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Imagination

Imagination is a capacity of internal visualization, concept creation and manipulation not directly dependent upon sensation. Imagination is associated with a range of phenomena: mental imagery, fancy, inventiveness, insight, counterfactual reasoning, pretence, simulation and conceivability. Products of the imagination are sometimes considered false or fantastical, e.g. the phrase, ‘I must have imagined it’ is applied to explain a mistake in conversation. The term ‘imagine’ is also used in countless idiomatic ways that do not imply any use of an imaginative faculty; for example, a person might exclaim ‘imagine that’ to an unusual news item.

In the history of western philosophy most connotations of the term ‘imagination’ are a response to the notion of mental imagery and imagistic representation. Philosophers ask how mental ‘pictures’ could be ‘in the head’ and how those ‘pictures’ can have intentionality. The association of imagination with inventiveness has yielded epistemological concern for imagined ideas, including what kind of knowledge stems from the imagination and whether conceivability impacts possibility. Contemporary cognitive science is focused on the cognitive architecture underlying imaginative thought and suggests connections between imagination, counterfactual reasoning and understanding other people’s mental states. This approach has impacted broader philosophical areas such as ethics, where the imagination plays a role in invoking moral responsibility through simulation, role-play and empathy. Non-visual sense modalities (e.g. hearing) have received much less attention in the imagination literature (Currie and Ravenscroft, 2003). Because of the range of uses of the term ‘imagination’ it is illuminating to look at the history of the faculty of mental imagery.

Imagination as a mental faculty

The ‘imagination’ has been considered a faculty of the mind since ancient Greek times. Plato described this faculty as a perceptual capacity to imprint images from the senses. Since then, its role has increased from a tool of perception to one of creativity, and insight. In the 20th century the existence of an imaginative faculty has been challenged with behaviorism and then resurrected by contemporary cognitive science as a faculty of supposition and pretence.

Imagination as a faculty of perception

The history of imagination in western philosophy begins with ancient Greek discussions of phantasia (Latin translation imaginatio). Plato explained phantasia as the faculty of imagery which operated during perception as well as during dreaming and recollection. Thus it was both an active and a passive faculty depending on the context of use. Unlike modern conceptions of imagination which explicitly contrast its role with perception, the ancient Greek phantasia was an integral part of perception. That is, the phantasia interpreted perceptual information (aisthesis) into sensory judgments about the world (phantasma). In de Anima, Aristotle explained this by considering our notion of the sun. Through phantasia we sense that the sun is a small disk in the sky. Yet we believe that the sun is in reality much bigger and located in the heavens. Aristotle illustrates how phantasma informs but does not dictate knowledge. This ancient Greek faculty is analogous with Kant’s concept of reproductive imagination. Kant describes reproductive imagination as a reconstructive capacity of
humans and animals which completes fragmentary data of the senses. For example, it is utilized when we perceive a cube as a three-dimensional object, even though we only see three sides of it. Because Plato viewed empirical knowledge as inherently flawed, and phantasia was informed by the senses, he took beliefs informed by this faculty to be a poor sort of knowledge. He supposed that real knowledge of the world was restricted to the Gods and perhaps a few superior human beings who had access to the forms. Aristotle was more moderate and took phantasma to be one of the two key elements in thinking, the other being judgment. In contrast, the stoics and epicureans took sense judgments to be the superior form of knowledge. They argued that all knowledge is simply the development and extension from sense knowledge, thus they claimed that phantasia was crucial to understanding. Regardless of its epistemological role, phantasia in early Greek thinking was securely tied to perception. The extension of phantasia from a faculty of perception to one of creation or divine insight came hundreds of years later.

