the features that they do not actually have but would have at a different moment. For example, Donald Trump plays himself in the TV series *Days of Our Lives*, and he refuses to trade sex for a job in the fiction. Here Trump does not actually refuse sex trafficking; instead, he represents himself refusing sex trafficking in a counterfactual situation. Briefly, when portraying

[9] Notably, an intention to act according to the convention of the play can be derived from an intention to imagine an identification. When an actor intends to make their audiences imagine they are the character, the actor can consciously consider whether their acting conforms to the relevant conventions. Otherwise, the audiences would fail to imagine the actor as the character. For example, if the actor broke the conventions and portrayed Hamlet as a licentious and brutal guy, the audiences would resist imagining him as Hamlet. However, actors do not have an imaginative identification intention in all cases. For instance, Brechtian theaters require a particular type of acting in which actors fail to portray their characters in performance. I suggest that Brechtian actors act only according to the relevant conventions of the Brechtian theater, not with their imaginative identification intentions. Thus, I suggest a disjunctive explanation. I do not require actors must have an imaginative identification intention. This point differs from Guo (2022), who claims that imaginative identification is indispensable.

the characters, actors represent their own features as those other individuals would have or the features the actors would have at a different time.

Moreover, this representation process is governed by theatrical conventions or the actor's imaginative identification intentions. When actors aim to represent characters, their representations should conform to theatrical conventions or be consistent with their intentions to make audiences imagine an identification. If Hamlet is described as indecisive in the play, the actor should aim to represent an indecisive person, or he should act to make audiences more easily imagine he is indecisive.

The final onstage performance, which the audiences watch, can be viewed as the outputs of the process of acting. By rehearsing and preparing the roles, actors build patterns, models, and routines. Via the latter, they successfully portray the characters in the final performance.

Briefly, acting is a process from preparation to performance. Initially, actors aim to understand the content of the play or trigger their own experiences; then, via their understanding and experiences, actors prepare and rehearse the scenes and lines. Finally, via the routines built in rehearsal, actors portray their characters to their audiences in onstage performances. This process is triggered when the actors start to make preparations to enter the roles and ends when the onstage performance is over and the actors walk off the stage. This process is characterized as a representation—actors represent the characters' features and are governed by certain norms, such as the relevant theatrical conventions and the actors' imaginative identification intentions. Acting is distinguished from other processes by the features of its inputs, outputs, and operations governed by the relevant rules. One of those elements cannot alone distinguish acting.[10]

[10] Certain states may be especially appropriate for describing certain types of acting process. For example, the character's emotion felt by actors evidently defines method acting. However, acting is not best characterized by reference to only a certain single state because this cannot distinguish acting from other types of processes. For instance, for Brechtian theaters, actors are not encouraged to feel the character's emotions; in this sense, the character's emotion—a distinctive state—is unnecessary for the process of acting. Alternatively, in people's engagement with fiction, they can be immersed in the narrative and feel the character's emotions; here, the character's emotion is insufficient for distinguishing acting from reading. Hence, I suggest acting

Consider a child's pretend play and a liar. In pretend play, unlike actors, children do not need to understand the play and experience the characters when preparing the play; in telling a lie, unlike actors, the liar does not act with the intention to make audiences imagine an identification. Reconsider the ordinary actions. They are not representations. Unlike actors, when someone does something in daily life, they do not represent the other's features. In this sense, the process-approach differentiates acting.

The process-approach can also differentiate different types of acting. Consider two actors, one portraying Hamlet and another portraying Romeo. Both are still distinguished by the features of their inputs, outputs, and operations governed by the relevant rules. When portraying Hamlet, the actor analyzes the text of *Hamlet*, represents Hamlet's features, and intends his audiences to imagine that he is Hamlet. Moreover, when portraying Romeo, the other actor analyzes the play *Romeo and Juliet*, represents Romeo, and intends the audiences to imagine he is Romeo and not other characters.

Reconsider the role-playing therapy. If a patient has phobias, a therapist can play the role of someone causing these phobias to help the patient overcome them. Compare this case with dramatic acting. Different rules are involved. One involves the rules of psychotherapy, such as ensuring patients' safety; another involves the rules of theater, such as attracting audiences.

5. Conclusion

There are four different kinds of ways to grasp a thing. Reductive understanding states something is placed in a well-known category and uses the features of the things in this category to understand it. *Sui generis* understanding states something is not placed in the well-known category but classified into a *sui generis* category. I argue that the three current popular theories of the nature of acting (the pretense theory, the display account, and the game model) are implausible and cannot explain some

is differentiated by the whole process comprising inputs, outputs, the operations between states, and the relevant norms.

cases of acting. Therefore, I suggest that other concepts should not be used to understand the nature of acting; a *sui generis* account of acting rather than a reductive account is required. Acting is to portray roles and act out scenes, not other kinds of activities.

I also introduce the distinction between a state approach and a process approach. I further argue that acting should be viewed not as a state but a process because it has some characteristics of a process but not a state. Therefore, acting can be distinguished from other processes by specifying the characteristics of its inputs, outputs, operations, and rules.

Notably, I do not provide a sufficient and necessary definition of acting (I do not even assert that it is a "definition") because I do not explain the conventions, the performance, or what preparation involves in detail. This might be future work. This article only aims to provide a new way to understand acting and argue that this new way helps distinguish acting from other concepts.

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