

INTERVISTE

Conversation with Bence Nanay

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Bence Nanay is professor of philosophy at the University of Antwerp. His extensive list of publications ranges from aesthetics to philosophy of mind and perception, and the philosophy of biology. He is the recipient of several major grants, the ERC Consolidator Grant with the project “Seeing Things You Don’t See”, the FWO Odysseus Grant, and the Horizon 2020 Marie

Curie Grant. His research in recent years has focused on the nature and role of mental imagery (Mental Imagery, Oxford University Press, 2023). We have interviewed him about his education and career, as well as his current and future work. <https://bencenanay.com/>

1: Why did you decide to study philosophy? And where have you studied?

BN: While many people have beautiful stories about how they fell in love with philosophy, my path is different. I had no romantic attraction to philosophy but saw it as the most viable way to explore the questions that fascinated me. My interest is not in philosophy as a discipline per se, but in certain questions, such as understanding how the mind works or why we find certain things beautiful. Philosophy serves as a framework for me to search for answers to these questions. However, I do not have the passionate devotion that is often associated with this subject.

My academic path took me through Hungary during my undergraduate studies before entering a PhD program at the University of California, Berkeley. However, I decided to interrupt my studies there and, after a year, to do a Master's degree at Cambridge. In fact, after my bachelor's degree, I applied to various programs in the US and the UK and finally decided on Berkeley and Cambridge. Unable to make a final decision, I postponed a year at Cambridge and eventually decided to do a PhD at Berkeley. After a year there, I returned to Cambridge to complete my Master's degree before returning to Berkeley again to continue my studies.

2: You also have a side-career as a journalist, is that right?

BN: I used to, I was working as a journalist.

3: Was this parallel to your philosophy education and career?

BN: Yes, it was parallel, for most of the time. Maybe the first thing I should say is that having a journalism background is a pretty good training for doing philosophy, it teaches you two things that I think are really important for philosophy, and I wished more people had these skills. One of them is that I was working with deadlines, so when you are writing an article in journalism, if you have to send it by midnight, you must send it by

midnight, even if it's not perfect, and I feel that this is an important skill for philosophers to have: sometimes you have to send something off even if it's not perfect, because things can always be more perfect. That's one skill that I feel it's good to have if you are a philosopher. And the other one is that you should always know what audience you are writing for, so if you're a journalist you write different pieces, you write for different audiences, different papers for different magazines, you calibrate things, what you're saying for a specific kind of audience. I think this is also very important in academia that you always have an idea what kind of audience you are writing for, like writing a more popular piece, that's going to one kind of audience, if you're writing a grant application that's for a completely different audience, and so on. That's a very good skill to have.

However, I've never done daily journalism, I was doing cultural journalism, I did a lot of film criticism, various kinds of other cultural journalism, music criticism, stuff like that. One good part of the gig was that I am a member of the international federation of journalists, and I was also a member of the international federation of film critics, which sent me to a lot of film festivals. And I have done that until the birth of my first child, then I just stopped. My first child was born in 2007. I haven't done any journalism ever since.

4: Who have been your major philosophical influences? Richard Wollheim seems to have played an important role in your formation.

BN: I chose to attend Berkeley mainly because of Wollheim, who had a great influence on my philosophical development. We shared many philosophical interests, but there were also areas where our views diverged. For example, he was heavily involved with Melanie Klein and psychoanalysis, especially in the later years of his life, subjects I am not so interested in. Nevertheless, we had a close friendship and we spent a lot of time together, often over a glass of wine in a café. He was an incredible support and help to me. Unfortunately, he passed away in the middle of my doctoral studies, which hit me hard. At the time, I almost gave up my work in aesthetics because I thought there was little interest in the field.

Two other influential figures on my philosophical journey were Jerry Levinson and Dom Lopes. They played a crucial role in keeping me focused on aesthetics despite the difficult circumstances.

I belong to a generation of philosophers who approach questions in a straightforward, naturalistic way. In the 80s and 90s there was a significant

movement towards the naturalization of the mind, and scholars like Fred Dretske and Daniel Dennett have been crucial in shaping my thinking in this regard. Their approach, which explores the mind from a bottom-up perspective, has had a strong influence on me.