**Imagination as a creative faculty**
Creative imagination is the ability to construct new ideas from those previously experienced. This kind of imagination first appeared in Philostratus in 300AD and was a philosophical syncretism probably attributable to a Platonizing stoic who believed that through the manipulation of phantasma all knowledge of the world arose. This was also the view of the British Empiricists, e.g. Hume made the imagination the central faculty of cognition which freely created and combined ideas according to three principles of association: resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect. Hume’s imagination was responsible for categorizing things into kinds, story-telling and creative thinking. Kant also considered creative imagination a central faculty of cognition. He called this ability to combine experiences, the productive imagination and it played a crucial role in the mind’s ability to create a coherent understanding of the world. Although Hume had many positive roles for imagination, he also warned of the danger of flights of fancy to solid philosophical inquiry. He argued that imagination can lead to error because once ideas have been formulated they can come to have greater sway over belief than is warranted by their genesis. Hume’s concern has lead to imaginings being associated with falsehood or fiction. Because imagined ideas are not limited by either natural or social laws, they have been viewed as a dangerous departure from epistemological success. Nevertheless, John-Paul Satre (1940) welcomed the freedom of the mind brought by the imagination. E.J. Furlong (1961) also championed the originality, creativity, freedom and spontaneity of the faculty.

**Imagination as a faculty for divine inspiration**
The imagination became associated with religious revelation due to neo-platonic interpretation. Even though Plato did not suggest this connection, he did locate phantasia in the soul near the faculty for divination, visions of warning and consolidation. Neo-Platonists consequently interpreted phantasia as a transmission device for divine inspiration. This notion was heartily endorsed by the early Christian church and went on to substantially influence the romantic view of imagination as a redemptive act analogous to and a part of the infinite creative act of God (Coleridge, 1817). The neo-platonic imagination of the 19th century was a poetic source of deeper truth about the world. Vedic and Sufi traditions also considered imagination a faculty through which humans could connect with the spiritual world, hence ultimate reality. This view is sharply contrasted by the treatment of imagination by 20th century analytic philosophy.
Imagination as a faculty of supposition
Not only did the rise of behaviorism lead to a reduction in the philosophical discussion of imagination, but behaviorism sought to obliterate all talk of mental faculties. Gilbert Ryle (1949) argued that the term ‘imagination’ did not designate a mental capacity, but instead related to a multitude of creative behaviors such as pretending and fancying. He argued that many of the activities called ‘imaginative’ were really connected with hypothetical reasoning and supposition. He denied any necessary connection with mental images at all. Indeed, Ryle denied the existence of mental images. Ryle’s persuasive arguments substantially influenced materialist philosophers of the late 20th century. Cognitive science has since tried to explain Ryle’s imaginative behaviors as products of the functional architecture of the mind. Recent philosophy of mind has acknowledged Ryle’s criticisms against mental imagery and generally avoids commitment to ‘mental images’. Instead, philosophers investigate the imagination as functional faculty concerned with many of the behaviors Ryle sought to explain such as pretence and supposition. Current theorists suggest that this faculty gives rise to pretend behavior and the ability to simulate other people’s mental states (Goldman, 2006; Nichols, 2006). Currie & Ravenscroft (2003) have dubbed this ability ‘recreative imagination’. Recreative imagination is an empathetic skill which enables people to take perspectives other than their own and to contemplate possibilities. To this end, imagining may be mental faculty where the will can consider ideas “offline” without concern for truth makers. Contemporary philosophical debate about recreative imagination is interdisciplinary and seeks to reveal the underlying cognitive architecture and neurological basis of imagining. Another recent debate focuses on imagination as a tool of conceivability (Hawthorne & Gendler, 2002). These philosophers discuss whether the ability to imagine or conceive of something provides any justification to believe in its possibility or likelihood. This line of inquiry stems from Hume’s argument that whatever can be imagined is possible. Hume used this claim to buttress his argument against causality. He said that because we can imagine a cause without a particular effect or vice versa, there is no necessary link between them. Similarly, contemporary philosophers often judge the reasonableness of thought experiments based on whether they have difficulty imagining the scenario presented. Nevertheless, it is important to be clear exactly what is implied by this notion of ‘imagine’. If ‘imagine’ is restricted to instances of mental imagery, then things deemed impossible by modern science—such as whales the size of the earth or humans with five heads—can be visualized without any commitment to their likelihood of existence. If ‘imagine’ is extended to logical conceivability, then inconceivable objects such as round squares may be rendered less likely in virtue of the difficulty in understanding what such an object could be. Because of the myriad of issues brought up by mental imagery it is important to deal with it separately as a topic.

