

Imaginative Experience

Amy Kind

akind@cmc.edu

(to appear in [*Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Consciousness*](#), edited by Uriah Kriegel; this is the final submitted version)

Last year when I was on a work-related trip to Ohio, one of my hosts convinced me to take a brief detour so that I could see what she described as a cultural landmark. She wouldn't tell me anything more about it until we arrived. And indeed, it was quite a sight to behold: An office building designed to look like a giant woven wooden picnic basket – complete with two basket handles attached at the top. The seven story building was built in 1997 to serve as the corporate headquarters of the Longaberger Basket Company. Consisting of stucco-over-steel construction, it weighs in at about 9000 tons, with the handles alone weighing in at 150 tons.

Perhaps you too might have been lucky enough to have visited this architectural marvel, and you might now be remembering it and your experience of having seen it. But assuming you've not had the pleasure – and I suspect that many readers of this essay have probably never driven on that section of State Route 16 in Newark, Ohio – you might well have imagined the building as you read my description of it. If you didn't, then pause for a moment and try to do so now. Next, let's reflect on your mental activity. How is what you're doing when you're imagining the building different from what you'd be doing if you were just thinking about the building? Do you picture it before your mind's eye, so to speak? What's your experience like as

you do so? Is it vivid and clear – almost like you’re right there seeing the building – or is it instead hazy and dim?

These questions – about the phenomenal character of our imaginative experience, about how it is and is not like the phenomenal character of perceptual experience, about how it is and is not like the phenomenal character of other mental activities – have a long history in philosophical discussions of imagination. Philosophers have also long asked parallel questions about the nature of imagination. But in this essay, our focus will not be on *what imagination is* but rather on *what it is like*. Rather than exploring the various accounts of imagination on offer in the philosophical literature, we will instead be exploring the various accounts of imaginative experience on offer in that literature. In particular, our focus in what follows will be on three different sorts of accounts that have played an especially prominent role in philosophical thinking about these issues.

When developing accounts of imaginative experience, philosophers generally (though not universally) accept two pieces of phenomenological data and take them as a starting point: (1) the experiential character of imagining is importantly similar to that of perceiving; (2) despite this similarity, the experiential character of imagining is nonetheless importantly different from perceiving.¹ Corresponding to these two pieces of data, someone who aims to explain imaginative experience must discharge two principal tasks: first to explain the similarity between the experiential character of imagination and the experiential character of perception,

¹ Russell (1921) is an important exception with respect to (2). I return to Russell’s view in Section 4 below.

and second, to explain the difference. Though to some extent we'll address both of these tasks in what follows, our focus will be on the second. All three of the views that we'll consider aim principally to explain how the character of imaginative experience differs from the experiential character of related mental states like perception.

Along these lines, the first of these three views draws attention to various ways in which the phenomenology of imagination is thought to be impoverished in relation to that of perception and other mental states. Imagination is claimed to be less vivid, less clear, less forceful. While this account – what I'll call the *impoverishment view* – has been explored by various philosophers across the centuries, it is probably most closely associated with David Hume.

The second view that I'll consider relies on the operation of the will to distinguish the experiential character of imagining from the experiential character of perceiving. It's perhaps a bit of an overstatement to call this an account, since it has not been fully developed in the philosophical literature. But, that said, we see an exploration along these lines – what I'll call the *will-dependence view* – in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

The third view to be considered relies on the fact that imagination is in some way distanced from reality; as noted above, our imaginings take us away from the here and now. On what I'll call the *nonexistence view*, this fact about imagination is claimed to imprint itself on the character of imaginative experience, and moreover, to do so in such a way that differentiates it from the character of perceptual experience. A version of this account was suggested by Jean-Paul Sartre.

While there are important insights to be drawn from each of these views, each seems to me to be importantly flawed in various ways. As I will suggest, close examination reveals that none of them gives us an adequate account of the character of imaginative experience. Ultimately, in the final section of this paper, I briefly explore what their failure teaches us about the project of giving an account of imaginative experience.

Before I begin, however, I need to say something about what imagination is. For indeed, given some ways of understanding imagination, it might seem to be a mistake to talk of the experience of imagining. Thus, before I turn to the three different views of imaginative experience, I will first take up the issue of why we should believe there is such a thing as imaginative experience at all.