In addition to philosophical influences, literature has also played a crucial role in shaping my thinking. Marcel Proust and Robert Musil in particular have had a profound influence on me. Their works deal with philosophical ideas, especially Proust's exploration of perception. Other writers such as Pessoa have also contributed to my understanding of the self and the imagination.

5: Tell us about your interest in perception, there are many currents in contemporary philosophy of perception, e.g. naïve realism, intentionalism, etc. what is your stance?

NB: My view on perception is that it is a very important part of the mind, and in some ways it is the easiest part of the mind to study, partly because there are more empirical studies on perception than on any other mental phenomena. I think that perception is the process of transferring or transforming inputs into perceptual representations, this makes me a representationalist. Perception is the creation of representations out of inputs that can be used for doing other things, they can guide action, and so on. There have been a lot of debates about the nature of perception, but I think the stance I take is not particularly controversial.

I should add: Why perception? It may seem a niche topic in philosophy of mind. In some sense the mind begins with perception. It is not only the easiest part of the mind to examine, but it is also in some sense the most basic way of being attached to the world. In some sense everything else about the mind depends on perception. Other areas of philosophy also depend indirectly on perception, think of epistemology: perception plays an important role in informing us about the world. I also believe that much of aesthetics is also about perception, maybe we will talk about this later.

6: You are particularly interested in the intersection between perception and action, what is your stance on this issue?

BN: We have an extremely complex perceptual apparatus, 90% of the brain's energy consumption goes to the perception system. One may wonder why we have such an evolutionarily expensive mechanism. From an

evolutionary point of view, what matters is not so much what you perceive and how accurately you perceive, what matters is what you do! If you survive, you spread your genes, and if you don't, and you get killed it's not very good in evolutionary terms (laughs). Why is it that all this energy that the brain consumes is not for perception but for action, I think that simply part of what perception does is to guide action, the idea is that you can perform actions better if your perceptual apparatus is better, if you can spot the predator far away you have better chances to run away, if you can follow the prey with your eyes efficiently while you're chasing it down, you'll have better chances to catch it. So, perception is directly relevant for the successful performance of actions.

I think a lot of things follow from this, both for philosophy of perception and the philosophy of action, and in general about a tempting way of thinking of the mind: that perception furnishes the inputs, and action is the output, and in between you have all this complicated rational high-level propositional stuff. I think that this is not the right kind of picture. I think that often there is nothing between perception and action, perception directly feeds to action, this is especially true for simple actions and simple perceptual states. Very simple animals are capable of perceiving and performing simple actions, and it is unclear whether there is much complexity in-between. So, the picture that I am working with is that in the vast majority of cases perception directly feeds to action and more higher-level phenomena are later evolutionary "additions". Guiding action is the primary function of perception. This has the implication, for instance, that properties of objects that are relevant for performing an action, think of grasping, are likely to be perceptually relevant. There is a big question in philosophy of perception about what kind of properties perception represents, clearly perception represents colors, shape, spatial relations, but there are other properties that perception clearly does not represent for example whether this cup I am looking at was made in China. We can draw a distinction between properties that perception represents, and properties that we infer, and are represented by non-perceptual means. I think that this close perception-action link gives some kind of credibility to the idea that some action-relevant properties are going to be represented perceptually, because properties that are represented perceptually can more smoothly guide actions.

Maybe I may say a tiny bit about how this link between perception and action bears also on the philosophy of action. Philosophers of action are often interested in kinds of actions that differ from perceptually-guided action (think of grasping this cup and lifting it to my mouth so I can sip

from it), but to perform this action is not possible without having a number of perceptual states. The kinds of actions that philosophers of action are typically interested in are, for instance, rational action (who I am going to vote for, weighing in reasons for one candidate or the other), autonomous actions, actions we are responsible for, and if we take the picture I was describing seriously, I think that these kinds of actions are not the kinds of actions we should start with for thinking about actions. Of course, these are interesting and important kinds of actions, but we can't perform these actions if we cannot perceive the world, in some sense all these kinds of actions depend very heavily on perception, we are in a better position to understand action thinking of it as closely linked to perception.

7: In your earlier work on perception you introduced the notion of “pragmatic mental imagery”, can you elaborate on this notion?

