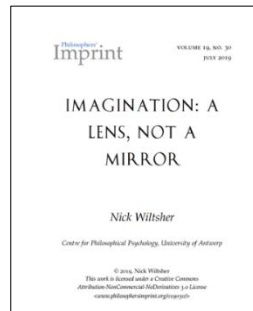


Lecture 1 - What is imagination? What can we learn by using it?**IMAGINATION: MORE LIKE AIR THAN GOLD**

December 14, 2022

A post by Neil Van Leeuwen

**THE JUNKYARD**

A scholarly blog devoted to the study of imagination. Speaking at a session at the 2015 meeting of the Pacific Division APA, Noel Carroll referred to imagination as “the junkyard of the mind” – a place where everything gets thrown in. Need something to explain our engagement with fiction? Enter imagination. What accounts for our ability to access modal truths? Again, enter imagination. Pretense. Mindreading. Empathy. Thought experiments. Creativity. Delusions. Dreams. Metaphors. Sure, let’s throw all of those onto the imaginative scrap heap as well – a heap that seems to be getting higher and higher.

1. The Heterogeneity of Imagination

Football – Liverpool are rubbish this year. But if they signed Jude Bellingham, I imagine that they’d be really good.

Dinner – I’ve just eaten, but when I imagine a sizeable burger with chips in front of me, I do feel a little peckish.

Thought experiment – You might think that torture is always wrong, but here’s an imaginary case where torture is actually the right thing to do. So torture is at least *in principle* permissible.

Play-fighting – My younger brother and sister used to have plastic lightsabers, and would imagine that they were duelling.

Mindreading – My friend is upset. In order to know how to comfort them, I imagine what they’re feeling, and what would make me feel better if I were in their situation.

Fiction – I read *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and as I do so, I imagine/picture what Westeros looks like.

Reductio – To prove that in first-order logic, nothing is non-self-identical, I proceed as follows: imagine that there is something that is non-self-identical, get to a contradiction, hence by *reductio ad absurdum* there is nothing that is non-self-identical.

These are various contexts in which we employ imagination. (Other similar terms: pretence, make-believe, suppose, picture, conceive). Is there just one mental faculty – imagination – here? And if so, how do we characterise it?

Kind (2013): “no single mental activity can do all the explanatory work that has been assigned to imagining.”

Argument 1: Fiction vs Thought Experiment (Kind 2013: 153)

The imagination involved in engagement with fiction is different to that in modal epistemology:

Imagination in *Thought Experiment* seems to be a belief-like propositional attitude. I imagine *that the world is such-and-such, and consequently torture is permitted*.

Imagination in *Fiction*, however, involves more, resulting in our affect-laden responses to fiction. I feel bad for fictional characters, scared of the monster. Imagining in other contexts (daydreaming) has similar affect.

Argument 2: Reductio vs Thought Experiment (Kind 2013: 152)

The imagination involved in modal epistemology is different to that in supposition.

In *Thought Experiment*, it is important that our imagination is some guide to possibility. Torture is not always wrong, because there is *some* possible case in which torture is permissible. How do we know this? Because we can imagine one.

Supposition seems to involve imagination. But we can suppose impossible things, as in *Reductio* above. Consequently, we can imagine impossible things. So how can imagination be a guide to possibility, as it was above? Imagination in *Thought Experiment* seems quite different to imagination in *Reductio*.

Conclusion: imagination is heterogenous. There is no single thing “imagination”.

“Not only do features that are essential to imagination in one context drop out entirely in another context, but even worse, features of imagination that play an essential role in one context are sometimes inconsistent with features of imagination that play an essential role in another context.” (Kind 2013:157)

One way forward, then, is to divide up the imagination into different kinds, and then these different kinds can explain the various cases above. Imagination is not a single thing, but there are a couple of related phenomena which we group together under this heading.

2. Propositional vs Experiential Imagination

Propositional imagination: imagination as a propositional attitude.

This is like belief in various respects. Different to belief, though is that imagination has no aim at truth, and differs in its connection to action – imagination is “offline”. (Question: is PI the same thing as supposition? We’ll see next week.)

Experiential/imagistic imagination: imagination as recreating certain perceptual (or emotional?) experiences.

This is like perception in various respects. Again, however, there is a different connection to action, and imagination is often (though maybe not always – hallucinations/dreams) under our control, unlike perception (and belief).

We can now classify our above examples as involving propositional imagination, experiential imagination, both, or neither.

3. Knowledge through imagination

Initial puzzle: how can just imagining stuff give us any (contingent) knowledge about the world?

(In *Football*, *Thought experiment*, *Mindreading*, *Fiction*, and *Reductio* we learn information about the world through imagination.)

Kind defends knowledge through imagination, when it is subject to two constraints – the *reality constraint* (imagine target content in maximally realistic way) and the *change constraint* (imagine the situation evolving in a realistic way). For imagination to be helpful in my learning something, I need to abide by these two constraints.

Williamson argues that imagination (involved in counterfactual reasoning) is an epistemologically useful process evolution would select for. (If I were to jump, would I make it over that gap? – useful to know!) Experiential and propositional.

Gendler also defends (conditional) knowledge through imagination – experiential imagining can lead to justified true beliefs. If you painted your neighbour’s living room walls green, would that clash with the current carpet? One way to tell would be to call up a mental image of the green walls and the carpet, and decide on the basis of that.

Spaulding is sceptical of knowledge (purely) through imagination. Take *Mindreading* – we also need theoretical knowledge in order to say which of the many mental states we could imagine when simulating another’s mind are *correct*. (This is the “threat of collapse” objection to ST – see Davies and Stone 1995 on reading list.) Spaulding argues this is the case more generally. Imagination produces knowledge of possibilities but doesn’t on its own tell us which actually hold in the world.

Bibliography

Gendler, Tamar Szabó. “Thought Experiments Rethought—and Reperceived.” In *Intuition, Imagination, and Philosophical Methodology*, 42–52. OUP, 2010.

Kind, Amy. “Imagining Under Constraints.” In *Knowledge Through Imagination*, edited by Amy Kind and Peter Kung. OUP, 2016.

———. “The Heterogeneity of the Imagination.” *Erkenntnis* 78 (2013): 141–59.

Spaulding, Shannon. “Imagination Through Knowledge.” In *Knowledge Through Imagination*.

Williamson, Timothy. “Knowing by Imagining.” In *Knowledge Through Imagination*.

Plan:

Lecture 2 – Can we really distinguish experiential and propositional imagination so clearly? Is imagery involved in the latter?

Lecture 3 – Is (propositional) imagination a fundamental/irreducible mental state, or can imagination be explained in terms of other more fundamental states like belief?

Lecture 4 – If we posit a fundamental mental state of imagination, which is like belief but slightly different, do we also need to posit a fundamental mental state of “i-desire”, which is like desire but different?