1. Imagination

Here it will be helpful to begin with René Descartes' discussion of imagination in the Sixth Meditation:

... if I want to think of a chiliagon, although I understand that it is a figure consisting of a thousand sides just as well as I understand the triangle to be a three-sided figure, I do not in the same way imagine the thousand sides or see them as if they were present before me. ... But suppose I am dealing with a pentagon: I can of course understand the figure of a pentagon, just as I can the figure of a chiliagon, without the help of the imagination; but I can also imagine a pentagon, by applying the mind's eye to its five sides and the area contained within them. And in doing this I notice quite clearly that

imagination requires a peculiar effort of mind which is not required for understanding.

(Descartes 1641/1986: 50-1)

For the purpose of this essay, we can leave aside the question of whether Descartes is right that we cannot imagine a chiliagon. Rather, what's important is the "peculiar effort of mind" to which he adverts at the end of the passage. Here Descartes seems to be suggesting that imagination requires mental imagery, and indeed, an imagery-based understanding of imagination has played an important role in the philosophical literature.²

At this point, however, an obvious worry immediately arises, since an understanding of imagination in terms of imagery might seem to limit imagination to the visual domain. Can't we engage in non-visual imaginings, as when someone imagines the thunderous applause she hopes to receive at the end of her presentation or the smooth surface of the lectern she'll be standing before? To account for these kinds of cases, we might reinterpret "imagery" in broad terms, such that there can be auditory imagery, olfactory imagery, and so on. But insofar as even this broadening of the notion still seems too restrictive – we can also engage in imaginings of emotions, pain, and other bodily sensations, and it might seem to stretch the notion of imagery too far to allow for emotional imagery and pain imagery – it's perhaps best to understand the "peculiar effort of mind" in terms of sensory (or quasi-sensory) presentation.³

² See Kind (2001) for one development of an imagery-based account of imagination.

³ White, for example, is willing to extend the notion of imagery to include auditory imagery but refuses to do so for our imaginings of aches and pains (1990: 89-90).

This Cartesian-inspired understanding of imagination fits well with the idea that imagination has a phenomenological character, i.e., that we're right to talk of imaginative experience. But we find in the philosophical literature several worries about this Cartesian picture. One concerns how we should best taxonomize a group of what might broadly be called "speculative" mental activities, i.e., how we should best understand the connections between imagining, supposing, and conceiving. Another, related to the first, concerns the alleged existence of imaginings that seem to proceed without the involvement of any sensory presentation whatsoever.

As we go about our everyday activities, our thoughts often extend far beyond what's presently going on around us. Did my students understand the material I covered this morning in class, or will I have to review it again next time? How is my spouse handling what was predicted to be a particularly tough day at work? When I get home tonight, will I be able to scrounge together a decent dinner from what's in the house or do I need to stop by the store? In asking these questions, I take myself out of the here and now in which I find myself and speculate about what's happening elsewhere, about what has already happened, or about what will happen. Sometimes this speculation might proceed via the production of the sorts of sensory presentations that we were considering above. I might try to visualize the contents of my fridge and pantry, for example. But sometimes this speculation seems to occur in other ways, via a chain of reasoning. I might simply start with the supposition that I have only an assortment of vegetables of questionable freshness, some leftover rice, a couple of eggs, and so on, and then try to work out whether I can throw together an adequate meal from the things on that list. In making this supposition, I need not visualize the food items themselves. Rather,

I might proceed much as one does in a logic class when one puts forth a certain proposition for the sake of a *reductio* proof.

And now the question arises: Should we treat these different ways of speculating as fundamentally different mental activities, or are they essentially the same, perhaps with one a sub-class of the other? While many philosophers, and especially those in the Cartesian tradition discussed above, tend to draw a sharp distinction between imagining and supposing, other philosophers argue that supposition should be treated as a special type of imagination.⁴ If this latter view is right, then we have a problem in accounting for imaginative experience, since supposition seems to lack the kind of sensory character associated with other types of imagining. In fact, many philosophers have treated supposition as lacking experiential character at all.⁵ But even if it has some kind of experiential character along the lines of conscious thought – what’s typically referred to as *cognitive phenomenology* – we would still face a problem in providing a *unitary* account of imaginative experience.⁶

As for the second worry about the Cartesian picture, philosophers have often suggested that there are many instances of imagination that do not involve the production of sensory presentations. As Alan White argues, though we can just as easily imagine a difficulty or an

⁴ Philosophers distinguishing imagination and supposition include Gendler (2000) and Balcerak Jackson (2016); philosophers treating supposition as a special kind of imagination include Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, Ichikawa and Jarvis (2012), and Arcangeli (2014).

