**The Psychotic Transition: Some Remarks on the Nature of Hallucination-Inducing Imaginative Experiences**

**Abstract.** There are numerous studies suggesting a substantial link between psychotic hallucinatory states and some forms of disordered imaginings. We have to figure out (1) what characteristic makes imagining, not other mental states, prone to induce hallucination, and (2) what underlies the (phenomenological/conceptual) transition from imagining X to the hallucinatory experience of X? In this paper, I will try to provide answers to these questions, in order to shed light on the nature of the so-called “misidentified” or “disordered” imaginative experience. To achieve this, I emphasize the phenomenological aspects of hallucination and imagination.

**Keywords:** imagination, hallucination, perception, schizophrenia

1. **Introduction**

Hallucinations, in general, and visual hallucinations, in particular, are considered as instances of the *positive symptoms* of schizophrenia. In psychotic hallucinations[[1]](#endnote-1), one is incapable of distinguishing external reality from the internal activity of one’s own mind (De Masi et al., 2014). Hallucinations involve phenomenological similarities to veridical perceptions, as a result of which the patient is deceived. Thus, I call an experience a “psychotic hallucinatory experience” only if these conditions obtain:

1. The subject seems to perceive veridically some object O.
2. From the subjective point of view, the experience is indistinguishable from the veridical experience of O.

In order to exclude illusions, we may add:

1. There is *actually* nothing perceived during the experience, i.e. there is no actual external sensory stimulus. (For other variants of this definition see O’Shaughnessy (2000, p. 350-351) and Slade & Bentall (1988))

It is important to note that in the above definition, only the condition (c) is intended to differentiate hallucinations from veridical perceptions while subjective conditions, (a) and (b), underlie the phenomenological confusion involved.

Given considerable phenomenological similarities between hallucination and perception from one hand and the between perception and imagination from another hand, it would not be surprising to find an explanatory/causal account for hallucination in terms of disordered imagination. There are, in fact, numerous studies that aim to suggest a substantial link between hallucinatory states and imagination. The schizophrenic is said to fail to recognize the imaginative quality of imaginative experiences and takes the content of the mental image of O as the content of veridical perception of O (De Masi et al.;2014; Brebion et al., 2008; Sass 1994). For example, some researchers suggest that auditory hallucinations stem from externalization of verbal fantasy (or the so-called “internal speech”), and likewise, visual hallucinations stem from externalization of visual mental images (McGuire et al*.*, 1995). Currie points to the very same idea in a different way:

To explain hallucination in terms of the misidentification of imaginings, we may assume that a loss of sense of agency robs the subject of the capacity distinguish between genuinely perceptual experience and mental imagery in its various forms… [I]maginings that have visual, auditory or other modes of imagery as their counterparts would be opt to be confused with experiences in other modes, were it not for our sense that they are willed by us. (Currie 2000, p. 180)

What is it to have a “misidentified imaginative experience”? To put it another way, what aspects of a normal imaginative experience are omitted or ignored, as a result of which hallucinatory experiences emerge? The problem I raise here is how to explain the transition from the imaginative state to the psychotic-hallucinatory state. To achieve this end, my argument emphasizes a comparative examination of the phenomenology of normal imagination against disordered imagination. The answer, I think, consists of two steps. Firstly, we have to grasp what characteristic makes imagining prone to yield hallucination. That is, what is peculiar in nature of imagination that, unlike the variety of other mental states, turns it into a possible ground for emergence of hallucinations? Secondly, given that potentiality on its behalf, what underlies the (phenomenological/ conceptual) transition from imagining X to hallucinatory experience of X? To settle these questions help us characterize the nature of the so-called “misidentified” or “disordered” imaginative experience.

