

Sartre

For Sartre, imagining is central to mental life. Along with perceiving, it is one of the two main forms that consciousness takes. Imagining and perceiving are fundamentally different, both in phenomenology and in their deeper nature. Neither can be reduced to the other, and they cannot combine in a single mental state. The range of imagining includes not merely visualizing and the purely mental states that provide its equivalents in other sense modalities, but also our engagement with a range of external objects and events, such as ‘seeing’ faces in the flames of a fire or reading a novel. Indeed, imagining is the basis of our engagement with all art. More than this, however, it is essential to consciousness, in the form in which we enjoy it, and to the freedom that consciousness essentially involves. Few other thinkers have given the imagination such significance in human life, and few have explored so thoroughly what marks it apart from other mental states.

In elaborating Sartre’s position, I draw mostly on *L’Imaginaire* (Sartre 1940): all unattributed page numbers below refer to the most recent English translation of this work (Webber 2005).¹ This book represents the height of Sartre’s engagement with Phenomenology, the tradition in philosophy that centers on the study of the structure of conscious states, as experienced by their subjects. At its core is thus a description of the phenomenology (with a small ‘p’) that distinguishes imagining from perceiving: the features of each that characterize what it’s like to undergo them. I begin with those features (§1), before turning to the range of phenomena Sartre takes to exhibit them (§2). However, Sartre steps beyond both phenomenology and Phenomenology in offering an account of the deep nature of the state that has those features, in his doctrine of the ‘analogon’ (§3). I close by briefly sketching his views on the significance of imagining (§4).

¹ While *The Imaginary* comes in the middle of a sequence of publications exploring the themes above, it is the work in which Sartre develops his theory of imagining in far greater depth than elsewhere. A preceding book, *L’Imagination* (‘The Imagination’: Sartre 1936), is largely a review of existing psychological literature on the topic. And the *magnum opus* to follow, *L’Être et le Néant* (‘Being and Nothingness’: Sartre 1943), concentrates on working through the account of consciousness and freedom sketched briefly at the close of *The Imaginary*, leaving imagining itself aside.

§1 Phenomenology: the four characteristics

Sartre cites four ‘characteristics’ of imagining that are intended to capture its ‘intentional structure’, and thus its phenomenology. While the later three distinguish imagining from perceiving, the first describes a feature common to the two.

First, as Sartre puts it ‘**the image is a consciousness**’ (5). Reflection on the phenomenology of imagining shows it to be a way of being related to things in the world. Despite the readiness with which commonsense resorts to talk of mental images, and despite various theories that have sought to describe what these images are, and how they differ from ‘percepts’, the experience of imagining itself gives us no reason to believe in them. If I visualize the chair in my office, the only object of which I am aware is the chair. No ‘image’ figures in my experience, if that means something like an inner picture of the chair; or a Humean ‘idea’, a percept in less vivid form. Indeed, no mental thing of *any* kind forms the immediate object of my imagining. When I imagine the chair, just as much as when I see it, my mental state presents me as directly related to something in the world. The relations are very different, in ways to be described by the remaining three characteristics, but the basic structure is the same.

Since phenomenology suggests there are no mental particulars mediating our relation to what we imagine, and if (as Sartre assumes) phenomenology does not mislead us here, it might seem we should drop talk of mental images altogether. However, like others who have traded particulars for states and activities in the ontology of the mental (e.g. Smart 1959), Sartre sees no harm in allowing himself talk that suggests otherwise. The trick is to remember that it has content only as paraphrasing claims about the relevant states and processes or, as Sartre prefers, ‘consciousnesses’. It is true that there are mental images of chairs, provided we mean by that no more than that people sometimes have ‘imaging consciousness’ of chairs - i.e. they are related to chairs in the way distinctive of imagining.

What, though, of cases in which what we imagine does not exist? How can that be construed as a distinctive relation to some object in the world? Sartre has remarkably little to say about this problem. Various solutions might be offered him, but the simplest is perhaps the following. When imagining does relate me to worldly objects, it has the distinctive features described below. Perhaps those features can also characterize a non-relational form of consciousness, when what is imagined is merely imaginary. Imagining is sometimes relational, sometimes not, but is never mediated by mental objects. It does, however, always exhibit the remaining three characteristics.