⁵ For discussion of the differences between imagination and supposition see Gendler (2011).

⁶ See Chapter 7, this volume, for a discussion of cognitive phenomenology.

objection as we can imagine an elephant or a bus, only for the latter examples “would the presence of imagery be at all plausible.” (White 1990: 89) Or consider a case offered by Neil Van Leeuwen: “When I imagine, on reading *Lord of the Rings*, that elves can live forever, I’m fictionally imagining a proposition that I couldn’t imagine using mental imagery. It would take too long! So presumably I represent this in a more abstract symbolic code...” (Van Leeuwen 2013: 222) Like supposings, these instances of imagining would also lack the kind of experiential character associated with other types of imagining, so they too pose a problem for the attempt to provide a unitary account of imaginative experience.

To my mind, the defender of the Cartesian picture has several resources available for answering these two kinds of worries.⁷ For our purposes here, however, this doesn’t really matter. Rather, we can simply sidestep the debate. Even if supposing forms a sub-class of imagining, and even if there are examples of imagining that proceed without the use of any sensory presentation, there is reason to set these cases aside. Importantly, the kind of experiential character associated with supposing or with the kinds of examples posed above by White and Van Leeuwen seems to borrow from other types of experience; it is not proprietary to imagining. Yet there is still a large class of imaginings that proceed by way of sensory presentation and thereby seem to share an experiential character, and it’s this experiential character that is similar to, but in some ways also different from, the experiential character of

⁷ See Balcerak Jackson (2016) for a persuasive case that supposition should be treated differently from imagination; see Kind (2001) for an attempt to accommodate the alleged examples of non-imagistic imaginings.

related mental states like perception and memory. It's this experiential character that is proprietary to imagining, and it's this experiential character that will be our focus in what follows.

Thus, these two worries do not suggest that our investigation into imaginative experience is unwarranted. Rather, they simply suggest that our investigation should be understood as an investigation into what we might call *proprietary imaginative experience*.⁸ To investigate it we will focus on those imaginings that proceed by way of sensory presentation. Whether these imaginings capture the entirety of the class of imaginings – as assumed by those in the Cartesian-inspired tradition considered above – is a question that we do not need to settle for our purposes here. However that question is settled, it remains appropriate to investigate the nature of imaginative experience.

2. The Impoverishment View

As I noted above, philosophers attempting to provide an account of imaginative experience want to explain the difference between imaginative experience and other types of conscious experience like perceptual experience and memory experience. One particularly well-known attempt at such an explanation comes from Hume's *Treatise*. In the opening section, Hume claimed that ideas could be distinguished from impressions on the basis of

⁸ There is some cost to proceeding this way. In particular, one might worry about the existence of imaginings that lack the kind of experiential character that's proprietary to imagining. But insofar as an account of the nature of imaginative experience is different from an account of the nature of imagination, perhaps this cost is not too high.

“force and vivacity” (1739/1985: 1.1.1). He then uses similar descriptors to distinguish ideas of memory from ideas of imagination:

We find by experience, that when any impression has been present with the mind, it again makes its appearance there as an idea; and this it may do after two different ways: either when in its new appearance it retains a considerable degree of its first vivacity, and is somewhat intermediate betwixt an impression and an idea: or when it entirely loses that vivacity, and is a perfect idea. The faculty, by which we repeat our impressions in the first manner, is called the MEMORY, and the other the IMAGINATION. 'Tis evident at first sight, that the ideas of the memory are much more lively and strong than those of the imagination, and that the former faculty paints its objects in more distinct colours, than any which are employ'd by the latter. When we remember any past event, the idea of it flows in upon the mind in a forcible manner; whereas in the imagination the perception is faint and languid, and cannot without difficulty be preserv'd by the mind steady and uniform for any considerable time.

(Treatise 1.1.3)

Hume here draws the contrast specifically between imagination and memory, but most discussions of imaginative phenomenology tend to focus on the contrast between imagination and perception, where the same point can be made. Doing so gives us a version of what I am calling *the impoverishment view* of imaginative experience:

THE IMPOVERISHMENT VIEW: Imaginative experience is an impoverished form of perceptual experience.

