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A Review of Colin McGinn's *Mindsight*

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Anyone who has been around analytic philosophy the past 20 years knows that consciousness is *in*. These days much effort is spent playing whack-a-dualist. It seems that anyone who is anyone has written a book on the metaphysics of mind. Colin McGinn's new book marks a refreshing departure from this trend. *Mindsight: Image, Dream, Meaning* discusses the role imagination plays in the way we represent the world; the role it plays in dreams and some mental illnesses; and the fundamental role it plays in belief and meaning.

When we stop and reflect on imagination in our experience, we can see that it plays a crucial role in our conscious lives: we are constantly representing non-actual situations. Imagination, then, clearly needs a cogent analysis and deserves a place in consciousness studies. In this review I discuss McGinn's contribution to this subsection of consciousness studies by way of focusing on his major themes: the status of the image, the relationship between imagination and dreaming and delusion, and the relationship between belief and meaning.

The Image

In the initial chapters McGinn makes important distinctions between imagining and perceiving and the act and object of imagination. Understanding the image/percept distinction helps us better see the relationship imagination bears to other cognitive faculties. McGinn uses Hume's famous distinction between impressions and ideas to

frame this discussion. For Hume impressions are sensations (percepts in McGinn's terminology[1]) and ideas (images in McGinn's terminology) are mental states whose targets are past impressions. So we might say that for Hume imagination is "perception" of past perceptions.

Hume first discusses impressions and ideas in the *Treatise* where he claims they are only distinguished by their liveliness in the mind, impressions being more vivid. We might say that if impressions are original copies, ideas are xeroxes of those original copies. In any case, both impressions and ideas are like percepts for Hume. McGinn sees this as a fundamental error. The source of the error lies in Hume thinking that ideas take impressions for their intentional objects. In other words, it's wrong to think that when I look at the table in front of me (impression) and close my eyes and "see" the same table in my mind's eye the idea takes my original impression—or sense datum—as its intentional object. *Contra* Hume, McGinn endorses a naïve realist view to the effect that the intentional objects of images (or Humean ideas) are worldly objects which lie (for the most part) outside of the mind.

After clearly distinguishing images from percepts of sense-data, McGinn sets out to further classify images by focusing on the following question: Are images more like thoughts or percepts? An initial distinction is this. Images are subject to the will in the same way thoughts are: we can stop or start thinking in the same way we can stop or start imagining. Not so with perception: we can't stop perceiving a table (ignoring the option of closing one's eyes) that is in front of us, because perception happens to us; thought and imagination are something we do.

Another difference is that while both are indeterminate in their own way, images are more so than percepts. Similarly, images are unsaturated in a way that percepts are not: When we imagine we leave out a fair amount of detail. (To see the point, imagine Bill Clinton to yourself. Stop. And go read the footnote.[2])

McGinn makes the above passive/active distinction even finer. He rightly contends that images require our attention for their existence while percepts do not. Also the content of images can't be "up for grabs" in the same way that the content of percepts can be. For example, when I perceive a person in the distance I may not realize that person is my brother; the person may look like my brother but based on the indeterminacy of the given percept I may withhold judgment on the question of his identity. In contrast, when I imagine my brother; the content is not up for grabs in the same way. I know it's my brother from the start, because imagining something is a creative and active act whereby we stipulate the content of the imagining in a way that is markedly different from the passive act of perception.

Similarly, images are occlusive in a way that percepts are not. For McGinn this is borne out by a simple experiment. You can see a chair and imagine or think about an apple, whereas you cannot think about an apple and imagine it at the same time. These are willed acts for McGinn and occupy a subject's attention in a way that is distinct from percepts.

One avenue for further discussion is the nature of imagination in relation to sense modalities other than vision. McGinn spends most of his time with visual imagination. While experience shows this is the most prevalent form, other ways to represent the

world imaginatively do exist. McGinn acknowledges this, but doesn't elaborate quite enough.