BN: This nicely flows from the previous question. The more basic concept of pragmatic representation is the kind of representation that represents those aspects of the environment that are directly relevant for action. So, in order for me to pick up this cup and take a sip, I have to represent it as being at a particular location. The spatial location of the cup in relation to me, egocentric representation, is the kind of property I need to represent in order to grasp it. I also have to represent the size of the cup, and how the cup is related to my grip size. All these properties must be represented to enable action. I call the representation that represents these action-relevant properties, pragmatic representation: “pragmatic” because it involves a pragmatic way of dealing with the world, and “representation” because of course I can misrepresent some properties.

Pragmatic representations are absolutely necessary in order to perform some action.

But you ask about pragmatic mental imagery. Pragmatic mental imagery is the offline, imagery version of pragmatic representation. So, again, if I close my eyes, and I reach out my hand to grasp the cup and hold it up, I would not have a perceptual representation, but my action would be guided by mental imagery. Just like in everyday life our actions are typically steered by pragmatic representations, so we quite often use mental imagery to guide actions. Imagine you are in your bedroom in the middle of the night, and it is pitch dark, you reach out the light switch guided by mental imagery, not perception.

8: In recent years you have worked extensively on the problem of mental imagery. Can you tell us what is mental imagery and what is the distinction between imagery and imagination?

I have spent a lot of time researching mental imagery, a subject that is very important to me. I conceive it as a form of perceptual representation that is similar in format and content to the perceptual representations we experience when we look at physical objects such as a tree. However, the main difference between perception and mental imagery is that in perception, sensory input directly triggers perceptual representations, whereas mental imagery is not directly triggered by sensory input. This is a negative definition, which automatically raises the question: What triggers mental imagery?

Mental imagery can be triggered by various means. For example, they can be triggered from the top down and on a voluntary basis, e.g. when you close your eyes and visualize an object like an apple. Or it can be triggered cross-modally, as in auditory mental imagery, where auditory perceptions arise indirectly from visual stimuli, such as hearing the voice of your favorite politician while watching him on the muted TV.

Contrary to a common misconception, mental imagery is not about pictures or images, but can manifest in all sensory modalities. Mental imagery therefore encompasses all forms of perceptual representation, independent of sensory input, and can therefore occur in all sensory modalities.

Regarding imagination, it is only one way of using mental imagery, although not the only method. While voluntary visualization is a form of imagination, involuntary flashbacks to previously experienced scenes are also a form of mental imagery, without necessarily using imagination. Imagination is a mental act, something we do, usually voluntarily, and it uses perceptual representations provided by mental imagery. However, there are other ways to use mental imagery. Imagination is just one of the many ways to use mental imagery.

It is important to recognize the importance of mental imagery because it plays a central role in various mental phenomena, including everyday perception. In fact, much of our perception is shaped by mental imagery, especially in cases of amodal completion. Amodal completion refers to the ability of our mind to fill in missing information about occluded objects based on partial sensory input: When I look at you guys, I do not see you in your entirety because you are occluded by your computers, coffee table, cups, etc., but I do not only represent those parts that are not occluded, but the whole you. The same thing happens when I perceive a simple object.

I directly perceive only the front of the cup on the table, I do not perceive its back. However, I do not represent only the front of the cup, but the whole cup. This process, which is fundamental to everyday perception, underlines the pervasive influence of mental imagery on our perceptual experiences.

Essentially, everyday perception emerges as a fusion of sensory stimulation-driven perception and mental imagery. As I have argued in my work, I firmly believe that mental imagery, especially in the form of amodal completion, contributes significantly to our perception of the world and our mental life. And that is the main reason why philosophy should be concerned with mental imagery.

9: What is the role of mental imagery in perception? Can mental imagery be multimodal? Is this related to synesthesia?

BN: Multimodal mental imagery refers to the phenomenon that mental imagery in one sensory modality is triggered by input from another sensory modality (Nanay 2018a). A classic example of this is watching television with muted sound, where auditory mental imagery is evoked by visual input - for example, watching your favorite politician, you hear his voice. This type of mental imagery involves multiple sensory modalities and is therefore particularly interesting to study.

