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Perceptual Imagination and Perceptual Memory

An Overview

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The essays in this volume explore the nature of perceptual imagination and perceptual memory. How do perceptual imagination and memory resemble and differ from each other and from other kinds of sensory experience? And what role does each play in perception and in the acquisition of knowledge? These are the two central questions that the essays in this volume seek to address.

One important fact about our mental lives is that sensory experience comes in (at least) three central variants: perception, imagination, and memory. For instance, we may not only see the visible appearance of a person or a building, but also recall or imagine it in a visual manner. The three types of experience share certain important features that are intimately linked to their common sensory character, many of which distinguish them from thought. Among these features are their apparent presentation of external objects or events (rather than propositions about them), their perspectival nature, that is that they present the world from a certain point of view, and their connection to one (or more) of the sense modalities, such as by having some modality-specific content and phenomenal character.

But there are also important differences among the three types of sensory experiences. Most notably, there is usually taken to be a fundamental divide between perceptions, on the one hand, and recollections and imaginings, on the other. Perceptual experiences are typically taken to be distinct from imaginative and mnemonic ones in that they present objects with a certain sense of immediacy. When we see objects, they seem to be present directly before us in our environment; while the objects of our memory or imagination don't seem to exist now in front of us they may be given to us as being located in the past or in some imagined world or in some location in this world other than our environment (although we may imagine that objects are now in front of us).

This difference in kind between perceptual experiences, on the one hand, and memories and imaginings, on the other, is often accompanied by certain differences

in degree. Thus sensory episodes of imagining or remembering are typically said to have less "force and vivacity", to quote David Hume, than episodes of perceiving; while the latter often appear to be less open to the influence of voluntary mental activity than the former.[1] Whether Hume's description should be taken literally or metaphorically is a matter of debate.

In addition, all three types of sensory experience are typically taken to play different motivational and justificatory roles; and these rational differences are taken, by some at least, to be phenomenologically salient to a certain extent. We are inclined and entitled to different beliefs in response to perceptions, memories, and imaginings; and this is arguably reflected by differences in what it is subjectively like to undergo these sensory experiences.

The nature of perception has always been one of the major topics in the philosophy of mind, while the opposite has been true of perceptual imaginings and perceptual memories. In particular, not much attention is paid to the similarities and differences between memory and imagination in their sensory forms, as well as to the fact that both are, from a phenomenal point of view, much closer to each other than to perception.[2] One central aim of the volume is, therefore, to remedy this situation and to get clearer about the nature of perceptual imaginings and perceptual memories by comparing them with each other and with perceptions.

One important issue in this domain is what makes it possible for imaginings and memories to possess the features distinctive of sensory experiences despite lacking perceptual immediacy. When we perceptually imagine an object does this consist in imagining having a perceptual experience of that object? And when we perceptually recall an object, do we perceptually remember a perceptual experience of such an object?

Another important issue is whether perceptual imaginings and perceptual memories differ intrinsically or extrinsically from each other. For instance, do the differences between them stem solely from how they originate in, and depend on, past perceptions, or solely in how they are related to the will and to mental agency?

Our sensory imagination is not completely unconstrained. What we can visualize, say, is restricted to the visible and, arguably, to what we have seen in the past or can extrapolate from our past perceptions (cf. Hume's missing shade of blue). But the imagination is, nonetheless, that aspect of our mental lives concerning which we enjoy most freedom, at least compared to perception and memory. We typically enjoy voluntary control with respect to when and what we imagine. This has led some

[1] David Hume, *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding* (London: A. Millar, 1777), Section 2, E2.1.

[2] At least this was the case until very recently. One exception comes in the form of the newly published Amy Kind (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Imagination* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2016). Another is the work on aphantasia—the condition in which people lack the ability to form mental images. See Adam Zeman, Michaela Dewar, and Sergio Della Sala, 'Lives without imagery: congenital aphantasia', *Cortex* 73 (2015): 378–80 and Matthew MacKisack, Susan Aldworth, Fiona Macpherson, John Onians, Crawford Winlove, and Adam Zeman, 'On picturing a candle: the prehistory of imagery science', *Frontiers in Psychology* 7 (2016): 00515.

to argue that there is a certain kind of agency that is constitutive of imagining and differentiates it from both perceiving and remembering. But is this conception viable given that people report involuntary instances of imagining? And, in any case, isn't some perceptual remembering voluntary?

Some people have thought that only our sensory recollections, but not our sensory imaginations, are inescapably particular in their presentation of objects. While we recall the appearances of specific objects which we perceived in the past by means of particular perceptions, imaginings—like depictions—allow for the presentation of generic objects and do not require any specific past acquaintance (although they do not exclude it). This raises the question of how, and in virtue of what, we can imagine particular objects rather than generic ones, or to what extent particular and generic imaginings involve some form of particular or generic sensory memory. It may be helpful in this context to compare the imagination with the phenomenon of depiction.