Second, the image admits only of ‘**quasi-observation**’. The contrast here is with genuine observation, the provision of which is essential to perception. In perceiving, we grasp a world which extends beyond our reach, and which is given as doing so. To use Sartre’s example, when we see a cube, certain of its faces will be hidden from view. Perception is not confined to what is explicitly given: we see the thing as a cube, not a mere facade. In going beyond what is explicitly given in this way, perception involves an ‘hypothesis’ about the nature of its object. So there is always the possibility of confirming, or disconfirming, that hypothesis, by moving around the thing, scrutinizing it more closely, or attending differently (e.g. by focusing on the reflection of the object’s rear in the mirror behind). These various ways of testing what perception suggests without guaranteeing are all forms of observation.

Observing is integral to perceiving, because all perception presents us with a world that outstrips our purchase on it. But this last depends on the fact that perception is perspectival, that it presents the world from a limited position within it, a position from which certain features of the world are immediately accessible, and others are not. (This point is most familiar for vision, but it transfers, albeit sometimes with a little strain, to perception in the other traditional sense modalities, and beyond.) But perspective is not a feature of every way in which the mind engages the world. Consider, for instance, conceiving. Thinking of a cube, Sartre says, is not perspectival: I conceive of all its sides, faces and angles at once, and there is no perspective, within the world conceived, from which the cube is presented. In consequence, there is no room for hypotheses here, no room for uncertainty about whether what I conceive really is a cube, and no role for observation in confirming that fact.

Imagining is an intermediate case. Like perception, it is perspectival. To visualize a cube is to picture how it looks from some point, or perhaps points, in its surroundings; to imagine a cube in a tactual way is to imagine it in contact with some part of one’s body. However, like conceiving, imagining presents its object in its entirety. Despite the fact that my visual image of the cube presents only some sides as facing me, that it is a cube is given not as mere ‘hypothesis’, but with certainty (cf. Wittgenstein 1965: 39; Peacocke 1980: 20). It would be idle to rotate the cube in imagination, since its nature is already secure. If, in rotating it, I picture more cube faces, I merely stay true to the thing as initially imagined. And if I don’t, I cease to imagine a cube, and start imagining something else. Thus imagining has the perspectival character that normally makes room for observation, without involving the uncertainty that it is observation’s role to resolve. There is an invitation to observe here, but no possibility of taking it up. Hence ‘quasi-observation’.

Is Sartre right to make these claims? The next section discusses cases that pose particular challenges to the idea that all imagining is perspectival. Here let us consider Sartre's claim about the epistemology of imagining. He sometimes expresses this by saying we learn nothing from our images. That is certainly false. I can learn whether I'm capable of imagining a fugue in three parts by attempting to do so. And can't we find out about the aesthetic and spatial realms by consulting our imaginings, for instance by imagining this tie with that shirt, or this peg going into that hole? However, we should distinguish between the world imagined (the real things, if any, that provide the objects of our imagining) and the world as imagined (how we imagine things, including any real things our imaginings concern, to be). Sartre's key thought is not that imagining can't teach us about the former, but that it doesn't allow us to learn about the latter. (Indeed, strictly speaking, he need claim only that there is no room to learn about the world as imagined *through observation*.) That thought is rather harder to evaluate. If the only way for imagining to teach us about the world imagined involved our learning about the world as imagined, refining Sartre's claim in this way would be pointless. However, it is not true that these forms of learning are tied in that way. It's at least possible that the real story involves learning that the shirt clashes with the tie, not by imagining the two together and observing the effect, but by finding that I cannot imagine the two going well together (Hopkins 2011: 111-113). Moreover, while there is a small psychological literature that seeks to test issues closely related to those raised by Sartre's claim, the results are inconclusive (Peterson et.al 1992; Reisberg 1996).

The third characteristic is that while perception presents things as real, imagining does not. As Sartre puts it, imagining '**posits its object as nothingness**'. Sartre sometimes refers to this positing as an 'act of belief' (12). Certainly perceiving something tends to engender the belief that such a thing exists, whereas imagining it does not. But Sartre's claim is not about the different relations in which these states stand to belief, but about features of the states themselves that are responsible for those differences. It is integral to perception to present itself as revealing how the world is, and integral to imagining not to do so. Any consequences for belief are downwind of that more fundamental contrast.