McGinn also discusses interesting cases where perception and imagination converge. McGinn frames this discussion using Wittgenstein's notion of 'seeing-as'. To 'see-as' is to imaginatively interpret perceptual content (or what McGinn calls “core percept”). The duck/rabbit figure is a classic example of seeing-as. McGinn adopts Wittgenstein's view that in cases of seeing-as, images come into contact with percepts (48-9). Here we might think McGinn inherits a puzzle from Wittgenstein: How is it that percept and image can merge if one cannot, as Wittgenstein and McGinn hold, have an image of *x* while one is simultaneously perceiving *x*? How can one have an image of the figure as a rabbit, when one is also seeing it as a rabbit? We certainly don't experience the melding of image and percept when we look at the figure. The paradox dissolves when we remember that *images are not like pictures in the mind.* That is to say, it’s not as if we have an image of a rabbit in our heads and a percept of the figure in our heads. No, such a figure gives us either *Rabbit-content* or *Duck-content* based on the imaginative interpretation we give the figure. In either case, there is only perceptual content being interpreted in a certain way: there isn’t perceptual content and imagined content.[3] The duck/rabbit discussion shows that images are determined by—but not copies of—external objects.

One potentially troubling thing McGinn says about the image is this. McGinn thinks that imagery comes with a frame that is itself an intentional object (which McGinn argues images are not). This is an interesting asymmetry: all other intentional objects are external (outside the head). This could become a troubling claim for McGinn's naïve theory.

The best case for this naïve realist theory of imagination is an argument from elimination. McGinn argues that the rival theory, the Picture Theory (akin to Hume’s sense-data theory we discussed on which images are indirect objects in the intentional act of imagination) cannot meet two objections. McGinn characterizes the Picture Theory thus:

> Imagistic consciousness is thus held to be structurally analogous to the consciousness we have of external pictures: there is a kind of double intentionality involved, in which both the picture and what it represents become intentional objects. Images are simply inner pictures, arrayed before the mind's eye (61).

So on the picture theory the structure of imagination is like this. You have a subject who imagines a direct object (say your mother's face) by way of an indirect object (the image of your mother's face). This is where McGinn thinks the double intentionality comes in. At first glance, this is not an unattractive view, because of the vivid phenomenology of imagination: it just seems to us that we have an image that is like a worldly picture. McGinn, however, makes a persuasive case against this view by way of the following two objections:

Medium objection:

If the image is a picture, it should have some non-intentional properties, and so, we should be able to turn our attention directly to those, irrespective of the direct object. This seems to make images look less like pictures since the exercise requires us to go back to the direct object. McGinn writes, "I cannot turn my attention to the materials of the image independently of what it is an image of." (63)

Infinite regress objection: [4]

One can concede that images are not pictures, but hold they are composites of sense-data which act as the indirect objects of imaginative episodes. In short, this objection is that the structure of these types of accounts commits one to holding that there will be an indirect object that represents the image (or pervious indirect object). This is a problem not only because we don't attend to such representations in imagination, but also because a regress quickly ensues and the theorist is stuck with an infinite chain of images, each one taking as its intentional object another image.

I think that only the first objection is successful. To the second, a picture theorist may claim that his account commits him to no such regress because sense-data are primitive—primitive in a non-*ad hoc* way to boot, since the fact that sense-data are primitive is a core principle clearly written in the rest of his doctrine.

In any case, the medium objection forces us, as far as I can see, to side with McGinn's naïve direct-realist view, which he summarizes as:

> In the case of images I would say, boringly enough, that they are experiences in the having of which we apprehend external objects—though, of course, the mode of consciousness involved is imagistic, not perceptual (68).

Dreams

Dreams present a challenge to the percept/image divide McGinn spends his first five chapters carving out. The reason is this: we know that images are subject to the will in a way that percepts aren't, so, given that dreaming is (for the most part) a passive enterprise, we're lead to believe that dreams are made up of percepts. In addressing why dreams appear to be unwilled in a way that percepts do not, McGinn posits a division of the self during dreaming, a "psychic split" between "author and audience". This Freudian move allows McGinn to claim that dreams are produced by an unconscious will. This idea, while interesting, is not clearly coherent. To will something seems to be, by definition, to consciously desire that it happen. And for there to be an author/producer that wills the dreams of which the consumer/audience is unconscious suggests that *someone* must be conscious of this willing. McGinn holds firm to this entrenched Freudian idea of an unconscious will. But I think many readers will find this underdeveloped.