Any attempt, I think, which aims to capture the phenomenology of all kinds of positive symptoms of schizophrenia at once, or even all subclasses[[2]](#footnote-1) of hallucinations is too ambitious to make in a single paper. The main reason is the heterogeneous phenomenal feature of auditory verbal hallucination, or “AVH” (McCarthy-Jones et al., 2013; Maiese, 2018). It is not meant to imply that there is no unifying account that can capture this diversity. Given that even to describe various forms of AVHs requires too long a paper, even if there is such a unifying account, it will still take a great deal of effort and volume to elucidate how the articulated account entails/explains this diversity. Therefore, I focus only on visual hallucination from which 15% of schizophrenics are said to suffer from (Frith 1995, p. 68; Currie 2000, p. 180; Cutting 1995).

Next, I will deal with similarities and differences between imagination and perception. We will see that similarities and differences amount to answer the first and partly the second question respectively (see the abovementioned questions). Phenomenal similarities amount to answer why imaginative states are prone to induce psychotic-hallucination while the difference(s) amount(s) to illuminate what underlies the transition from normal imagination, as qualitatively distinct from veridical perception, to hallucinations.

It will be observed that *spatial neutrality* plays the central explanatory role in this respect. The property of spatial neutrality refers to the fact that in perceptual experience objects are perceived to be located in a particular place in space while this is not the case for imaginative experiences. In the latter class, objects are felt to lack the same sort of spatiality. Their components are not represented as determinate with respect to possible locations. Finally, I conclude the paper with its main suggestion. Hallucinations arise due to faulty ascription of spatiality to objects and events of imagination. Images to which determinate spatial location are wrongly ascribed are in fact hallucination-inducing.

Another clarifying point is that my conception of imagining is not committed to either pictorial or anti-pictorial view of underlying realizations of images (among examples of these views are Kosslyn (1980) and Pylyshyn (2002)). The only commitment it takes is the presupposition that there is a kind of mental experience called imagining with *phenomenal* features accompanying it.

1. **Similarities: the first step**

All phenomenal features of imagining can be divided into two classes: (1) Properties that belong to imagining exclusively; and (2) properties imagining and perception have in common. For now, I deal with the common properties briefly; afterward, I will turn to differentiating aspects.

1. *Perspectivalness*. It is believed that a sensory image of an object O, like sensory percept of O, is perspectival (Peacocke 1985, pp. 24-8; Martin 2002, pp. 408-10; Smith 2006, pp. 52-3). When a subject is visualizing a cube, it is not the case that all its sides are represented to the subject at the same time. Similarly, when a cube is perceived, not all its sides are perceived simultaneously. In both cases, some aspects of the object seem to be absent.
2. *Phenomenal Correspondence*. In addition, the phenomenological similarities between sensory *percept* and sensory *images* are considerable. What makes a mental image of a tiger a mental image of a *tiger* is partly its vast similarities to the percept of a tiger. These similarities are interestingly manifested in Perky’s well-known experiment (Perky, 1910), where subjects were asked to visualize objects while, at the same time, unbeknownst to them, barely visible images of the very same objects were projected onto a screen in front of them. Surprisingly, the subjects mistook perceiving objects for imagining them.
3. *Physiological Similarities.* The similarities between these two classes of mental states go far beyond the phenomenological level. At the physiological level, it has been empirically established that, to a great extent, the brain regions involved in perception overlap the brain regions involved in imagining (Kosslyn et al. 2006). In particular, if one imagines seeing an object, activity in the primary visual cortex (area V1) increases in a way that is very similar to the activity pattern when one visually perceive the very same object (Kosslyn and Thompson, 2003); and the primary auditory cortex responds to both imaginative voices and real voices (Meyer et al, 2010). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that when we visualize a scene, our eye movement pattern is very analogous to the eye movement pattern when we visually perceive the very same scene (see e.g. Laeng et al. 2014).

We see that phenomenological similarities between perception and imagining are well manifested in various forms. Therefore, in general, it is not far from truth to say that imagining is a “quasi-perceptual” experience (Richardson 1969, p. 2) or “simulate[s]” non-imaginative states (Ichikawa 2009, p. 106).