Hume was neither the first nor the last to characterize imaginative experience in this way. A century prior, for example, Hobbes had referred to imagination as “decaying sense” (Hobbes 1651/1968: 88). More recently, Alex Byrne has argued that we can best capture the phenomenological similarity between perception and imagination in their sharing the same kind of content; what explains the phenomenological difference is that the content of imagining is “degraded” in comparison to the content of perception (Byrne 2010: 19). Likewise, Colin McGinn has argued that images can be distinguished from percepts at least partly on grounds of saturation; in contrast to a percept, an image is “gappy, coarse, discrete” (McGinn 2004: 25). But this way of accounting for imaginative experience – in terms of its impoverishment – is most commonly associated with Hume.

The kind of impoverishment that Hume focuses on concerns an impoverishment of force and vivacity – imaginative experience is less forceful, and has less vivacity, than perceptual or memory experience. Unfortunately Hume does not tell us much about what the central notions employed – that of force and vivacity – are supposed to mean.⁹ And to make matters even worse, while his initial use of these terms suggests they are meant to pick out two different (if complementary) phenomenological aspects of mental states, he later explicitly equates them:

⁹ Nor has the matter received much attention by Hume scholars; as Traiger (2008: 61) notes, “There are surprisingly few detailed interpretations of Hume’s notion of vivacity.” (Govier (1972), which I will briefly discuss in this section, is one notable exception. For a discussion of the coherence of the notion of vividness, see Kind ms.

An idea assented to *feels* different from a fictitious idea, that the fancy alone presents to us. And this different feeling I endeavour to explain by calling it a superior *force*, or *vivacity*, or *solidity*, or *firmness*, or *steadiness*. This variety of terms, which may seem so unphilosophical, is intended only to express that act of the mind, which renders realities more present to us than fictions, causes them to weigh more in the thought, and gives them a superior influence on the passions and imagination. Provided we agree about the thing, 'tis needless to dispute about the terms. (Hume Appendix)

To contemporary ears, however, the term “force” seems to pick out something phenomenologically rather different from “vivacity” – even if we don’t have a good handle on what is being picked out.¹⁰ In a helpful discussion of Hume’s use of phenomenological descriptors for ideas and impressions, Trudy Govier argues that he could have overcome various objections and counterexamples to some of the associated epistemological claims he wants to make about ideas and impressions had he divided the phenomenological descriptors into two categories. In the first category, we have terms that refer to a mental state’s “staying power” – here we find Hume using words like *strong*, *forceful*, *vigorous*, *steady*, *solid*, and *firm*. In the second category, we have terms that refer to a mental state’s “clarity or amount of detail” – here we find Hume using terms like *vivacious*, *vivid*, *lively*, and *intense*. (Govier 1972: 45)

For our purposes here, we fortunately don’t have to worry too much about what exactly Hume meant – or even what he should have meant – by “force” and “vivacity.” On any

¹⁰ For a related point, see Brann (1991: 196-7).

likely way of unpacking these terms, the impoverishment view seems implausible. Perhaps the easiest way to diagnose its failure is simply to point to the numerous people who claim that their imaginative experiences are in no way less vivid or forceful than their perceptual experiences. Consider Francis Galton's famous "Breakfast Table Questionnaire." In the late 19th century, Galton asked 100 adult men (and, later, an additional 172 schoolboys) to "think of some definite object – suppose it is your breakfast-table as you sat down to it this morning – and consider carefully the picture that rises before your mind's eye." (Galton 1880: 301) He then asked a series of specific questions, including ones focused on illumination, definition, and coloring:

1. Illumination.—Is the image dim or fairly clear? Is its brightness comparable to that of the actual scene?
2. Definition.—Are all the objects pretty well defined at the same time, or is the place of sharpest definition at any one moment more contracted than it is in a real scene?
3. Colouring.—Are the colours of the china, of the toast, breadcrust, mustard, meat, parsley, or whatever may have been on the table, quite distinct and natural?" (Galton 1880: 302)

In response, though many of the subjects did indeed report that their imaginative experience was dim and indistinct in relation to the comparable perceptual experience, many others claimed to find no difference with respect to these factors between the two. As one subject remarked, "I can see my breakfast table or any equally familiar thing with my mind's eye, quite as well in all particulars as I can do if the reality is before me." (1880: 305) Quite apart from Galton's study, there are plenty of other people – people often described as highly imaginative