The first half of this volume opens with an illuminating essay by R. A. H. King investigating Aristotle's conception of imagination and memory, and their relations to perception. Dominic Gregory then investigates different forms of perceptual memory, arguing that there are two kinds of perceptual memories—both memories of what things were subjectively like for one at a certain time, and memories simply of how things were at a certain time. Experiential or episodic memory is also the topic of Robert Hopkins' essay. He argues that an important feature of this type of memory is that it involves imagining the past in a sensory way. Dorothea Debus considers how it is that we recognize perceptual memory as presenting the way the past was and we recognize that we should not take perceptual imagination to do so. The answer that she gives in her essay is that perceptual memories are related to a host of beliefs and experiences that allow a subject to tell a certain narrative about that perceptual memory, in a way that perceptual imaginings are not, and thereby provide the subject with a reason to take the perceptual memory to be a memory. Paul Noordhof turns his attention to the nature of perceptual imaginings and whether an account of their phenomenal character (that is, what it is like for the subject to have them) can provide reason to believe something about the metaphysical nature of the properties which determine that phenomenal character.

The second main aim of the volume is to specify and clarify the epistemic roles that the imagination and memory play in our mental lives.

One part of this discussion consists in the investigation of interactions between imagination and perception. Sometimes, we project mental imagery onto a perceived scene; and doing so may help us to acquire certain pieces of knowledge (e.g. whether a painting would look good on a particular wall), or to successfully perform a certain practical task (e.g. to pot a ball in billiards or snooker). Similarly, the sensory imagination has been said to be involved in the perception of hidden or occluded aspects of objects (e.g. when we see something as a voluminous building, rather than as a mere facade), or in the perception of ambiguous figures (e.g. seeing a wire cube in one of two possible

ways, rather than the other). This raises the question of what the relationship between perception and imagination is in these cases, and whether they involve experiences that are amalgams of perception and imagination, and whether this relationship may help to explain central features of experience.

Another important issue is whether sensory imaginings can provide us with evidence for belief, and ground knowledge, by themselves, that is, independently of perception. Standardly, discussions of this issue have been focused on our modal knowledge of the external world and the closely related knowledge of counterfactual conditionals. By contrast, this volume also addresses the questions of whether the sensory imagination can also give us access to non-modal knowledge, and whether it can play an evidential, rather than a merely enabling role, in the acquisition of modal and non-modal knowledge about experiences (i.e. about the mind itself). Thus the emphasis is not only on the kind of knowledge needed for certain fairly ordinary practical tasks, but also on knowledge about the essence of our own experiences. One key thought that needs to be spelled out is whether, and if so how, the imagination has to be constrained by our existing beliefs about relevant facts in order to be able to justify new beliefs.

Finally, it is interesting whether the insights gained into the perceptual and epistemic role of the sensory imagination can help to answer the question of the nature of sensory imagination and of its similarities and differences to other kinds of sensory experience. If perceptual imagination can enrich perception and ground knowledge then this would seem to indicate that it cannot be too far removed in its nature from perception and memory since, otherwise, it would be unable to play any comparable epistemic role.

The second half of this volume consists of five essays addressing these questions. Derek Brown defends the idea that all perceptual experiences receive some input from imagination, and spells out what kind of input. Robert Briscoe starts by assuming that perception and imagination interact and that we can superimpose mental imagery onto a perceived scene. He considers what knowledge and skills this ability bestows on us. He then goes on to consider how this phenomenon might explain the phenomenal character of occlusion. Gregory Currie addresses the question of what interaction there is between perception and imagination when watching films. He investigates the relationship between what he argues are distinct systems involving purely visual activity on the one hand, and the imagination on the other. Magdalena Balcerak Jackson argues that sensory imagination can provide us with knowledge of the nature and structure of our own experiences. She investigates this by examining the way in which sensory imagination is voluntary in a way that perception and memory are not. What we imagine seems up to us in a way that what we perceive and what we remember is not. Investigating exactly the way in which it is up to us leads her to draw interesting conclusions about the justificatory nature of imagination. Amy Kind's essay deals with the issue of whether perceptual imagination can provide

non-modal knowledge. She argues that it can and gives a detailed account of the sort of imagination that can play this role.

Fabian and I believe that the essays in this volume substantially push forward the debates about the nature of perceptual imagination and perceptual memory, and hope that they will inspire a great deal more work on these interesting topics by philosophers in the future.