Lecture 2 – Imagination and Imagery

Propositional imagination: imagination as a propositional attitude.

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

Experiential imagination seems to recreate these experiences through *mental imagery*. Mental imagery encompasses representations of sensory information without a direct external stimulus.

Arguably, mental imagery outstrips imagination. Earworms, dreams (controversial), flashbacks, hallucination, and multimodal mental imagery each look like cases of mental imagery without being imagination (because they are involuntary).

Question: Can you completely separate propositional and experiential imagination? Can you have (propositional) imagination without *any* mental imagery?

Historical view of imagination says <u>no</u>: imagination essentially involves mental imagery (e.g. Descartes on the chiliagon).

"... if I want to think of a chiliagon, although I understand that it is a figure consisting of a thousand sides just as well as I understand the triangle to be a three-sided figure, I do not in the same way imagine the thousand sides or see them as if they were present before me.... But suppose I am dealing with a pentagon: I can of course understand the figure of a pentagon, just as I can the figure of a chiliagon, without the help of the imagination; but I can also imagine a pentagon, by applying the mind's eye to its five sides and the area contained within them. And in doing this I notice quite clearly that imagination requires a peculiar effort of mind which is not required for understanding."

Many more modern philosophers answer <u>yes</u>, and reject the essentialist view (Walton 1990, 13, Van Leeuwen 2013, 222, Stokes 2019, 742). This trend arguably started with Gilbert Ryle, who eliminated mental imagery from his behaviourist theory of mind (he instead talked of imagination as a species of pretence, which has some associated behaviour).

Amy Kind (2001) is a recent defender of the historical, <u>essentialist view</u> – imagination essentially involves imagery. The imagistic aspect of propositional imagination is what makes it *imagination*, rather than a more limited attitude like conceiving or supposing. All that makes it *propositional* imagination is that its object is a proposition, rather than it not involving images.

Imagistic imagination isn't "imagination that involves imagery" (because all imagination does) but rather imagination where we don't imagine something propositional in form.

1. **Kind's argument for the essentialist view:**

Kind (2001) notes three paradigmatic features of the imagination: directedness, active nature, and phenomenology. All are explained on the essentialist view. Mental imagery is directed, is active, and has a certain phenomenology. If we take propositional imagination to involve no mental imagery, then we cannot explain *what it is like* to propositionally imagine.

Counterexamples to the essentialist view: (Cases where we imagine with no associated mental imagery.)

Van Leeuwen's immortality example: When reading *Lord of the Rings*, I imagine that elves can live forever. But I cannot imagine that proposition using mental imagery – it would take too long! (2013, 222)

Kind: "In imagining that elves live forever, I might produce an image of twelve generations of elves gathering for a family photo. Or I might produce an image of a page in my family photo album containing pictures of the same youthful looking elf at my great-grandparents' wedding, at my grandparents' wedding, at my parents' wedding, and at my wedding." (2022, 12)

So even in such cases, we do have mental imagery – it just may not be unique to that particular imagining. We can imagine different things with the same imagery. I will have the same imagery as above if I imagine that elves live to 500 years old. Imagery is essential to imagination, but does not individuate *particular* imaginings.

Abstract imagination: I can imagine things about unobservable entities: theoretical posits of physics, legal and moral principles, abstract objects, etc. There is no mental imagery here: these entities are unobservable, so there is no sensory experience to be represented.

Kind would dispute that these are cases of imagination – they are mere supposition instead. Imagination *requires* imagery.

2. Imagination vs Supposition:

One benefit of the essentialist view is that we get a nice distinction between imagination and supposition.

There is intuitively a difference between imagining something and merely supposing it – imagination seems to be more substantial. We cannot imagine impossible things, but we can suppose them. When we imagine things, this comes with emotional affect, and when we try to imagine morally abhorrent things, we sometimes face "imaginative resistance" (Gendler 2000), neither of which occur in supposition.

The essentialist view says involvement of mental imagery can distinguish imagination and supposition, and account for the above differences. We cannot imagine impossible things because we cannot generate the relevant mental imagery of impossible scenarios. Imagining has emotional content, and sometimes faces resistance, because we are being asked to generate more vivid imagery than in the abstract, image-less attitude of supposition.

If we reject the essentialist view, we cannot use mental imagery to distinguish propositional imagination and supposition. Some do in fact claim that there is no distinction – supposition is just one form of propositional imagination (Currie & Ravenscroft 2002, 33-36).

Yet it looks like we do need to distinguish these two mental processes, because they play different epistemological roles:

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.

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.

Thought Experiment relies on propositional imagination being some guide to possibility. Supposition, however, is no guide to possibility – in *Reductio* we suppose what is impossible. We therefore seem to need to say what is different about supposing and propositionally imagining.

3. Nanay's argument for the essentialist view:

Bence Nanay (2022) argues that mental imagery is involved in propositional imagination (and sometimes in supposition), because propositional imagination relies on language processing, and language processing involves mental imagery.

One example where language processing involves mental imagery is the tight connection between linguistic and imagistic representations. According to 'dual coding theory', linguistic representations are constituted by/accompanied with mental imagery. This explain why concrete words, with more determinate associated mental imagery, are easier to recall than abstract words, with less determinate mental imagery. Compare "annuity" to "anniversary".

It is tempting to approach the mind, and mental representation, through the lens of language – a distinctively(?) human phenomenon. Such an approach is common (Fodor, etc.). An alternative approach, however, is to consider how similar we are to other animals, and to theorise the mind, and imagination, from that starting point.

Other animals (at least vertebrates) perceive similarly to how we perceive, and exercise their mental imagery similarly to how we do. Perhaps we should try to understand the human mind, and in particular our capacity for imagination, through mental imagery, then, rather than through language. Perhaps just what it is to imagine is to make use of such imagery.

Bibliography

Currie, Gregory, and Ian Ravenscroft. 2002. *Recreative Minds: Imagination in Philosophy and Psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Gendler, Tamar Szabó. 2000. "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance." *The Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2): 55–81.

Kind, Amy. 2001. "Putting the Image Back in Imagination." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62 (1): 85–109.

Kind, Amy. 2022. *Imagination and Creative Thinking*. Cambridge University Press.

Nanay, Bence. 2022. "Against Imagination." In *Contemporary Debates in the Philosophy of Mind (2nd Edition)*, edited by Jonathan Cohen and Brian McLaughlin. Blackwell.

Stokes, Dustin. 2019. "Mental Imagery and Fiction." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 49 (6): 731–54.

Van Leeuwen, Neil. 2013. "The Meanings of 'Imagine' Part I: Constructive Imagination." *Philosophy Compass* 8 (3): 220–30.

Walton, Kendall L. 1990. *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Harvard University Press.