These common properties between imagining and perception contribute to the explanation of the imagination-hallucination link (the first question above). It explains why *imagination* in some abnormal mental situations tends to induce hallucination, given that the latter has phenomenological similarities with perception. However, to focus on the commonality does not capture everything, since commonality does not tell why *not all* instances of imaginings are hallucination-inducing. In order to explain the psychotic transition (the second question above), we need to know how the normal and abnormal imaginings differ in such a way that only the latter kind yields hallucination. To achieve this end, we have to take distinguishing features into account.

1. **Difference: the second step**

Empiricists like Hume (the most quoted) and Berkeley (less quoted) hold that the difference is quantitative rather than qualitative. Hume in *Treaties* says

… The difference betwixt these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. Those perceptions [= perception in a broad sense], which enter with most force and violence, we may name *impressions;* and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their ﬁrst appearance in the soul. By *ideas* [= mental images]I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning. (Hume 1740/2009, p. 17)

Further, he gives his main proposal: “That idea of red, which we form in dark, and the impression, which strikes our eyes in sun-shine, differ only *in* *degree, not in nature*”. (ibid, p. 20, emphasize added). Berkeley also sees the difference in terms of quantity, rather than quality, where he says

The ideas of Sense are more strong, lively, and distinct than those of the Imagination; they have likewise a steadiness, order, and coherence, and are not excited at random, as those which are the effects of human wills often are. (Berkeley, § 30);

and,

The ideas formed by the imagination are faint and indistinct; they have besides an entire dependence on the will. But the ideas perceived by sense, that is, real things, are more vivid and clear, and being imprinted on the mind by a spirit distinct from us, have not a like dependence on our will. (Berkeley 1972, pp. 225-226)

According to this view, the difference is not categorical and must be characterized in terms of degree of “force”, “liveliness”, “faintness”, “vividness”, “clearness” etc. (For a recent discussion of the quantitative view and a defense of a quantitative view, or the so-called “continuum theory”, see Thomas (2014)). McGinn introduces the property of *saturation* as a sharp distinction mark. This property refers to the fact that every point of, say, the visual field, is such that some quality is manifested while images are “gappy, coarse, discrete” (McGinn 2004, pp. 25-26). It seems, however, that the quality of being gappy, coarse, and discrete in McGinn’s terminology is closely connected, if not equal, to what Berkeley and Hume meant by mentioning the qualities cited above[[3]](#endnote-2); hence the term “saturation” in this context is almost a synonym for “vividness” (Ffytche 2013, p. 56).

This mark, of course, strikes us as plausible, especially in the cases of experiences with complex content. Compare the mental image of a landscape with the percept of the very same landscape. It is hard to deny the existence of difference in degrees of details, contrast, etc., or which is construed as “saturatedness” or “determinateness”. This being accepted, it would seem that, given the fact that most of our ordinary conscious experiences are rich in content, this account captures the issue pretty well. However, as McGinn points out, faintness is not a sufficient criterion yet because of the existence of faint percepts (2004, p. 10). Take the case of astigmatism, a well-known symptom of which is blurred vision of objects especially on borders. Severely astigmatic vision, being incapable of distinguishing between “6” and “8”, can hardly be considered as a “clear”, “vivid”, or “saturated/determinate” experience.

However, in addition to the previous worry, one may ask, “Even if we took quantitative account, such as those of Hume and Berkeley or probably McGinn’s saturation criterion, as plausible in the case of complex contents, would it also hold for simpler cases?” It seems not. When I am quite concentrated, my initial visual images of a plain yellow sheet of paper does not seem less vivid or less saturated than the direct percept of the very same paper. Contrary to McGinn’s idea, every point of this mental image is such that the quality of yellowness is manifested. It is the case especially if I have previously intended to form an image of the paper immediately after seeing it. The upshot is that *even if* there were some plausibility on behalf of the traditional empiricists’ quantitative account and McGinn’s saturation criterion, it would not still capture the differences quite satisfactorily for especially in the cases of simpler contents, the matter of degree and the difference with respect to saturatedness almost vanishes.