Synesthesia, on the other hand, is a phenomenon that some people experience in which sensory stimuli in one modality evoke sensations in another, such as the association of certain colors with musical tones. It is noteworthy that in such cases, the experience of color involves mental imagery triggered by non-visual stimuli, which can be referred to as cross-modal mental imagery. This raises numerous questions, such as why some people experience synesthesia and others do not. This is in contrast to more commonly observed effects, such as the previous example of muted television, where the visual stimulus triggers auditory mental imagery, a common phenomenon that occurs in most people.

My approach suggests that mental imagery may offer insights into understanding synesthesia. This framework considers not only the traditional forms of synesthesia, but also more unusual variants. For example, there is a documented phenomenon known as swimming star synesthesia, in which professional swimmers perceive specific colors associated with different swimming styles, even if they are only imagining or watching someone swim. By looking at mental imagery, we may be able

to elucidate the underlying mechanisms behind such rare but fascinating phenomena.

10: What is the role of mental imagery in cognition?

I have emphasized the importance of mental imagery not only in perception but also in various other mental phenomena. In my recent book on mental imagery, I deal with its role in cognition, focusing particularly on desires and emotions.

In the realm of desires, mental imagery plays an important role because it represents the desired goal state. I argue that the state of desire, what we want to achieve, is often represented by mental imagery. This view is supported by both empirical evidence and philosophical claims.

Emotions are also strongly influenced by mental imagery. Mental imagery can trigger emotions, and conversely, emotions can evoke certain mental imagery. Many important emotional problems in psychiatric practice are closely linked to mental imagery.

Consider aphantasia, in which people report a lack of voluntary mental imagery. This phenomenon is negatively correlated with mental health problems, as imagery plays an important role in various mental health problems such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and trauma. Conversely, hyperphantasia, in which mental imagery is vivid and abundant, is positively correlated with mental health problems.

The final frontier, that is thought to have nothing to do with imagery, concerns beliefs. Beliefs are traditionally viewed as propositional attitudes distinct from imagistic states. However, I disagree with this dichotomy and argue that beliefs often contain elements of mental imagery, especially in the process of elaboration. For example, while some beliefs can be elaborated using detailed mental imagery, others remain more abstract and are less susceptible to elaboration. Understanding how mental imagery contributes to the elaboration of beliefs could also highlight its importance for cognition.

*11: Let's move on to aesthetics. In your book *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* you claim that philosophy of mind and perception can shed light on some questions in aesthetics, can you elaborate on this?*

BN: Sure, first of all, I make a distinction between philosophy of art and aesthetics. The former is concerned with questions about the nature of art, the metaphysics of art (what is art?), epistemological and ethical questions related to art, and so on. My take is not that perception and the study of the mind can shed light on the nature of art. Aesthetics has historically been very different from the study of art. Aesthetics is about a special way of “seeing” the world that is particularly significant for us. Some of our aesthetic experiences are of artworks — think of listening to your favorite song or going to a museum and seeing an artwork — but of course you can have an aesthetic experience of other things that are not artworks, think of looking at a beautiful natural landscape or seascape. The aesthetic and art may be linked but need not to. We can also have non-aesthetic experiences of artworks, if you are an art-thief or an art-dealer, you may not look at the artwork having an aesthetic experience, in a sense, these people would look at the artwork in a much more “pragmatic” way. There is thus a double dissociation between aesthetics and artworks. Since aesthetics is about this special way of experiencing the world, the study of what it means to experience things, philosophy of perception and of mind, is a sort of natural ally of aesthetics.

12: Your work on picture perception has been influenced by Wollheim, the twofoldness, can you give us a summary or overview of your take on picture perception, imagery and action?

BN: Picture perception: this is a big question in aesthetics, but also philosophy of perception. Suppose you look at a painting of a ship. The mainstream take is that when you look at the painting you perceive the ship, but you also perceive the canvas’ surface. So, it seems that you are seeing two different things: the 2D surface of the canvas, and the 3D object, the ship. This seems paradoxical. One question here is: how do seeing the ship face-to-face and seeing a painting of the ship differ? And another one is: how do we see both the surface and the ship? Wollheim’s influential idea appeals to the notion of “twofoldness”: we simultaneously see the ship and the canvas. This is kind of metaphorical. I flash out an empirically plausible story about how this is possible. My story appeals to the two visual systems. We know that we possess a dorsal visual stream and a ventral visual stream, and that they may dissociate, for example in cases of brain injuries. For example, if the dorsal stream is working but the ventral stream is damaged, you’ll see things clearly but have troubles performing actions, this will be a