– who also deny that their imaginative experiences are impoverished in comparison to their perceptual experiences. Consider Temple Grandin, an author and professor of animal science who has become particularly well-known for her writing and thinking about her experience with autism. Grandin describes herself as “thinking in pictures” – when she imagines the front of a shop she often goes to, for example, she *sees* it in her mind. Moreover, she sees it in a way that could be described as “perfectly clear and as vivid as normal vision.” (Grandin and Panek 2013)¹¹

But however vivid or forceful Grandin’s imaginings – or those of any gifted imaginer – there remains a phenomenological difference between these imaginings and the corresponding percepts. Thus, the impoverishment view cannot give us the right account of what’s distinctive about imaginative experience. And the problem doesn’t seem to be limited to the specific phenomenological descriptors that Hume was working with. For whether we try to spell out the difference in terms of vividness or intensity or resolution or accuracy, it’s hard to believe that the ‘best’ imagining couldn’t be at the same level as the ‘worst’ perception. As Uriah Kriegel has aptly noted, “when we consider the lowest resolution a perceptual experience can have consistently with the laws of nature, it is hard to believe that no imaginative experience can match *that* level of accuracy.” (Kriegel 2015: 189)

3. The Will-Dependence View

¹¹ This description comes from the Vividness of Visual Imagery Questionnaire, an influential measure of imagery vividness developed by David Marks (1973).

Underlying the impoverishment view is a commitment to what has often been called the *continuum hypothesis* (see Savage 1975: 260). On this hypothesis, perceptual experience and imaginative experience differ in degree and not in kind. Perception and imagination are simply at different points on the same experiential spectrum, a spectrum that contains not only memory but also hallucinations and dreams. As we've seen, different versions of the impoverishment view cash out this phenomenological continuum in different ways, but however it's explicated, the fact remains that imagination and perception are thought to be experientially continuous with one another. In this section and the next, we'll consider two views that deny this claim. On these views, perceptual experience and imaginative experience differ not in degree but in kind.

To flesh out the first of these two views, it will be helpful to begin with Wittgenstein's discussion of imagination. Exploring the similarities and differences between visual impressions (percepts) and visual images in the second volume of his *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Wittgenstein relies heavily on a point that, as we saw above, poses trouble for the impoverishment view: However similar our imaginings and our percepts, they cannot be mistaken for one another. As he notes, "One can't take an image for reality nor things seen for things imaged." (1948/1980: §85; see also §97).¹² But why can't we make this mistake? His

¹² See also Sartre, who suggests that we "*never* take our images for perceptions." (1936/1962: 87) For a contrary view, see Russell's claim that the difference between the two "is by no means always obvious to inspection" (1921: 145). In support of this claim, Russell notes: "When we are listening for a faint sound – the striking of a distant clock, or a horse's hoofs on

answer draws upon the operation of the will: Imagination is subject to the will in a way that perception is not. As Wittgenstein puts it, imagining is a *doing* and not a *receiving* (1948/1980: §111): “When we form an image of something we are not observing. The coming and going of the pictures is not something that *happens* to us.” (1967: §632) And this sets imagining in sharp contrast to perception. Though I can will myself to imagine a picnic basket, I cannot through sheer force of will bring myself to see a picnic basket. Of course, I can take certain actions that will put me in a position to see one – I can travel to a local picnicking site or to a store carrying household goods. And more generally, there are actions that I take to enable myself to have visual impressions, like opening my eyes. But I cannot bring myself to have a perception simply by willing it to be the case.¹³ This gives us what I’m calling the *will-dependence view*:

THE WILL-DEPENDENCE VIEW: Imaginative experience is a type of sensory experience marked by its dependence on the will.

the road – we think we hear it many times before we really do, because expectation brings us the image, and we mistake it for sensation.” (1921: 145) Also relevant here is C.W. Perky’s experiment in which subjects took themselves to be imagining an object in cases in which they were presented with a faint image of that object. (Perky 1910) Whether this experiment shows that we can mistake imagining for perceiving has of late been a matter of considerable dispute. (See Hopkins 2012).

¹³ See McGinn (2004: 13) for further discussion of this point. More generally, Budd (1989: Ch. 5) provides a helpful exploration of Wittgenstein’s will-dependence view.