To find a satisfactory distinction mark, let us compare the visual mental image with the visual percept of a given person. In both cases, each part of the object is spatially related to other parts, the head being higher than the trunk, the legs being lower than the trunk, etc. This spatial similarity between the image and the percept of the person is necessary for the former to be an image *of the very same person perceived*. However, we further ascribe another spatial property to a percept exclusively. That is, not only are parts of the percept spatially related to each other but also they necessarily occupy some regions of the space around us, while it is not the case in visual images. McGinn says

… [I]mages are neutral as to the actual spatial relations of their objects. If I form an image of my friend Peter, I do not represent him as in any definite spatial relation to me or to other objects, whereas if I see Peter, he *must* be spatially located by my perceptual experience. Thus imagery is non-locating, unlike perception (2004, p. 58, emphasize added)

Although it is possible, of course, to imagine occluded parts of a visually perceived object in the real space, (the so-called “amodal perception”) (Nanay, 2010; see also Martin 2004, p. 410), it is not a requirement for imagining the object. That is to say, the object of imagination *does not have* to be represented as located in the real space. It is a peculiar characteristic of imagination that although it has an internal spatial structure essentially, it is *possible* for the object of imagination not to seem to actually occupy any region of space at all. Contrary to features such as “vividness” and “faintness”, this spatial property is not a matter of degree. In essence, imagination can represent its object as spatially neutral while perception necessarily represents its object as spatially located.

The thought is that there are two different sorts of spatiality, call them “internal” and “external”. The image and the percept both have internal spatiality, that is, items of the percept and the images, likewise, are spatially arranged. The situation is different with respect to the external spatiality. The image lacks the latter sort as it lacks the specificity about the location as a whole. Of course, I can visualize my pen, a piece of paper and the pen being on a specific part of the paper. It does not imply, however, that at the very moment of visualization I could not imagine the pen without visualizing any background. To “design” a spatial framework or a background in the mind’s eye is not mandatory in imagination.

Images and percepts can be seen as different with respect to *definiteness*. Metaphorically speaking, when an image is to turn into its corresponding percept, it has to undergo the process of coagulation. From a free-floating state, it has to be converted into a solidified state. We can also grasp the difference in terms of actuality and potentiality. The object of image is not, in a sense, as actualized as the object of the percept. They have an infinitely large number of potentials: the object of imagination can be represented as located at any spot that is logically possible. Contrary to images, percepts introduce their objects fully actualized with respect to the location; thereby, they logically exclude infinitely many facts concerning the place of their objects.

It is illuminating to compare thoughts to images with respect to definiteness. As the percept is more bound than the image, the image is more bound than the thought. The relative boundness of the percept is a consequence of spatial externality that the image lacks. However, the thought is even less actualized than the image, as the former does not have even the internal spatiality: It hardly makes sense to ascribe *any* form of spatiality, either internal or external, to the subjectivity of *pure* thoughts. Consider a relatively specific thought “This cat is black”. This sentence expresses a definite thought though, in a sense, not as definite as the image of a black cat. Assuming that there is actually a cat, the sentence has a definite meaning, expresses a definite thought, and presumably has a definite truth-value, but, still, it is consistent with a variety of phenomenal qualities the image of a black cat may represent. It does not definitely decide whether the cat is standing, sitting, sleeping and or infinitely many other possibilities. In contrast, a complete mental image of a black cat represents the object as either standing, sitting or sleeping (You may try visualizing a black cat that is *just* a black cat, neither sitting nor standing, neither sleeping nor awake!). However definite and specific a thought is, there is always an infinitely large number of situations that the thought leaves undecided while the associated image definitely describes. By a “complete image” of an object X, I mean to represent in the mind’s eye every part of X that X is intended to have. You can, of course, visualize a black cat without visualizing its legs in which case the represented cat is neither standing nor sitting. Nevertheless, it does not count as a complete image of a black cat. Again, you can certainly visualize a black cat that is legless. It is completely another issue since, in the latter instance of visualization, you are not forming an incomplete image of a perfect black cat, rather you are forming a complete image of a mutilated black cat in which the issue of standing or sitting does not even arise.