form of ataxia. Put roughly, the dorsal visual stream is functionally responsible for action-guidance, whereas the ventral stream is responsible for visual recognition and object identification. They also come apart in much more natural circumstances, for example when we look at pictures. In summary, my view is that the visual system represents the picture surface, the canvas, in the dorsal stream, and the depicted ship is represented by the ventral stream. This I think illustrates how empirical findings can shed light on picture perception, and it is also a way of elucidating Wollheim's notion of twofoldness. You can perform action on the picture surface, but you cannot perform any action in relation to the depicted ship. This is where "action" comes in in relation to picture perception.

13: You are currently working on a book on Robert Musil, can you tell us something about it?

BN: Yes, I am writing a book on Musil for a series on "Philosophy Outsiders", it's a series on figures who are not, strictly speaking, philosophers, and yet have interesting philosophical ideas. Musil is an excellent "philosophy outsider", and I must say, this may be more surprising to US readers, who are not familiar with Musil, than to Italian readers. I think that Musil is much better known in Italy than in the US. Musil was trained in philosophy and experimental psychology, and he decided, very much like Proust, that he wanted to communicate philosophical ideas not in the standard philosophical way, with a philosophy treatise, but in the form of a novel, with his *The Man Without Qualities*. My book is on Musil's philosophical system, I set out to show how his ideas are important and unique: I think that existentialism drew a lot of ideas from Musil, but so have done some strands of analytic philosophy, the philosophy of emotions, etc. I try to give a first systematic treatment of the philosophy of Robert Musil. I must say that I am having much fun writing this book, but it is also occasionally frustrating since his philosophical ideas are not openly stated, they must be reconstructed from the narrative.

14: You have a long-standing interest in the philosophy of biology, what is your main research interest in this area?

BN: Well, I should say that I have not been doing philosophy of biology for a very long time! Mainly because I find it difficult to keep up with the

biology literature being more busy with the literature in cognitive science and neuroscience.

There are two areas that I feel I worked for a while in philosophy of biology. The first one is the question of biological functions. So, the function of the heart is to pump blood, but it also does other things, for example making thumping noises. Questions about functions also apply to mental representations: the function of a mental representation, we may say, is to guide action. The central issue is how we identify the “function” of a biological or mental structure? Most accounts of function refer to the evolutionary past: the idea is that the function of the heart is to pump blood because in evolutionary history this function has been selected. My solution to the problem of how to identify biological functions does not refer to evolutionary history, but appeals to a modal claim, I call it a modal theory of function. What fixes the function of the heart is what would happen if things had been different. If you think of functions as modal concepts, one interesting implication is that functions depend, in part, on our explanatory project, on what aspect of the heart we are interested in, different counterfactual situations will be relevant.

The other thing I have been writing a lot about is how to conceptualize natural selection. There are mainly two ways of thinking about this, and both date back to Darwin. One way other researchers have thought about natural selection is in terms of heritable variation of fitness, where fitness and heritable variation are types, and the other way in terms of replication and interaction, every round of interaction makes replication somewhat different, this way of thinking about natural selection is cashed out in terms of tokens. Most researchers today tend to think about natural selection in terms of “types”, and I was trying to go back to thinking about natural selection in terms of property tokens, rather than types. I think this is informed by my general nominalist commitments in metaphysics.

15: Let's move now to metaphilosophical questions: one of the most controversial distinctions is that between continental and analytic philosophy, what is your take on this distinction?

BN: I began my philosophical journey in the continental tradition, and although I still value it, I have since turned to the analytic tradition because I find it more suitable for philosophy of mind and I like its clarity and rigorous argumentation very much. However, I am open to both traditions and believe that we should recognize the valuable contributions of

philosophers from both traditions. I recognize the importance of authors from different backgrounds and traditions.

In my view, there are profound ideas in continental philosophy that are sometimes overlooked in analytic circles, and vice versa. I consider myself a pluralist in this regard and value the insights from different philosophical traditions, including non-Western philosophy that transcends these distinctions.