What seems to be the same basic point is given various formulations in the literature on imagination. It is sometimes put by classifying imagination as an action: To imagine something is to perform an action; to perceive is not. It is also sometimes put in terms of voluntariness: Imagination is voluntary while perception is not.¹⁴ And it is also sometimes put in terms of control: Imagination is under our control while perception is not. That these different formulations are meant to be capturing the same basic point is supported by the fact that they are often intermixed. For example, Jonathan Ichikawa notes that “To imagine is to act—our imagery is in some important sense under our control; this is not so with percepts.” (Ichikawa 2009: 107)

The will-dependence view is sometimes associated with Jean-Paul Sartre, who takes spontaneity to be a key characteristic of imagining (what he calls the *imaging consciousness*):

A perceptual consciousness appears to itself as passive. On the other hand, an imaging consciousness gives itself to itself as an imaging consciousness, which is to say as a spontaneity that produces and conserves the object as imaged. ... [T]he image consciousness is not given as a piece of wood that floats on the sea, but as a wave among the waves. (Sartre 1940/2010: 14)

¹⁴ Wittgenstein does not like this way of formulating the point because it suggests that we are picking out a property extrinsic to the act; see §83. The *very same* arm movement may sometimes be voluntary and sometimes not, but in the case of imagining and perceiving, we do not have the very same act. On Wittgenstein’s view, the fact that imagining is subject to the will and perception is not makes them different kinds of acts.

We also see hints of the will-dependence view in the work of Brian O'Shaughnessy, who makes much of the will-susceptibility of imaginings and who seems to take this will-susceptibility to play a role in making an imagining be experienced as an imagining. (O'Shaughnessy 2000).

Likewise, having noted that "images and percepts are asymmetrically related to the will, and that this is an important difference between them," Colin McGinn suggests that this difference impacts their experiential natures: "there does seem to be some sense in which the phenomenology of images is affected by their voluntariness: what it is like to have them seems affected by the fact they are products of will; their causation is somehow imprinted on their phenomenology." (McGinn 2004: 16)

Note that this latter claim – that the operation of the will imprints itself upon imaginative phenomenology – is essential to the will-dependence view. To distinguish imaginative experience from perceptual experience, it is not enough merely to find a difference between imagination and perception. Rather, we must find a difference that impacts the phenomenology. So we can really see the will-dependence view as consisting of two parts: (1) imagining and perception differ in their relation to the will; and (2) this difference in relation to the will makes a phenomenological difference. Correspondingly, there are two different kinds of objections that might be raised by an opponent of the view. First someone might argue that imagining and perceiving do not fundamentally differ along the dimension of will-dependence. Second, someone might grant that imagining and perceiving differ along this dimension but deny that this difference impacts the phenomenology.

Perhaps the most plausible way to pursue an objection of the first sort is to point to the phenomenon of unbidden imaginings, as when an image just pops into your head or you find a catchy tune running through your mind. Often these unbidden imaginings are unwelcome ones – horrific or disgusting or embarrassing – but they might equally be innocuous. It’s also often difficult to banish them.¹⁵ Once you find yourself picturing some unpleasant situation, it can be very hard – even seemingly impossible – to get yourself to stop; likewise, that catchy tune might not only be running through your mind but stuck there. In what sense, then, are these imaginings subject to the will? Not only were they unwilling to begin with, but they also seem unable to be willed away.

In addition to these kinds of examples that suggest that will-dependence is not a necessary feature of imagining, an opponent of the will-dependence view might also try to suggest that will-independence is not a necessary feature of perceiving. Along these lines, Nigel J.T. Thomas has argued that we have more voluntary control of perception than proponents of the will-dependence view would have us believe. As he notes, “Something may be there in front of you, but, if you don’t want to see it, it is easy enough to shut your eyes, or turn them away; or if you *do* want to see what is not *quite* in front of you, it usually takes no great effort to turn your eyes or move your body toward it.” (Thomas 2014) More generally, Thomas suggests that the claim that perception is not subject to the will derives much of its plausibility

¹⁵ McGinn notes that there are three different stages at which imaginings are subject to the will. The will may be involved in their inception, in their maintenance, and in their termination. (2004: 14)

from a mistaken and outdated view of perception, one that sees perception as something that passively happens to us rather than something we do. Though Thomas ultimately grants that there is some difference between imagination and perception with respect to their relation to the will, he sees it as a difference in degree rather than a difference in kind.