In addition to its importance *per se*, the difference with regard to external spatiality can explain some alleged distinction marks between perception and imagination:

1. **, (2)** **Quasi-observation and nothingness**. Sartre and McGinn point to the fact that imaginative experience essentially involves “quasi-observation”, observation that teaches nothing to “the observer”, contrary to perceptual experience, which is informative and teaches something that has not grasped before (Sartre 1948, pp. 8-14; McGinn 2004, pp. 17-22; Wittgenstein 1981, §§ 627-632). The knowledge is contained in the very same act that gives birth to the images. Therefore, images do not present any piece of knowledge, which has not been gained before by the subject. Sartre also talks of “nothingness” of imagining, which is meant to refer to the fact that an image posits its object as *not-being* (1948, pp. 14-8). Presumably, that is why images do not invite belief in the same way as percepts do.

The peculiar spatial characteristic of imagination is explanatorily relevant here. Given that what we normally take as physically “real” *must* be represented as located in a real region of space out there, a visual image, by its very nature, cannot be considered as representing its object as “real”. Therefore, representation of something unreal (or “nothing”, except in our image) can be marked as “quasi-observation”. When a mental act posits its object as unreal or nothing, it hardly represents it as genuinely informative.

**(3) Absence.** Though not essentially independent of the two qualities cited above, “absence” refers to the fact that “perceptual consciousness contains a kind of double reference – to the object and to the perceiver’s body – while the imaginative consciousness makes no such reference; it simply posits its object in a way that is neutral about its relation to the imaginer’s body.” (McGinn 2004, p. 30)[[4]](#endnote-3). We can easily see how the principle of spatial neutrality plays its explanatory role with respect to this feature. If a particular act of imagining is not committed to posit its object as occupying the “real” space surrounding the imager’s body, it does not make sense to assert that imaginative experience makes reference to the imager’s the body. To represent things in a way that they have spatial relations to the body implies representing them in such a way that necessarily involves occupation of definite locations in space.[[5]](#endnote-4)

It is worth mentioning that the preceding claim on the peculiar spatial property of imagining is consistent with the claim that the visualized object and the object visually perceived share the very same space. Chomanski holds that in cases in which the subject has perceptual experience and visualization experience simultaneously – a situation in which the subject’s eye must be open – both the object perceived and the object imagined are represented as located in a single space (Chomanski, 2018). Though I am not going into details of this claim, mainly due to space limitations, it must be noted that this claim suggests that the imager may image an object and perceive another within the same space. It does *not* imply that the visualized object *must* seem to occupy a specific region of the space of perception: Contrary to perceptual experiences in which one *necessarily* perceives things as located in the space, although one, if willing, may image something in the very same space, one does not have to at all[[6]](#endnote-5).

Hallucinations arise because of faulty ascription of external spatiality to the object of imagination. The phenomenology of externality is tightly connected to the conception and perception of independence and objectivity. Objectivity and externality do not merely belong to ontology. We perceive something as external only if it *seems* to have an objective and independent existence. To say that physical objects are perceived as external is to say that they are represented as independent entities (Normally, we do not *infer* that such and such sensory impressions come from external sources; rather it seems that we *perceive them as external*.). In psychotic hallucinations, the schizophrenic falsely represents internal activities as external as he represents them as independent entities.

In fact, this possibility of sharing the very same space, which is Chomanski’s point, provides positive evidence in favor of my account. We know that veridical perception and hallucination can occur simultaneously. That is to say, when having a hallucinatory experience, it is *not* the case that *whatever* the subjects see is non-veridical. The subject non-veridically perceives a giant snake crossing a *real* road. Both representations occur in a single episode of consciousness[[7]](#endnote-6). Both the snake and the whole physical surroundings feel real, and only the experience of the snake is hallucinatory. The important note is that the experience of real and unreal events constitute one single conscious state.

Therefore, the term “hallucinatory experience” is sometimes somehow misleading for, strictly speaking, we do not have two sorts of experiences, veridical and hallucinatory; rather, we have two *sorts of objects* of experience, real and hallucinatory constituting a unified stream of phenomenal consciousness. Alternatively, we can say there are two sorts of representations, veridical and hallucinatory. A particular so-called “hallucinatory experience”, like my example, may consist of the two sorts of objects, real ones and unreal ones, or the two sorts of representation.