Within continental philosophy, thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty have explored the complicated relationship between perception and action, ideas that I have partially systematized and integrated into my own work. I argue for greater cross-communication between analytic and continental philosophy, acknowledging their different methods but emphasizing the importance of the exchange of ideas. Indeed, I strongly believe that analytic philosophers should be open to drawing inspiration from a variety of sources in their pursuit of clarity and rigorous argumentation.

16: Armchair philosophy versus empirically informed philosophy?

I firmly believe that philosophy is confronted with incredibly complex problems and that we should therefore not limit ourselves to armchair speculation. Philosophy of mind is a good example of this. The issues surrounding the mind — such as the nature of memory or how emotions work — are immensely complicated. It would be unwise to try to solve such profound questions through armchair thinking alone.

Take memory, for example. While some insights into memory and imagination can be gained from armchair thinking, psychologists and neuroscientists have conducted controlled and sophisticated studies that have yielded interesting and complex results on these issues. I argue that it is the role of philosophers to integrate these findings. By synthesizing empirical research and philosophical inquiry, we can make significant progress beyond what mere armchair speculation could achieve.

Take, for example, phenomena such as aphantasia or hyperphantasia. If a person suffering from aphantasia or hyperphantasia relied solely on armchair observations of their own mental imagery processes, their perspective would be inherently biased. Relying solely on armchair speculation may lead to subjective generalizations.

If you consult the empirical sciences instead, you will gain a more balanced and informed understanding. I also argue for recognizing the importance of interpersonal and cultural differences in cognition that are

often overlooked in contemporary philosophy. It is of utmost importance to explore how cognition differs from person to person and from culture to culture.

17: What would you like to work on in the future?

I have several projects for the future that I definitely want to pursue. Firstly, I am very interested in delving into the works of Robert Musil, a project that arose out of my personal curiosity.

I also want to explore the area of global aesthetics and cross-cultural aesthetic appreciation: I want to explore how aesthetic sensibilities differ across cultures. When we come from different cultures and look at the same object, we have very different experiences of the same object. This underlines the importance of individual and cultural differences for our mental life.

I am also currently developing a book project that deals with the concept of the fragmented mind. This project looks at the fragmented nature of human cognition and explores how individuals systematically ignore uncomfortable information about themselves. I believe that this fragmentation of the mind contributes to various problems, including procrastination, mental health problems, sleep disorders and social problems such as susceptibility to misinformation and fake news. Therefore, I am motivated to explore methods that "defragment" our mind and improve cognitive functions.

In addition, I am fascinated by the idea of translucent mental states - beliefs and mental states that resist elaboration - and their implications for our understanding of the mind. I would like to work on a broader project on the "translucent mind" that explores the limits of our insight into our own mental processes and their impact on emotions and epistemic positions.

In the future, I would also like to explore the works of Proust, focusing in particular on his insights into perception. Proust's observations on perception, gleaned from his personal reflections, offer valuable insights that are comparable to empirical scientific findings.

Finally, I would like to revisit my interest in film, reconnect with my origins and explore this area of study further.

18: Do you have any recommendations for aspiring philosophers?

Quit philosophy! (Laugh)

Philosophy can be an incredibly frustrating discipline that requires a lot of patience and perseverance to succeed. One is often tempted to give up!

Much of what is valued in the field of philosophy can be considered a learnable skill. Writing a philosophical paper that meets the standards of academic journals, for example, is a skill that can be acquired through practice and dedication: no one is born with an innate mastery of this craft. There is always room for improvement in philosophy, both in our papers and in our views. An important skill to develop is the ability to let go of perfectionism and accept that our papers may never be flawless. Instead, we should strive for papers that are "good enough" and be open to refining our ideas through constant dialog and critique. In short, "whatever works".

I also believe that philosophy is inherently a collective endeavor that is best advanced through collaboration and discussion. By engaging with others, we can better understand alternative perspectives and refine our own ideas. We should not view published papers as definitive claims, but as a starting point for further conversation and refinement.

So the two most important pieces of advice for aspiring philosophers are: first, it is perfectly fine to publish work that may not reach the highest level of perfection; and second, it is important to consider the target audience when writing and publishing papers, as this can have a big impact on how our ideas are received and understood.

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