In fact, imagination's positing takes one of four more specific forms. It can present its object as not existing, as absent, as existing elsewhere, or it can merely not present the object as existing. Sartre does not give examples of all four forms, and one can expend considerable energy trying to work out if there really is room for this many subspecies. However, what is central to the four is that they all, explicitly or implicitly, involve negation (12). In this they contrast, not only with perception, but with conception too. For conceiving also presents things as real, only the things so presented are 'universal essences'.

That is, Sartre apparently thinks of conceiving as a matter of grasping the features essential to the concept's referent, without concern as to whether there is in fact anything corresponding to that concept. Conceiving shows us how things are, only not with the world in itself, but with our concepts. From this point of view, conceiving and perceiving are of a piece, positing as real, and imagining is the only consciousness that has negation ('nothingness') at its core.

It is this feature of imagining that will prove the source of its deepest significance (below, §4). It is also perhaps the least controversial of the three ways in which imagining is supposed to differ from perceiving. True, we might fruitfully investigate how best to construe Sartre's claim: here, as with all the other characteristics, my discussion is far briefer than the richness of the material deserves. (For more, see Casey 1981.) True too, some have taken positions squarely opposed to Sartre's, preferring to treat both imaginings and perceptions as failing to lay claim to show how things are, their connections to belief having to wait upon our judgment about which fit into series sufficiently coherent to suggest they reflect reality. (Collingwood 1938: ch.IX offers a particularly well developed version of such a view.) But any such view ignores finer grained differences that Sartre details elsewhere, such as the way the identity and nature of imagined objects is fluid as those of perception are not (II:V) and the gappy and elastic nature of the spatial and temporal structures within which imagined objects are presented (IV:I). If only some of these claims are true of only some images, that is enough to show that at least some imaginings come clearly marked as such, and so need not wait on assignment to a series before they can be identified for what they are.

It is, of course, another question whether every imagining has this feature. The most serious challenge to Sartre's claims about positing lies in cases in which imagining and perceiving are apparently mistaken for one another. The possible counter-examples here include hallucinations and dreams, in which *prima facie* imagining is mistaken for perceiving; and the famous Perky experiments (Perky 1910), in which observers apparently confuse seeing a faint projection of an object for imagining that thing. For if perceiving always presents its objects as real, and imagining never does so, how could we ever confuse the two?

The challenge here is of course more general. It confronts any attempt to distinguish imagining from perceiving by their phenomenology, and thus faces each of the three characteristics Sartre casts in that role. He sees clearly the threat from hallucination and dreams, offering sophisticated treatments of each (IV:III & IV:IV). For example, he treats dreaming as analogous to the state of being absorbed in a

story. The fascinated dreamer is so wrapped up in her dream that she loses her sense of the reality with which the dream world contrasts. Her dream does not present its world as real, but she has no sense of the real against which to locate the unreality it conjures for her. As for the challenge from experimental work, here Sartre is inappropriately (and unusually) dismissive (52). Fortunately, there are other, more serious, doubts one might have about what Perky's experiments prove (Segal 1971; Hopkins 2012).

Fourth, and last, imagining exhibits **spontaneity**. 'A perceptual consciousness appears to itself as being passive. An imaginative consciousness, on the contrary, presents itself to itself as an imaging consciousness, that is, as a spontaneity that produces and conserves the object as imaged.' (14).

In perception, one experiences oneself as responding to how things are in the world, as being receptive to the nature of those things. In contrast, imagining involves the generation of objects from within one's own mental resources, and that this is so is integral to its phenomenology. Of course, since at least Kant the idea has been familiar that perception cannot be entirely passive. Organization must be imposed on the input the senses provide if mere sensation is to be transformed into cognition. And, of course, sometimes what we imagine is driven by external forces, as when I cannot get a catchy tune out of my head. But perception must be passive at its core, if it is to inform us about the world. And imagining can have external causes without that fact being intimated by the phenomenology of imagining itself. What is so frustrating about the recurring tune is precisely that in imagining it I myself bring it back to life. If instead it plagues me because you won't stop singing it, my annoyance has a quite different character.

