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**The Epistemic Role of the Imagination**

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There are several questions we can ask as epistemologists of imagination. In this entry, we will focus on what is arguably the central question: Is imagination among the ways that we come to learn facts about the world; in other words, is it a source of evidence, alongside more standard sources such as perception and inference? In what follows, we will call this question *the source question* and participants in the debate who answer ‘yes’ to the source question *yea-sayers* and those who answer ‘no’ *naysayers*. Along the way we will also consider why, when, and how the imagination might manage to provide us with knowledge.

Investigating the source question, along with the epistemology of imagination more generally, has significance for two other sets of debates. The first set of debates examines specific kinds of learning, which arguably deploy the imagination (*see e.g.* theory of mind, thought experiments, *and* epistemology of modality). The second assesses other putative sources of evidence which compete with the imagination in providing explanations for the same, or overlapping, cases of knowledge (*see especially* intuition *and* inference).

The traditionally dominant answer to the source question, and probably still the received view on the topic, is that the imagination is *not* a source of evidence (e.g. Sartre 1940). The standard justification stems from an apparent contrast between imagination and other mental capacities such as vision. The imagination is supposed to be voluntary or free in a way that, say, vision is not. In particular, what we decide to imagine is up to the imaginer, at least as far as the initial constraints on the imagination go (although see Balcerak Jackson 2018 and especially Munro and Strohminger 2021 for criticism).

Recent work on the imagination challenges the received view. Williamson (2016) defends a positive answer by providing evolutionary considerations in its favor: a good imagination—and in particular one that can provide us with knowledge of our surroundings—would be adaptive; moreover, the imagination conforms to predictions made by this adaptive hypothesis (although see Kinberg and Levy 2023, Sect. 3.3, for discussion of alternative evolutionary explanations of the imagination). Another influential strategy among yea-sayers considers constraints which set imaginings that produce knowledge apart from those that do not. Kind (2016, 2018) argues that an imagining needs to respect certain constraints for it to produce knowledge (see especially her 2016 for discussion of the “reality” and “change constraints”).

The answer to the source question will depend partly on what the imagination is. It is standard to distinguish between propositional and sensory imagination (and there may even be forms of imagination, which do not neatly fit into either category, such as “motor imagery” and “imaginative desire”). While answers to the source question often focus on sensory imagination (see e.g. Myers 2021, Williams 2021), it is agreed that focusing on sensory imagination will only help so much: many sensory imaginings do not seem to be capable of providing knowledge, nor do we always try to use them in this way (e.g. in the context of fantasy) (for a related distinction between realistic and fantastic imagining, see Gauker 2021). To fix ideas, it may help to illustrate our discussion with an example. Consider how you might use your imagination while you are moving homes; in particular, suppose you use your imagination to arrive at the belief that a bulky sofa will fit up your staircase. The imagining you use, let’s further suppose, is visual in character: you experience a sequence of visual images during the process, which may even resemble a silent “mental movie”, which unfolds over time.

While naysayers emphasize the voluntary aspect of the imagination, yea-sayers observe that in many cases like the sofa case part of the process is involuntary. While the process is initiated by a voluntary decision to try to imagine moving the sofa up the staircase, how the imagining ends up unfolding is not. For example, whether you imagine the sofa side bumping up against the doorway at each angle you try is involuntary (for more on this involuntary aspect of the imagination, see e.g. Langland-Hassan 2016, Williamson 2016 and Williams 2021).

The mover can of course only come to know the answer provided her mental representation suitably reflects the actual dimensions of the sofa relative to the path in three-dimensional space it must traverse. Yea-sayers contrast the way imaginers draw on information about the moving task from the process used in inference. In inference, a subject starts from a series of beliefs in order to arrive at a new belief. However, the imagination arguably has the capacity to draw on stored representations that the subject does not believe but takes to represent the world around them. In particular, the imagination may be able to draw on memories or visual experiences specific to the problem-solving task at hand as well as folk theories that represent more generally how objects behave in a range of situations. Aronowitz and Lombrozo (2020) develop the idea systematically in their account which appeals to a process of “representational extraction” (see also Miyazono and Tooming 2023 for relevant discussion).

Naysayers react to accounts of imagination as a source of evidence with one of two claims. First, the process fails to meet some condition for the resultant belief to qualify as knowledge; for example, the process is not sufficiently reliable. Second, the process does result in knowledge, however it is not the imagination that is responsible for the subject’s knowledge. At most, the imagination generates hypotheses, which we then assess by other means. Spaulding (2016) argues that the imagination brings propositions to mind for evaluation, but the evaluative stage is carried out by another mental capacity. What capacity is responsible for the subject’s knowledge will presumably depend on the examples treated; in some cases it may be intuition and in others inference. For example, Kinberg and Levy (2023) argue that “constrained imagining” in Kind’s (2016, 2018) sense collapses into “hypothetical reasoning”, which they seem to classify as a form of inference.

The debate between yea-sayers and naysayers raises interesting foundational questions about the boundaries between imagination on the one hand and intuition and inference on the other. Disagreement between the two sides seems to stem partly from how we regiment parts of a learning process, which is at least partly imaginative: do we classify part of the process as an imagining plus an intuition or is the entire process an imagining or imaginative exercise? Moreover, can an imaginative exercise be a kind of inference or at least reasoning (as in Myers 2021), or if not, what distinguishes them? Future work that regiments types of imaginative states and processes can help us more meaningfully compare accounts of the epistemic role of imagination.

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