McGinn rightly notes that dreams are more like images in the sense that they are occlusive, meaning they require our complete attention. But McGinn makes an important

qualification. He claims that not only do dreams commandeer our attention like images do, but they also block us from imagining things in addition to them. But actual dream experience suggests this is false. To see why it is false, consider the following quote from *Mindsight*:

> in the dream there is only the dream world and no envisaged alternative to it; so I feel condemned to that world, since I can picture no other. I become modally blind, so to speak; the possible world I am conjuring in my dream is the only world that I can represent. The sense of alternatives has disappeared from my consciousness. The thought "I might not have been having this experience" does not belong in the dream consciousness. (80)

An interesting, if hopelessly fleeting, dream phenomenon belies this claim. I'm sure that most everyone has come to realize, while dreaming (or nightmaring), that the dream in question is not real. This phenomenon would not be a problem for McGinn if this realization were always followed by the dreamer ceasing to dream. But times when one realizes one is in a dream (in short, pictures another world—the actual one) and fails to "escape" the dream show that one can contemplate other worlds besides the dream world, and still be "locked" in the dream. McGinn is likely to say that this is just a case where we go off-line for a moment and then get back on-line and tap back into the dream. But I don't think this distinction fits the phenomenological facts in these cases. At another point in the chapter McGinn makes similar claim. Discussing the roles of dream producer and dream consumer, he writes, "the dream producer is unconscious relative to the dream consumer" (89). *It seems to me that, at pivotal points, the dream consumer can realize that he is the dream producer.* If that is true, then it looks like McGinn is stuck with a troubling picture of the self: an entity that can divide in dreams and (presumably) reunite in wakefulness.

What does this tell us? Importantly, it reinforces the idea that dreams may be a *sui generus* breed unto themselves. It leads one to believe that dreams don't fit into McGinn's percept/image dichotomy, but are rather more complex and layered than he makes out.

With an attention to this last claim, McGinn notes a further distinction between the content of dream "images" and the content of wakeful images: the former appear to have belief already built it. When we imagine seeing a tiger in our dreams we believe there is a tiger in front of us. When we imagine a tiger in wakefulness, we don't believe it is in front of us. How is it that dream images have this component?

McGinn offers an explanation for dream beliefs by way of comparing them to beliefs about fiction. Beliefs about fiction are similar to our ordinary beliefs, except weaker and relativized to the world of the fiction. On this comparison between beliefs about dreams and beliefs about fiction, McGinn writes:

> The basic idea is that the dream is a story—a piece of fiction—told in sensory terms (images), in which the dreamer becomes unusually deeply immersed. It is this notion of immersion that does the work. (103)

This sounds pretty good, accept there is something relevantly different about assenting to dreams and assenting to works of fiction: the former is built in and trivial, while the later only happens in good works of fiction. I don't loose myself in a dream only if the

characters are believable and the world of the story is mesmerizing, as I do in fictional reproductions. No, in a dream, I'm lost from the get-go. McGinn seems to think that dream beliefs are like fictional beliefs in that we give our assent to dream beliefs. He writes,

> So engrossed am I by the dream story that I give my assent to it or, at the very least, go into a state that is very similar to ordinary assent. Fictional immersion simulates belief (104)

I do think that dream beliefs are *similar* to beliefs we have about fictional characters and other intentional objects in fictional "worlds". But the *assent* is completely different. In a sense it doesn't even make sense to talk about dream assent since it presupposes that one is up in the air about how they feel about a dream. This isn't the case: dreams presuppose assent. In this respect, as McGinn points out, they are very much like percepts, further muddying the image/percept divide relative to dreams.

McGinn uses his theory of dreams to explain delusion. McGinn contends that imagination—and not hallucination—is the source of delusion. Most everything in this chapter is sound. McGinn's explanation by way of imagination purports to do three things the hallucination theory cannot: explain the irrationality of delusion; fit the empirical facts, and capture the phenomenology of delusion.

The idea behind the first *desideratum* is that if delusion beliefs are triggered by hallucination, they aren't irrational—for they give the same impression as percepts. In other words, as far as an agent is concerned, percepts and hallucinations are the same and he can't be faulted for being irrational for believing hallucinations because they appear just as percepts do. I think McGinn is a bit too quick here. For example, we wouldn't want to say that beliefs caused by hallucinations are just like beliefs caused by percepts and thereby rational. Even if the phenomenology of hallucination and perception is the same, there is still a difference. The difference is that beliefs caused by hallucinations should strike a rational agent as bizarre or out of the ordinary due to their *intra*subjective irregularity. We hallucinate strange things, and rational agents should be able to notice this and see hallucinations for what they are: chimeras.

McGinn's theory seems to both fit the empirical facts and capture the phenomenology of delusion, that is, delusionals do seem to incorporate surrounding stimulus into their episodes. So they receive at least some veridical percepts, a point in McGinn's favor. Also it seems that delusional beliefs are more akin to dream beliefs than percept-driven beliefs. As such, McGinn's theory can account for this characteristic of delusional beliefs that the hallucination theory cannot. This also matches up with what McGinn says about the psychic split involved in dreaming.