Is the idea of spontaneity that imagining is an exercise of agency, or merely that its immediate causes lie within the conscious subject? In describing imagining, Sartre makes very little use of the notion of agency. He does say something about the related notion of the will. He explicitly distinguishes willing and spontaneity (18; 134). (He is thus not flummoxed by cases, such as the 'ear worm', in which imagining is clearly not governed by the will.) Of the two, spontaneity is more basic. Indeed, Sartre seems to think that imagining is never perfectly determined by the will, and that the will cannot govern how a given imaginative project develops (135). Perhaps he thinks the notion of agency unhelpful, there being various cases intermediate between minimal spontaneity and full-blown willing, and little reason to draw a line that classifies only some as genuine actions.

While positing as nothing is the source of imagining's significance, spontaneity is in some respects the most fundamental of the characteristics. It explains quasi-observation, and necessarily accompanies positing as nothingness (14). Indeed, Sartre seems to say that it is spontaneity that above all identifies imagining for what it is. It is because it presents itself as spontaneous that imagining is given to us as imagining.

§2 The scope of Sartre's account: the image family

So much for the phenomenology of imagining. Across what range of activities does it extend? It is easy to assume that Sartre intends his description only to apply to cases of visualizing and its analogues in other sense modalities, such as 'hearing' sounds in one's head. In fact, Sartre devotes considerable space to discussing a far wider range of cases. In addition to what we might think of as internal sensory imaginings, he also includes sensory imaginings that involve an essential role for external objects; and internal imaginings that do not have a clear sensory character. Let's take these in turn.

While visualizing is one - perhaps the - paradigm of imagining, Sartre sees it as part of a wider range that includes our experience of realistic paintings and photographs, appreciating impersonations, caricatures and other schematic pictures, seeing things in the flames of a fire, and having hypnagogic imagery - the very vivid images that some people experience while drifting off to sleep. To count as imagining, these cases need only exhibit the characteristics above. Do they?

The easiest characteristic to apply across the entire range is positing as nothingness. In every case we are directed to something other than what is really before us: the scene we see in the picture, the face we see in the fire, the person who is being impersonated, the arrangement of colors and 3D shapes the hypnagogic image presents us with. And in no case does being presented with those things tempt us to form the belief that they are really before us. This is at least evidence that in every case our state of mind presents the relevant object as 'posited as nothingness'.

What, though, of spontaneity and quasi-observation? Sartre himself arranges his cases on a spectrum. At one end lies pure visualizing, at the other seeing things in realistic pictures. Everything else lies between, so we pass from visualizing, through hypnagogic imagery, to seeing faces in the fire, on through our experience of relatively schematic representations (caricatures and impersonations), until we reach the least schematic, *viz.* realistic paintings and photographs. The further we retreat from this

last pole, the more obvious it is both that we ourselves create what we use the marks, sounds or flames to present, and that there is nothing more to be found in them than we ourselves currently find there. (It would be bizarre to scrutinize the fire to find out more about the face in it, or to insist that seeing it there is mere openness to the nature of the flame, rather than a creative act wrought upon it.) But at the least schematic end, we might wonder whether either characteristic holds. If I look at a detailed oil portrait in realist style, is seeing the sitter really down to me? And, rather than excluding observation, doesn't the painting present me with that person in a way that invites me to look harder, to find out more?

As far as spontaneity goes, it is important to remember that it is not equivalent to will. We clearly cannot will what we see in detailed pictures to the degree we can what we see in 'doodles' or the flames. Even so, the former might still involve some manifest input from us. Seeing the scene in the photograph is a creative act on our part in which we 'animate' the marks, as seeing things in the flesh is not (25). Perhaps the threat to quasi-observation can also be finessed. Of course we can observe the painting or photograph itself: after all, that is there to be perceived, and where there is perception there is observation. What Sartre has to deny is that we are ever in a position to observe *the depicted scene*. If we're tempted to think otherwise, that is because we confuse observing the canvas with observing the scene it enables us to envision. Observing the marks no doubt can cause us to imagine the scene in more detail, thus encouraging the confusion. Even so, that confusion should be avoided. Or so, at least, Sartre can claim.

At this point, however, we run into another important theme. Sartre thinks consciousness always forms a synthetic unity. It is thus not possible to be in a single state of mind that involves features that are fundamentally in tension with one another. Since the features of imagining and perceiving are, as described above, radically opposed, imagining and perceiving cannot be combined: it is not possible both to perceive and to imagine at one and the same time. This is perhaps the claim of Sartre's that is hardest to swallow. However, his commitment to it cannot be gainsaid - he repeats it at several points. Taking it seriously has two consequences that are of immediate relevance. First, Sartre cannot treat our consciousness of any picture, highly realistic ones included, as a simultaneous mix of perceiving the canvas and imagining the object. Instead he must say that at most we alternate rapidly between the two. This complicates his explanation of why we are tempted to think we can observe depicted objects, at some cost to its plausibility.