Several different but related responses are available to proponents of the will-dependence view. First, they may note that the kind of control we have over our percepts seems importantly different from the kind of control that we have over our imaginings. As Ichikawa notes, the control that we have over our percepts is only *indirect*: “we can take action that we know will result in a changed perceptual experience, but we cannot change our perceptual experience directly.” (Ichikawa 2009: 107) This kind of difference is likely also what Wittgenstein has in mind when he notes that “Seeing is subject to the will *in a different way* from forming an image.” (Wittgenstein 1948/1980: §141) Second, they may also note that even when we cannot successfully subject imagination to our will, it nonetheless makes sense for us to try to do so, and this marks a significant difference with perception. As Wittgenstein notes, to say that imagining is subject to the will is to say that “it makes *sense* to order someone to ‘Imagine that’, or again: ‘Don’t imagine that.’” (1948/1980: §83) – it makes sense, that is, even if someone is unable to comply with the order. In contrast, it’s not just that the orders “See that!” or “Don’t see that” can’t be complied with but that they don’t even make any sense. To put this point another way: Perception does not just fail to be subject to the will in practice; rather, it fails to be subject to the will even in principle. In contrast, while there

may be cases where imagination fails to be subject to the will in practice, even in these cases it remains subject to the will in principle.¹⁶

These kind of responses do seem to bolster the first claim of the will-dependence account, i.e., they bolster the claim that imagining and perceiving differ with respect to their relation to the will. In doing so, however, they open up the second claim to attack. The problem? Once we see more clearly exactly how imagining and perceiving differ from one another with respect to their relation to the will, it becomes considerably harder to see this difference as being phenomenologically relevant. Even those imaginings that come to us unbidden, those that weren't actually produced by the will, have the phenomenology of imagining. We might grant that such imaginings are nonetheless in principle subject to the will, but it's hard to see how this in itself could give rise to phenomenology that's different in kind from the phenomenology of perceiving. While we might find it plausible to think that the will can leave its mark on imaginative experience when it's actually been in operation, it's considerably less plausible that the will can leave its mark on imaginative experience when, though it hasn't actually been in operation, in principle it might have been.

In fact, there are some who would argue that to grant even this would be to concede too much to the will-dependence view. For no matter how this view is spelled out, however exactly it turns out that imagining and perceiving differ from one another with respect to their relation to the will, it will fundamentally come down to a difference in causal origin. But why should we think a difference in causal origin amounts to a phenomenological difference? To

¹⁶ See also Budd (1989: 109).

use an example employed by David Sosa in a similar context, whether the burn on your skin results from too much time in the sun or too much time in the tanning booth need not make a difference to the pain you feel; the causal origin of your skin condition is different, but the resulting phenomenology is the same. (Sosa 2006: 320) On this line of objection, then, even if proponents of the will-dependence view are able to make good on their first claim, doing so is not enough to establish their second claim, i.e., we have no reason to think imagining's will-dependence accounts for its distinctive experiential character.

4. The Non-Existence View

As we saw in the previous section, Sartre takes spontaneity to be an essential feature of imaginative phenomenology, and we thus might treat him as a proponent of the will-dependence account. But there is also the development of a different kind of account in Sartre's work. While this account shares with the will-dependence view the sense that imaginative phenomenology differs in kind from perceptual phenomenology, it traces this difference not to the operation of the will but to the way in which imagination presents its object's existential status. On this view, perception "posits its object as existing" while imagining does not: "However lively, appealing, strong the image, it gives its object as not being" (Satre 1940/2010: 12, 14). Compare, for example, seeing the Longaberger basket building with imagining it. For Sartre, when the building is perceived, the perceptual phenomenology presents it as existing. In contrast, when the building is imagined, the imaginative phenomenology presents it as not existing – as "a nothingness" (1940/2010: 11). This gives us what I'm calling the *non-existence view*:

THE NON-EXISTENCE VIEW: Imaginative experience is marked by the fact that it presents its object as non-existent.

It may help our understanding of this view to contrast it with a different view in the same general vicinity. In *The Analysis of Mind*, Bertrand Russell argues that percepts and imaginings share all their intrinsic qualities; there is no difference between them that's intrinsic to the phenomenology. (Russell 1921: see especially Lecture VIII) Insofar as there seems to be a phenomenological difference between them, this can be explained in terms of their attendant beliefs. While percepts are accompanied by beliefs about the existence of their objects, there is an absence of such beliefs in the case of imaginings.¹⁷ Call this the *attendant belief view*. The non-existence view shares with the attendant-belief view the intuition that the existential status of the objects is an important factor in understanding the difference between perception and imagination. The two views differ, however, on whether this factor makes its way into the phenomenology itself.

