

Summary of *Explaining Imagination*

(for Book Symposium)

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Like most philosophy, *Explaining Imagination* was born of discontent. It is a twelve-chapter complaint—not against imagination, of course, but against its treatment by others. Imagination is an explanatory wildcard in the philosophical literature, a protean posit suitable for the resolution of diverse puzzles and paradoxes. It's *imagination* that generates modal knowledge (Yablo, 1993), that is needed for thought experiments (Camp, 2009), that allows us to understand and empathize with others (Goldman, 2006), that rationalizes our engagement with fiction and the arts (Friend, 2008; Meskin & Weinberg, 2003; Stock, 2017), that underpins pretense (Nichols & Stich, 2000; Van Leeuwen, 2011), that helps us plan for the future and reason counterfactually (Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002; Myers, 2021; Williamson, 2016), that facilitates memory (Michaelian, 2016), visuospatial creativity (Kind, 2018), scientific discovery (Stuart, 2020)...and so on. Among those who deem it unlikely that a single mental state or process could serve all these purposes (Kind, 2013), a common reaction is to posit *different kinds* or *modes* of imagination. But imagination remains the answer.

But what is imagination? Much is said, but what is said rules out surprisingly little. So it seemed to me when writing *Explaining Imagination*; and so it still seems. My strategy for making progress was to ask what we *really want* from imagination. What makes it essential to the enterprise of understanding ourselves—and not something we simply assume we have at hand and may as well make use of? A method for answering suggest itself: let us try to do our best without it, explanatorily speaking, and then see what we are missing. Imagination will be thrown into sharp relief.

Such was the project of *Explaining Imagination*, where I exemplified what I saw as the contexts where imagination most likely plays an ineliminable explanatory role. These included conditional and counterfactual reasoning (Chapters 5 & 6), pretense (Chapters 7 & 8), fiction-consumption (Chapters (9, 10 & 11), and creativity (Chapter 12). In each case I tried to account for the relevant behavioral and cognitive abilities without mentioning imagination, implicating, instead, other folk psychological mental states like beliefs, desires, judgments, intentions, and decisions. As it turns out, I never found myself lacking. While the contents and combinations of these other states were not the same in each context, there always seemed to be some such plausible collection available to do the work others had reserved for imagination.

There are two ways one could react in such a situation. The first is to call the very existence of imagination into question. Yet this eliminativist route requires, first, prior agreement about the properties imagination must have if it is to exist at all, and, second, confidence that the newly identified states lack these properties. I was confident in establishing neither. The more attractive, second, approach is to conclude that imagination is simply different than many have imagined. On this reductive view, imagining is not a primitive, *sui generis* mental state or process, but rather consists in the having and entertaining of these other kinds of states in certain contexts.

From this perspective, ‘imagination’ is a word whose reference we fix from afar, in the manner of a natural kind term.¹ (Which isn’t to say that ‘imagination’ *is* a natural kind term.) We see someone pretending to be an ostrich and say: he must be *imagining* that he is an ostrich. Someone else asserts a counterfactual and we say: she arrived at the judgment by *imagining* what would have happened had the antecedent held. Another is captivated by events she knows to be fictional: clearly, she is only *imagining* these events. Having fixed the reference of the term in these ways, we may discover, on more careful consideration, that the “imaginings” so picked out are states we’ve seen elsewhere: beliefs, desires, judgments, intentions, and decisions of a kind. We make this discovery by grasping how such states could plausibly play the explanatory role we’d attributed to imagining in the context.

¹ I use the phrase ‘fix the reference’ in Kripke’s (1980) sense, who observed that we sometimes learn to apply a term to a substance or individual on the basis its having some superficial property—the property by which we “fix the reference” of the term—even if that property is not ultimately essential to the individual or kind so picked out.

Importantly, when the reference of a term is fixed from afar, there remains what we may call the *reference-fixing description*. This is a description of the property or feature on the basis of which we apply the term in the first place. It's what you understand about imagination just in being a competent user of the term. I argue (in Chapter 1) that there are in fact *two* such reference-fixing descriptions for imagination, corresponding to two distinct notions of imagination in the common lexicon. The first, which I labeled Attitude Imagining (or "A-imagining"), understands imagination as *elaborated, epistemically safe thought about the unreal, fantastical, possible, fictional* and so on. The second, which I termed Imagistic Imagining (or "I-imagining"), understands imagination as any mental process that makes use of mental states that seem to the user to be image-like. Both characterizations leave open the possibility of more substantive discoveries about the nature of these states, while capturing what it is that leads us to describe certain acts as acts of imagining.

My main project in *Explaining Imagination* was then to shed light on A-imaginings, by showing how, on close inspection, they consist in other, more basic mental states. Instead of an elimination, I propose a reduction. Understanding the reduction requires attention to two guiding maxims, outlined in Chapter 1: *don't assume content mirroring* and *don't assume homogeneity*. Concerning the first, I do not argue that imagining that *p* is the same thing as believing or desiring that *p*—or even as *weakly* believing or desiring that *p*. Rather, I show how some uses of beliefs, desires, judgments, decisions, and intentions—*none* of which may have the precise content *p*—constitute cases of imagining that *p*. Concerning the second, in order for imagining to reduce to other mental kinds, we needn't assume that it reduces in the same way in each instance. For example, within philosophy, many apply the phrase 'entertaining the proposition that *p*' to any of a heterogeneous set of occurrent mental episodes during which the proposition *p* is "before the mind." The fact that entertaining the proposition that *p* is not strictly the same thing as, say, judging that *p* does not stand in the way of reducing entertaining that *p* (as a mental state type) to a heterogeneous class of other occurrent states, which may include judging that *p*. It is important to keep this sort of possibility in mind when theorizing about a kind, such as imagination, which even on its face appears heterogeneous to many.

Because imagination is invoked in so many explanatory contexts, the project I pursued in *Explaining Imagination* is necessarily incomplete. My hope for the book is that it clarifies a promising path one might take in trying to gain a better grip on what we do when we imagine.

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