The second consequence is to limit the range of cases Sartre can take as falling under imagining. Many have been tempted to treat cases of so called ‘aspect-perception’ as precisely involving an imaginative enrichment of materials that perception provides (e.g. Scruton 1974, White 1990). We see the dark wire frame of a (3D) Necker cube, but reversing its apparent orientation is a matter of imagining first one face closer than its opposite number, then vice versa. Others again have sought to treat imagination as a component in all perception. The tradition exploring this idea is long and distinguished (see Strawson 1970), but a recent manifestation is to apply the idea to what is now called ‘amodal completion’, i.e. the perceptual phenomenon of seeing things as cubes, or complete patterns in carpets, even though not every face of the object, nor every part of the rug, is visible (e.g. Nanay 2010). Given the doctrine of incompatibility, Sartre must reject both these ideas. If aspect perception is by definition a matter of imagination infiltrating perception, then there is no such thing; and, while, as we saw above, he certainly recognizes the phenomenon of amodal completion, the proposed analysis of it is one he repeatedly rejects (e.g. 180-1).

However, while Sartre thus excludes some sensory phenomena from being genuine cases of imagining, he also expands the category so as to include imaginings the sensory character of which is at least highly dilute, and perhaps even absent altogether, except *in potentia*. These states form a kind of half-way house between pure grasp of meaning and full-blown imagining. Like the former, they involve the mind’s directedness towards things without capturing any of those things’ definite sensible character; but like the latter, they do present those things as belonging to the sensible world. Sartre cites experiments in which subjects report themselves as ‘seeing’ (in the mind’s eye) two objects that are different, though not in any particular way (59). A more familiar example might be having a word on the tip of one’s tongue: one is aware of the very approximate form of the target, but not of any of the ‘matter’ (the marks or sounds) that fills out that form. Such states attribute no determinate sensory character to the things they concern, and may indeed not even clearly belong to one sense modality rather than another. Nonetheless, Sartre says, they aim at their targets *as objects*, at things that might populate a sensory world, and not at mere conceptions of those things. That is why they count as imaginings. These are the states that dominate our engagement with literature. The words in a novel generally do not prompt detailed sensory imaginings, but nor are they mere vehicles for pure meaning. Instead, they ‘represent the surface of contact’ between us and a world, a world that has a structure, however indeterminate the character of the nodes within it. The scene described at one point in a story

is experienced as related in certain vague but ever present ways to the characters and events described elsewhere (64-68).²

§3 Imagining's psychological substrate: the analogon

The various activities and mental states described in the last section all count as imagining in virtue of exhibiting its characteristic phenomenology. However, Sartre thinks they are also alike in another respect: they share a deep structure. In each, we are presented with something absent or non-existent *through* something else, something real that consciousness engages and animates in order to produce the imagined thing. Sartre calls this the 'analogon'.

The idea is easiest to grasp in the context of imaginings involving external objects. When I see Charles VIII in a portrait of him, the analogon is the painted canvas. I am conscious of Charles in the way distinctive of imagining only because the canvas is before me. Its role is not merely causal: the imagining consciousness itself incorporates the marked surface. Charles is presented to me *in* those marks. I organize them with thoughts of the king, with the result that he is presented to me - though not, of course, as really here.

Similarly, says, Sartre, with every other case on the spectrum above. The flames in the fire and the body and speech of the impersonator equally act as analogon for what they enable me to become conscious of. In every case, something real acts as an 'object for consciousness' (53), where it is clear this is distinct from consciousness's intentional object, the thing imagined. The analogon need not be external to the body: in the case of hypnagogic images, the role is filled by entoptic lights (40-49). However, external or not, something must play this role: even in the case of such purely interior phenomena as visualizing or rehearsing a tune in one's head. Otherwise, imagining would not differ from perceiving or conceiving. In perception, the mind 'faces' the very thing of which we are conscious; in conceiving its direction towards the thing conceived is 'empty', unaided by any real thing being before the mind. As a result, perception presents things as really here; and conceiving fails to present them at all. If imagining is to present things, but as not really here, something must really be before the mind, but not the intentional object itself. The analogon provides that substitute (52-3).

