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Imagination Between Bats and Cats

Margherita Arcangeli

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IMAGINATION BETWEEN BATS AND CATS

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Imagination is clearly “a dense and tangled piece of country” (Furlong 1961: 15). The last decade, however, saw considerable philosophical work aimed at mapping this terrain of the mind. Peter Langland-Hassan’s book is a sophisticated and thought provoking atlas, whose purpose is to show that where other explorers have found mysterious creatures, in fact there are ordinary animals. It seems that I belong to those explorers: contrary to Peter, who believes that imagination can be reduced to basic folk psychological states, I claim that imagination is a *sui generis* mental state.

More precisely, I take imagination to be the capacity to “recreate” non-imaginative kinds of mental state. “X-like imagining”, or “recreating X in imagination” (where X is a type of non-imaginative state like perception or belief) means that the relevant imagining is similar, from a phenomenological and/or functional point of view, to the *counterpart* it recreates. Imagination is a *family*, within which different *genera* and *species* can be identified, that recreate non-imaginative mental states, but in a partial way that makes them different in nature to their counterparts (it is an open question how many varieties of recreative imagination there are, that is, which mental states imagination recreates). This view is often conflated with the simulationist approach – notoriously held by Currie & Ravenscroft and Goldman, but it has older roots, which can be traced back to Husserl’s philosophy.

Despite our divergent ontological commitments, Peter and I agree in thinking that imagination exists. Indeed, his reductive proposal is not eliminativist. According to him, imagination is ontologically solid like water and yogurt cakes are: analyzing it in terms of the right combination of more basic entities does not make it disappear from the shelves of the mind’s market. Moreover, Peter offers a taxonomy of the “imagination” aisle and distinguishes between two senses of imagining: Imagistic Imagining (I-imagining) and Attitude Imagining (A-imagining). In a nutshell, I-imagining refers to the use of mental images, while A-imagining “is rich or elaborated thought about the possible, unreal, or fantastical that is epistemically safe” (p. 61).

Such a distinction might easily remind us of two varieties of recreative imagination, namely Sensory Imagination (SI) and Cognitive Imagination (CI) – different labels have been used to capture such a distinction, here I am using my preferred terminology. While the former is the recreation of perception, the latter is the recreation of belief.

However, Peter stresses that we should resist conflating I-imagining/A-imagining with SI/CI for at least two interrelated reasons. First, although A-imagining and CI roughly refer to the same phenomenon (p. 6), the same does not hold for I-imagining and SI. Some uses of mental imagery are not recreative imaginings (p. 72), thus hinting at a different phenomenon.

Second, SI and CI are different genera within the family of recreative imagination, whereas I-imagining and A-imagining are categorically distinct. Although both are called “imagining”, Peter suggests that what we have here is mostly a case of homonymy and homography: I-imagining stands to A-imagining, as the object bat stands to the animal bat – though according to him there is an overlap between I-imagining and A-imagining (maybe vampire bats can be used to hit baseballs, after all!).

Strangely it might seem, I agree with Peter. In my own taxonomy (see Arcangeli [2018](#) and [2020](#)) I have identified two different classes of mental phenomena, which (misleadingly, I think) are lumped together under the umbrella “imagination”: imagination as a type of content – perhaps a format (i.e., mental imagery), and imagination as an attitude (i.e., recreative imagination). My suggestion is to broaden the notion of A-imagining – which in my view is not necessarily propositional nor only similar to belief – to encompass, at least, both SI and CI (in [Arcangeli 2018](#) I argue for the inclusion of supposition as a third variety). Here stark divergences between our views start emerging.

Peter would undermine my taxonomy by arguing that SI and CI are not recreative in the same sense, thus failing to belong to the same family. He claims that while SI is recreative in a format sense (i.e., sensory imaginings “recreate the (presumably pictorial, or iconic) format of different perceptual states” – p. 73), IC is recreative in a functional sense (i.e., cognitive imaginings recreate aspects of the functional role of beliefs). I reject this view, which is based on the questionable equivalence of I-imagining and SI: in my view, the former is recreative in the format sense, whereas the latter is recreative in the functional sense (roughly objectual recreation and mental recreation, respectively, in my terminology – see [Arcangeli 2020](#)).

Peter would press me on clarifying in which sense SI functionally recreates perception, given their crucial functional differences (e.g., endogenous vs. exogenous causes, different epistemic relations to beliefs). My answer is that recreative imaginings, be them perception-like, belief-like or whatever, mimic only *part* of their counterparts’ cognitive profiles – which include their functional roles, as well as their phenomenological aspects. Recreative imaginings also show a proper

phenomenology and have their own functional features, which suggests that recreative imagination is a primitive psychological attitude.

What is wrong with this view? I am not stipulating a mysterious “faculty of mind or collection of *sui generis* mental states, quarantined from our actual beliefs, desires, and intentions”, that “could be carved off the mind while leaving our self-defining commitments and inclinations intact” (p. 1). On the contrary, I am treating imagination on a par with other primitive psychological attitudes, like perceptions, beliefs, desires, emotions.

I agree that in ordinary language “‘Imagine’ is a lot like ‘bat’” (p. 4), but I think that philosophical analysis should (also) seek an “exploratory theory” ([Stock 2017](#): 6) of imagination. That is to say, philosophers should not simply analyze the folk concept of imagination, but try to improve it, which might lead to a transformation of our usual way of understanding imagination. This endeavor should result in sorting out misuses of imagination-related vocabulary, identifying those occurrences which truly refer to mental phenomena and, if necessary, separating them into different categories. Within the terminological regimentation of imagination-related vocabulary in philosophical discourse I defended, imagination is not heterogeneous like bats, but rather like cats (which I have gladly gone on to study!).