

### Lecture 3 - Propositional imagination vs belief

Default view: propositional imagination is a belief-like propositional attitude, but is a distinctive/unique mental state.

Call this a “splitter” view: we can split up belief and imagination as similar but *distinct* mental states. (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, Nichols and Stich 2003, Doggett and Egan 2014.)

**Arguments for imagining as different to believing:** (Spaulding, 2015, 459–60)

1. Imagining that  $p$  connects to action differently to believing that  $p$ .
2. Imagining that  $p$  has no aim at truth. Belief that  $p$  does.
3. Imagining that  $p$  is subject to conscious, voluntary control. Belief is not.
4. We can imagine things we don't believe.
5. Imagination-induced affect is less intense than belief-induced affect.

Alternative “lumper” view: imagination is reducible to beliefs (and desires), rather than being a distinctive mental state. (Langland-Hassan 2020)

Imagining that  $p$  might still be reducible to/identical to belief with some different content. We don't need to posit a distinctive mental state (Langland-Hassan 2020: 17-18)

Other verbs followed by “that” clauses don't require a distinctive mental state: I regret, or am disappointed *that a student didn't do the reading*. Yet these aren't natural cognitive kinds, irreducible to other mental states. Why think imagination is one?

**Responses to differences between imagination and belief:** (Langland-Hassan 2020: 17-23)

1. Imagining that  $p$  connects to action differently to believing that  $p$ .

Sure. But imagining that  $p$  might be reducible to believing something with different content, which *does* connect to action.

E.g. when I imagine *that the mud pie is a chocolate pie*, I believe that holding the pie to my face while saying “Mmm, tasty!” is an appropriate way to act like the mud pie is a chocolate pie. I don't believe *that the mud pie is a chocolate pie*, but my imagining can still be explained in terms of beliefs with different content. And this belief about the appropriate way to act in certain circumstances *does* motivate action (i.e. when I am in those circumstances).

In other cases, the belief we reduce imagination to will not motivate action. Beliefs about what is going on in some far away galaxy do not motivate action because we cannot affect such a situation. When reading fiction, the beliefs that imagination reduces to will be like this, with no motivation for action.

2. Imagining that  $p$  has no aim at truth. Belief that  $p$  does.

Yes – what it is to believe is to take something as true, and I can imagine things I take to be false. Yet imagining, when analysed as belief also has an aim at truth. My belief about what is an appropriate way to act in certain (imaginative) scenarios aims at truth. If imagination is just this belief, then imagination similarly has an aim at truth.

Similarly, fictional imagination can be analysed as belief about what is true in a certain context, which aims at truth. Reading the Harry Potter books and imagining that Hogwarts is in America is *wrong*.

3. Imagining that  $p$  is subject to conscious, voluntary control. Belief is not.

True – we (arguably) cannot choose our beliefs. But we can choose what we decide to deliberate about. And in playing a pretend game, we come to believe certain things about what are good ways to act in this game etc.

Imagination's being subject to control is consistent with its being belief – imagination is just a process whereby we focus our attention on certain things, which involves forming beliefs about how we ought to act in certain circumstances etc.

Control comes from voluntarily taking on this process, though we do not control the contents of beliefs we acquire.

4. We can imagine things we don't believe.

Sure – everyone can accept that. But if imagination is belief with different content, then believing *that acting in such-and-such a way in a certain imaginative context* is perfectly consistent with believing *that the mudpie is not really made of chocolate*.

5. Imagination-induced affect is less intense than belief-induced affect. Hence, the two are separate.

Just because affect from imagining that *p* is less intense than affect from believing that *p*, that doesn't mean that imagination is not ultimately reducible to some mental states including belief.

Imagining my family in a house fire is unpleasant. But so is actively believing that it is possible that my family could be in a house fire, and considering the various things I believe would happen if so. Whilst belief *that my family are right now in a house fire* has stronger emotional affect than imagining it, imagining's less affective responses can be explained by the kind of belief we reduce imagining to.

### Schellenberg's (2013) continuum view:

Susanna Schellenberg offers a view of imagination that is neither lumper nor splitter. She proposes that imagination and belief lie on a continuum, and only with this view can we account for "imaginative immersion".

Imaginative immersion: cases where we do not consciously think about the fact that we are imagining. E.g. when reading a novel, or acting in a play, I get so wrapped up in it that I forget that I am imagining and none of it is real.

In such cases, our mental state starts looking a bit like belief. Belief is characterised as taking something as true. We start to do this in imaginative immersion – we temporarily lose track of the fact that we are imagining. We have mental states somewhere between belief and imagination, with aspects of each.

### Liao and Doggett's (2014) objections to Schellenberg:

Schellenberg's motivation for the continuum view is that it best explains two phenomena:

Role-playing shifts: One can slip imperceptibly from rote play-acting into being totally immersed in it.

Mixed mental states: It is hard to tell what state an imaginatively immersed person is in (belief or imagination).

The continuum thesis is insufficient to explain 1. The continuum of belief and imagination does not explain the change in *content* as we become imaginatively immersed. At the start, I believe *that I am pretending to eat a mudpie*. As I become immersed in the game, I imagine *that I am eating a mudpie*. Not only does belief shift to imagination, but the content changes. A continuum about mental states alone doesn't explain these shifts in role-playing contexts.

The continuum thesis is unnecessary to explain 2. We can explain mixed mental states using a non-continuum view of imagination and belief as separate. Even when pretending, people do seem to have genuine beliefs (rather than a mixture). The actor playing the role of a character still speaks and presents to the audience (even though the character is not *fictionally* speaking to an audience). Pretenders keep track of their genuine beliefs, and then *also* imagine various things. We need not posit a continuum – we can explain such cases with the regular distinction between belief and imagination.

### Bibliography

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