² Nowadays, it is common to suggest that imagining has both sensory and propositional forms. The latter is treated as a involving a distinctive attitude, taken towards a given proposition. It should be clear from the above that Sartre would have no truck with such a view. All imagining is directed at objects, at elements in a world. The states sometimes now described as propositional imaginings, he would consider not to be imaginings at all, but forms of supposition, or some such.

There is, however, one important difference between the cases. In almost all, from hypnagogic imagery to seeing portraits, it is possible to study the analogon directly. We cannot observe it while using it to imagine, since, as discussed above, perceiving and imagining are incompatible. What we can do, however, is to stop imagining and then observe the very thing that acted as analogon for that imagining. In the case of purely mental imagery, Sartre acknowledges, this is not possible. Whatever acts as analogon in these cases is destroyed, or fundamentally changed, when our consciousness alters. Shifting from the imaginative to the perceptual attitude transforms or annihilates the material that sustained the former. Thus, if we are to know the nature of these 'psychic contents', we must change tack. We must abandon phenomenological description, and the certainty its results enjoy, and turn instead to empirical investigation. Only psychology can reveal the nature of the analogon in purely mental imagining, and any conclusions we draw, as with any other inference to unobservable entities, will be no more than probable (53).

Drawing on a range of the psychological literature then available, as well as some more homely observations of his own, Sartre speculates that in internal imagining the role of analogon is played by bodily movements; by emotions, broadly conceived; or by a mixture of the two. He finds that when he visualizes a tennis match and places his fingers on his eyelids, he can feel the eyeballs turning as if following the ball back and forth across the net. His idea is that the subject is subliminally conscious of the rotation even when not touching his eyes. The movement is not an effect of his visualizing the game, but rather the material out of which the imaginative act constitutes the visualized scene. In other cases, this work is done by affect - by feelings that may, but need not, be directed towards the imagined object. As my mind turns to a colleague and rival, perhaps I dimly feel pangs of the jealousy she provokes. If I then find myself picturing her downfall, I do so by using those feelings as the peg onto which to hang my imaginative consciousness of the scene.

Of course, there must be more to imagining these things than the mere presence of such 'objects for consciousness'. The other essential ingredient in imagining is what Sartre calls 'knowledge' (II.I). Just as I need knowledge of how something looks if I am to see it in a picture, similarly it is my knowledge of how my colleague looks, talks and acts, or what a tennis match looks and sounds like, that enables me to animate the jealous feeling or movements of the eye so as to visualize those things. Like others before and after him (e.g. Wittgenstein; Peacocke 1985), Sartre thus sees imagining as 'a synthetic act that links a concrete, not imaged, knowledge to elements which are more properly representative' (9).

Now, some would say the same about perception. If perceiving involves more than having sensory impressions, because those impressions must also be organized by concepts, isn't this last reasonably described as exercising 'knowledge'? However, even so, a strong contrast with imagining, as Sartre construes it, remains. Whereas in perceiving the sensory input tightly constrains the nature of the object of which we are conscious, in imagining almost all the work is done by knowledge. The analogon, while essential, is in many cases almost infinitely malleable, in terms of the things we might use it to imagine. The structure of imagining is thus consistent with quasi-observation and spontaneity - indeed, Sartre can even explain them, by appeal to the dominant role of knowledge in determining what is imagined. (Compare Peacocke 1985 26-7.)

Given this, it would clearly be a mistake to construe the analogon as a form of inner picture. True, Sartre himself treats movements and affect in visualizing as playing the same role that the canvas plays in the case of the painted portrait. But the parallel is purely structural: in each, something real must be before the mind through which it makes the imagined object present. In the case of realistic pictures, what plays that role meets certain conditions - e.g. it must resemble the depicted object, or have similar effects on our visual system (22). But those cases are the exception. The order Sartre finds in his various cases of imagining precisely reflects the retreat from cases in which the analogon meets strict conditions and constrains tightly what is imagined, to ones in which ever more work is done by the 'knowledge' the subject brings to bear. The more schematic the picture, the wider the range of things we can see in it. We might see almost anything in flames in the fire, or have hypnagogic imagery of almost anything, given the entoptic lights that provide the material for such imaginings. So much the more so, then, for visualizing and other cases of inner imagining: there are even fewer restrictions on the range of things we might envision when using knowledge to animate particular sensations of movement or feelings. To appeal to the analogon in visualizing and other internal imagining is thus emphatically not to appeal to some inner model of the thing imagined. To suppose otherwise, Sartre says, is to succumb to the 'illusion of immanence', transferring features of the object imagined to features of the vehicle by which we imagine it (53; cf.5).