The real and the unreal are not represented as belonging to two *distinct* streams of experiences. This perceptual co-consciousness entails the existence of one single space in which both the real and unreal are represented as located. My account predicts that when veridical and hallucinatory representations together constitute a single stream of phenomenal consciousness, both must ascribe their object as occupying a single spatial framework. Therefore, my account explains the unified phenomenology of “hallucinatory experiences”.

1. **Conclusion**

To sum up, our phenomenological investigation have indicated that (1) in visual percepts and images, there is a spatial relation between parts of what is imagined, which also invariably holds between parts of what is perceived (call it “internal spatiality”); (2) in perception, unlike imagination, the subject, further, ascribes another sort of spatiality to the object of experience – in visual perception the object is seen as occupying a region of space (“external spatiality”); (3) this distinction mark is a fundamental one in that it can explain some other supposed imagination-perception distinction marks; (4) faulty ascription of external spatiality explains why objects of images in psychosis are felt to exist independently of the subject.

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1. The modifier “psychotic” is not redundant here, since, as we shall see, there are cases of *non*-psychotic experiences sharing some important aspects of hallucination proper. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Of course, McGinn intends to put forth this property as a *qualitative* mark, which categorically distinguishes between images and percepts. However, I think, it is re-verbalization of what Hume and Berkeley had in mind. Related to this construal is David Sosa’s claim (2006) which indirectly supports Hume and Berkeley’s view by maintaining that differences enumerated by McGinn are matters of degree rather than essential. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. He acknowledges that in fact this mark is an explication of another basic quality, the distinctive quality of the visualized field of imagination (discussed in pp. 22-4). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. In addition to the three respects I discussed, two more features of images are mentioned in Sartre’s analysis. (1) Imagining is a relation between the subject and the real object which the mental image is an image of. (2) imagining appears to be creative while perceptual experience appears to be passive. However, I do not intend to discuss these two properties here, mainly because of two reasons. First, I believe, with Sartre, that the former is a common element between perception and imagining. Second, even if perceptual experience involves no creative element, which is highly controversial, this feature does not seem to be conceptually independent of the informativeness of perception (as opposed to the quasi-observation property of imaginings).

   Secondly, McGinn lists nine respects in which, he thinks, imagination and perception differ. However, they are not logically independent of each other. For example, “attention” is closely related to “subjection to the will” (McGinn 2004, p. 28). When he is talking of absence, he is actually explicating another respect, visual field (p. 29). By “recognition” he means exactly what Sartre means by “quasi-observation” (compare ibid, pp. 30-1 with Sartre 1948, pp. 8-14); There are three respects, saturation (or determinacy), the relation to thought, occlusion which are straightforward consequences of absence (For more detailed discussion see Thomas, (2014 pp. 154-8)). Therefore, up to now, we are left with only four independent aspects of difference: subjection to will, observation/quasi-observation, nothingness, and absence. Finally, because of the possibility of existence of involuntary, unintended, passive imaginations such as earworms – a song stuck in our head against our will – (see also ibid, p. 139; Nanay 2010, p. 249), and moreover, because of the possibility of the presence of strong mental associations between some mental states and a given image, (when, for example, the percept of object X evokes an image of object Y involuntarily), it is hard to believe that “subjection to will” is a plausible distinction mark between imagination and perception. Therefore, in the final analysis, we are left with only those three aspects discussed in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. Chomanski also holds that imagery being non-locating is inconsistent with “perspectival-ness” of visualization. Considering my discussion, it seems that this judgment is not correct. It is not absurd at all to hold that things can be visualized *as if* they are represented from a specific point of view, while not anywhere *in particular*. For example, we can readily visualize a red ball to the right and a blue ball to the left without being compelled to represent them as locating anywhere in particular (though, of course, if *willing,* we can *further* ascribe to them a particular region of the space which is not essentially the same task). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. It is a report of my deceased uncle’s recurrent hallucinatory experience. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)