Imagination and Mental Imagery
Even though contemporary philosophy of mind no longer focuses on mental imagery as a necessary component of imaginative thought, the history of imagination has been dominated by discussions of imagery. This history begins with Descartes. Descartes took images as a necessary part of imagination. To investigate the usefulness of mental images he invited his readers to contrast the experience of imagining a chiliagon (a thousand-sided figure) versus conceiving of one. He noted that while it is clear that we can conceive an object with one thousand sides, he doubted whether we can create a mental image of one. Because of this, Descartes argued that the imagination must be a separate faculty to reasoning or consideration and is clearly a less impressive tool of thought. Contrary to Descartes, some philosophers have argued that mental imagery solves many problems
better than reason alone (McGinn, 2004). For example, when imagining the number of windows in
our home, we seem to move through the house using our ‘mind’s eye’, examining and counting the
windows as they appear in the images of rooms we ‘see’. The usefulness of mental imagery for
solving cognitive tasks has been used to support a resurgence of the picture theory of the
imagination (Kosslyn, 1994). Imagery enthusiasts argue that the reason that mental imagery is useful
in solving particular problems is because there really are spatially distributed, image-like
representations in the brain which graphically correspond to the objects they represent and this
distribution behaves differently to ordinary thoughts. They point to neuroscientific evidence which
shows similarities between the parts of the brain active during visual perception and those activated
during imagining. Detractors of the picture theory do not deny that visual centers of the brain are
active during both perception and imagining. However, they do deny the existence of mental images
(Dennett, 1986). They consider talk of ‘mental images’ to be metaphorical, arguing that mental
‘images’ are not really imagistic because they are neither really seen with an internal eye and nor do
they have objective colors, shape or texture or any other properties that actual pictures have. They
argue that images are indeterminate in a way that pictures are not. For example, we can imagine a
tiger without representing a definite number of stripes, yet an ordinary picture of a tiger will have a
determinate number of stripes as will the tiger itself. Other philosophers emphasize that subjective
experiences are no guide to underlying representation (Pylyshyn, 2003). Pylyshyn points out that the
properties of visual representations during ordinary perception do not have pictorial properties, so it
is unlikely that the properties of imagined representations have them either. To assume that a
representation has the same properties as the object represented is to make what Daniel Dennett
calls ‘the intentional fallacy’. This does not mean that the conscious experience of mental images
does not exist, merely that the properties of the underlying representation do not need to mimic the
objects they represent.

The Intentionality of Mental Images
The conscious experience of mental images has lead philosophers to try and understand what they
are about, i.e. their intentionality. When we imagine, we always imagine something, either actual or
fictional. E.g., we can imagine ourselves climbing the Eiffel tower or Santa Claus riding a unicorn.
Because imaginings frequently have a pictorial phenomenology, the intentionality of imagination has
focused on how mental images could be the bearers of intentionality. One way to explain the
intentionality of mental images is in terms of the intrinsic properties of the images themselves.
Unfortunately, as Gilbert Ryle pointed out, pictures themselves cannot exhibit intentionality because
a mental image of twins might look the same for each person, yet we can easily think about each
twin as individuals. Another problem is that we seem to be able to imagine things that have no
pictorial qualities to them. We are also capable of imagining very complicated pictorial qualities, e.g.
a thousand-sided figure, which is almost impossible to construe with images. Due to these criticisms,
accounts of intentionality for imagination have appealed to features other than the properties of the
images themselves, such as the thoughts behind the images. Also because ‘imagination’ and
‘imagining’ are used colloquially in idiomatic ways, perhaps it is unfair to hold philosophers of
imagination accountable for non-imagistic counterexamples. If we limit the use of ‘imagine’ to
experiences involving images, then unique problems in intentionality arise. E.g. how do mental
images refer to the objects in the world they represent, rather than just themselves? For example, a
mental image of the Eiffel tower could be about the tower itself or about the representation of the
tower. How does the image itself distinguish between these intentions? It seems that a combination
of thinking about our subjective experiences and the world give mental images their elusive intentionality, not the experience itself. Thus, intentionality comes from propositional thoughts and objects in the world, not internal perceptions of objects such as mental images.

See also CONCEIVABILITY, IDEA, MENTAL IMAGERY, INTENTIONALITY, PERCEPTION, PHILOSOPHY OF MIND, PRETENCE, EPISTEMOLOGY

References and further reading.