The theory of the analogon is thoroughly distinctive. Applying it to imagining in both inner and outer forms enables Sartre to offer highly original accounts both of visualizing and of pictorial experience.

But is the theory well motivated? Is it even coherent? And, if it is, are its psychological speculations borne out by subsequent research?

We can usefully separate Sartre's reasons for thinking that there must be an analogon in every case of imagining from his speculations about the precise nature of that thing, in cases where observing it is not possible. While the latter involve inferences on the basis of psychological evidence, the justification for the former claim is philosophical. Treating perception as involving the presence before the mind of the perceived, and imagining as involving the presence before the mind of something else, through which, using knowledge, we present ourselves with the imagined object, allows us to explain the phenomenology of the two. Quasi-observation, positing as nothingness and spontaneity can all be derived from this metaphysics of imagining, without too much ingenuity.

Only, however, if the theory is coherent. Anxiety on this score centers on the idea that the analogon is 'an object for consciousness'. Sartre can hardly claim less - if the analogon were merely a cause of imagining, it would not be an element within it, and would thus be incapable of explaining its phenomenology. But is the stronger claim really available to him? He accepts that, at least in cases of inner imagining, the subject is aware of none of the analogon's features. She is not aware of them while imagining, since then consciousness is wholly directed at the imagined scene. Indeed, if this were not so, imagining would not have the phenomenology described in the first characteristic, that of relating us to the imagined, unmediated by any mental particular. But nor is she aware of the analogon once imagining is over - else it would be something she could then observe. But if she is never aware of any of its features, in what sense is the analogon an 'object for' her consciousness? What can this phrase mean?

Before addressing this problem, let us add a second, from the other end of the imagining spectrum. Consider our experience of pictures. When we see Charles VIII in his portrait, the phenomenology is surely not the same as when we visualize him. Even setting aside differences of how detailed and stable our imagining is likely to be, isn't there some more fundamental difference between the two? But what can this be, if the canvas plays the role of analogon? Sartre is adamant that, when it is so used, it is not *perceived*. And if, while seeing Charles in it, we are not aware of its features in any other way, the nature of the painted marks seems to make no difference to our consciousness. But then, whence the

difference between this case and pure visualizing? Assuming that in each case we imagine Charles as bearing all the same features, the two experiences should be precisely alike.

To solve both these problems, I think we must treat the relation of being an object for consciousness as basic. This is a genuine relation: only what really exists can act as such an object. And it is fundamental to both perceiving and imagining. However, the relation fits into a very different structure in each case. In perception, the object for consciousness is the thing we perceive; in imagining it provides the material we animate in order to imagine something else. In the former, we are directly aware of its properties. In the latter, those properties are never perceived. However, it is not true, as assumed above, that we are not aware of them in any way. What is true is that we are only aware of them insofar as they contribute to the character of the imagined object. We cannot extract their contribution to that character from the whole. So we can't derive from our experience a description of the analogon's nature - not if that experience is imagining consciousness of Charles gained through his portrait, nor if it is visualizing him aided by sensations of movement or feelings. Nor are we aware of any thing distinct from Charles, the presence of which would prevent imagining being consciousness that directly aims at Charles himself. Nonetheless, in each case the Charles we imagine is 'inflected' by the means through which he is imagined, by the material out of the properties of which he is formed. Since the nature of the analogon does contribute to our experience in this way, we are in some sense aware of its properties, albeit not *as properties of the analogon*, and thus the idea that it is an object for consciousness makes sense. And since the analogons of which we are thus obliquely aware differ across our two cases (in one, a canvas with paint on it; in the other, inner sensations and feelings), we can accommodate the difference in phenomenology between them.