McGinn's discussion of delusion yields an interesting if not completely original psychological theory: delusion results from traumatic childhoods. In cases of extreme emotional or physical abuse children shift from thinking their perceptual beliefs match up with reality to thinking their imaginative ones do. This shift has the obvious value of allowing them to better cope with intense trauma from childhood.

Belief and Meaning

In the last few chapters of the book, McGinn makes an important distinction between types of imagination. He claims that there are ways to imagine that don't involve sensory imagining: what many philosophers, following Descartes, are apt to call 'conceiving'.

This type of imagination, whatever the label, is characterized by the imagination stance one takes to a proposition. It is distinct because it doesn't represent the world in the sensuous way that *imagination-with-images* does, but it is a type of imagination nonetheless.

McGinn discusses this type of imagination in relation to belief, another attitude agents have to propositions. McGinn actually proposes that belief presupposes imagination because to belief a proposition one first has to entertain it, and when one entertains a proposition, one imagines a certain possible situation and then confirms that that possibility is actual. This is a rather intellectual view of belief. Certainly some beliefs require imagining certain situations, but it is far from clear that all types of beliefs are so formed.

McGinn argues that imagination is the *sine qua non* of belief, or "rational, reflective belief" to be more precise. An admirable standard to be sure and one which has adherents: other philosophers think that the concept of belief involves doubt. That is, one can't believe p without also being able to doubt p. This means that one must entertain the negation of p to rationally and reflectively believe p. And to do this, one must employ imagination since often not-p is a non-actual state of affairs. One problem I can see here is that McGinn gets into trouble when 'p' is filled in by 'the external world exists'. It seems like I can't rationally believe this on McGinn's account. For to do so, I have to entertain its negation, and to do so, I have to engage the skeptical threat. If one entertains the skeptical threat, then it seems that one can't know anything, an unhappy result.

Not only is imagination closely tied to belief for McGinn, it is also closely tied to meaning. McGinn uses his theory of imagination to undergird a sort-of-Wittgensteinian view of meaning. The view is essentially the picture theory of meaning from the *Tractatus* with the stricture that the images can be cognitive and hence need not be sensuous. Here McGinn aims to be general enough so as to be consistent with prevailing theories of meaning (most importantly Donald Davidson's truth-theoretic semantics). The only roadblock he can see is Bertrand Russell's view that for one to grasp the meaning of a sentence, one must be acquainted with all its constituents. Russell doesn't have the right story, according to McGinn, because he doesn't consider the role that imagination and possible states of affairs (which we access via imagination) play in meaning. For McGinn we grasp the meaning of sentences by imagining the conditions under which the sentence is true. We grasp the meaning of 'Snow is white' by imagining the state of affairs in which snow is white. McGinn argues that imagination played a role in Davidson's theory all along; Davidson's caution about talking about such mentalistic phenomenon prevented explicit mention. Whether or not this is true, it meets our purpose to note that McGinn does not shy away from such mentalistic talk. He does not think that linguistic understanding "consist[s] in a collection of dispositions to respond to appropriate 'stimulus conditions' or some such thing [à la Quine]" (154). Taking this tack may offer a way to talk about the mentalist aspect of meaning that is clearly unsatisfied by Davidson's spartan account of meaning.

I think there is much here for cognitive scientists (a forceful argument against images being indirect objects; a psychological theory about dreaming and delusions) and philosophers alike (the potential to use imagination in a theory of meaning). Even if all of the material isn't entirely original, the book is still refreshing and clear-headed in its bold approach to the subject of imagination, but frustrating in the lack of depth in some areas, notably the chapters on dreams. I hope that these two factors will spark a philosophical interest in imagination, and its importance in fundamental human phenomenon: understanding, communication, and dreams. Even if the book fails to ignite such a spark, McGinn will still have done a great service by *Mindsight*.

References

1. For McGinn 'percepts' is shorthand for the units of perception. Percepts are to perception what images are to imagination.
2. What is the color of his shoes? You probably didn't "picture" any shoes at all. The point is: you didn't imagine every detail of him. Those details weren't presented in your "image" field in the same way they are present in your "percept" field.
3. By 'imagined content' I mean mental content that is the product of pure imagination.
4. Gilbert Ryle gives a similar argument in *The Concept of Mind* (cf. p.113).