Thus there is at least hope for saving Sartre's theory from the philosophical challenges it faces, while preserving his justification for it. What of the psychological evidence? Here I will be confine myself to three observations. First, Sartre was fully aware that his speculations about the precise form taken by analogons for inner imagining were hostage to future scientific work. Second, at least some of that work supports his idea that sensations of movement play some role in imagining. (Consider here, for instance, the evidence that imagining words is often accompanied by sub-vocalization, and that if one prevents the latter from occurring, subjects find it much harder to undertake the imaginings requested (Smith et.al. 1992).) Third, Sartre's view is quite consistent with the growing body of work, in both psychology and neurophysiology, supporting the idea that visual imagining exploits some of the same neural processing as visual perception. Of course, Sartre is adamantly opposed to the idea that

imagining is, except in certain very broad respects (e.g. in involving perspective), phenomenologically akin to perceiving. But in the current state of our knowledge of the brain, it is unclear that overlap in processing establishes any closer kinship; and the use of the visual system in visual imagining does not clearly preclude a role in it for other ‘psychic’ elements, of the kind Sartre’s speculations concern.

§4 The significance of imagining

Only half of *L’Imaginaire* is devoted to the exposition and direct defense of Sartre’s claims about the phenomenology and deep structure of imagining. In the rest, he launches a series of investigations into its place in the wider mental economy: its relation to feeling and to symbolic thinking, its role in dreaming, in hallucination and in thought, and its central place in art. Those investigations, often brilliant, sometimes frustratingly suggestive, have often been ignored by those who’ve engaged with the book. In many ways, however, they complete his position, by drawing consequences from the claims at its core, or offering subtle defenses of them. There is no space here to enter into any of these topics in sufficient detail to make discussion worthwhile. The interested reader is encouraged to explore for herself.

What cannot be omitted, however, is at least a brief outline of Sartre’s views on the deepest significance of imagining. Imagining is not merely one of the basic forms of consciousness, it holds the key to the most important feature of consciousness in general: freedom. To be free is to be able to step out of the stream of reality, to resist responding immediately to what reality puts before us, and to consider how we should act. If consciousness only presented us with the real, it would not be possible to step back in this way. For that, we need a sense of what is not, but which might be; we need the ability to grasp ‘nothingness’. Nothingness cannot be intuited: there is no consciousness that presents us with pure nothingness. Yet there is, of course, one form of consciousness that has the idea of negation written into its intentional structure. That form of consciousness is imagining, and the ability to imagine thus underpins our freedom. Indeed, it underpins anything recognizable as human consciousness at all. Since nothing can be presented as real unless the contrast with what is not real is available, perceptual and imaginative consciousness are in fact interdependent. Neither can exist without the other, but it is the imaginative form, through positing as nothingness, that is the immediate source of human freedom (184-8; cf. Sartre 1943 25-6).

Thus *L’Imaginaire* is the springboard to *Being and Nothingness* and the wider ambitions of that influential work. Even without that famous successor, however, the earlier book has a great deal to

offer. It remains the most systematic and insightful expression of resistance to Humeanism about imagining, i.e. the attempt to treat it as perception in some degraded or weakened form. Despite the powerful attack on that view offered by various major thinkers in earlier part of the twentieth century, Humeanism has proved very resilient. Indeed, it remains the largely unquestioned assumption behind a good deal of philosophical and psychological work on imagining, at least in its sensory forms. To my mind, Sartre's view provides a powerful and in many ways plausible alternative. Even those who disagree should value his thought for offering the stimulus to future thinking that only a radical challenge to orthodoxy can bring.

Robert Hopkins

Related Topics

Hume; Husserl; Wittgenstein; Imagination and Mental Imagery; Imagination and Belief; Imagination and Perception; Imagination, Dreaming, and Hallucination; Art; Fiction.

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Further Reading

William L.McBride “Sartre and Phenomenology” in L.Lawlor ed. *Phenomenology: Responses and Developments* (Durham: Acumen 2010) is a useful guide to how Sartre’s engagement with Phenomenology fits into the broader development of his thought. Chapter 8 of Gilbert Ryle’s *Concept of Mind* (1949) in some ways pushes the anti-Humean position even farther than Sartre does. Colin McGinn’s *Mindsight: Image, Dream, Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2006) offers a plain-speaking contemporary account of imagining that takes inspiration from Sartre’s view at many points.

[Bio:

Robert Hopkins is Professor of Philosophy at New York University. His published work covers, among other topics, the nature of sensory imagining, the relation of imagining to feeling, and the comparisons and contrasts between visualizing, seeing and picture perception.]