So why should we adopt the non-existence view rather than the attendant-belief view?

Here Sartre puts considerable weight on the fact that we can immediately and effortlessly apprehend whether we are perceiving or imagining. For a theory of imagination to be

¹⁷ Russell also denies that there is any phenomenological difference between imaginings and memories: "Memory-images and imagination-images do not differ in their intrinsic qualities, so far as we can discover." (Russell 1921: 176). Rather, the difference consists in the fact that memory-images, unlike imagination-images, are accompanied by a belief of the sort, "this happened."

plausible, "it must account for the spontaneous discrimination made by the mind between its images and perceptions." (Satre 1936/1962: 117). To convince us that we should accept this requirement, Sartre suggests that we each consult our own inner experience. As he reports of his own inner experience, "I am seated, writing, and see the things around me. Suddenly I form an image of my friend Peter. All the theories in the world are helpless against the fact that I *knew*, the very instant of the appearance of the image, that it was an image." (1936/1962: 96) As he also notes, "a host of strange little occurrences take place about us at every moment, objects which apparently move of their own accord, cracking or groaning, appearing or disappearing, and the like." (1936/1962: 98) Yet even when confronted with these "fantastic occurrences" we are not the least bit tempted to treat these as imaginings:

I was sure that I put my hat in the closet, and there it is on the chair. Do I fall into doubt, 'disbelieving my eyes'? Not for a second. I might wear myself out looking for explanations, but I would take for granted in all my reflections from start to finish, without even bothering to go over and touch the felt, that the hat I see is *my real hat*. I think my friend Peter is in America. There he is at the corner of the street. Do I say, 'It's an image'? Not at all. My first reaction is to wonder how he could possibly be back already. (1936/1962: 98)

In fact, in addition to supporting the immediacy requirement, these reflections seem to support a further requirement. Not only is there an immediacy to our imagistic apprehension,

but there is also a degree of certainty to it. (See also 1936/1962: 96)¹⁸ But it should be clear that the attendant-belief view is unable to meet either of these requirements. The consultation of attendant beliefs requires an additional step – a step that, at least in many cases, can be neither instantaneous nor effortless since it requires the balancing of various considerations and probabilities. Moreover, in typical instances this kind of consultation and balancing would not carry with it the degree of certainty inherent in our imagistic apprehension. Thus, the attendant-belief view must be rejected.

Of course, even if we reject the attendant-belief view, that is not enough to establish the non-existence view. The will-dependence view, for example, might also be thought to account for the immediacy and certainty requirements laid out by Sartre. Moreover, the claim that a presentation of non-existence is built into the phenomenology of imagining faces an obvious objection, because we frequently imagine objects that we know to exist. Uriah Kriegel, who has recently defended a version of the non-existence view, suggests that this objection can be easily answered: When I imagine something that I know to exist, as when I imagine the Longaberger basket building, my imaginative experience itself still plausibly presents the building as nonexistent, but “it is just accompanied by an overriding belief that the imagined object in fact exists.” (Kriegel 2015: 192) To flesh out this response, Kriegel draws a comparison to a case of optical illusion: “looking at a Müller-Lyer display, I have a visual

¹⁸ Kriegel (2015: 187-8) takes Sartre to have offered four related epistemological arguments: one about immediacy, one about effortlessness, one about certainty, and one about incongruity.

experience that presents-as-existent a pair of uneven lines; but the experience is accompanied by a belief that ‘disendorses’ that content.” (2015: 192) Likewise, if I close my eyes and imagine the Longaberger basket building having been relocated to my college’s football field, and I abstract away from my belief that the building exists, the building of my imagining is arguably something I am aware of as unreal (and as such stands in contrast to the real building that’s located in Ohio).

To see the problem with this line of response, however, compare imagining something that we know exists with imagining something that we know does not exist. Having heard about the Longaberger basket building, we might want to imaginatively explore other companies having headquarters that resemble their products, so we might imagine a Maybelline lipstick building. But when we compare the imagining of the Maybelline lipstick building to the imagining of the Longaberger basket building, it seems plausible that there is a difference in the imaginative phenomenology with respect to the presentation of their existential status. While the imagined Maybelline lipstick building may be presented-as-non-existent – while this could plausibly be said to be built into the imaginative phenomenology – this does not seem true of the imagined Longaberger basket building. It’s not just that I believe the one building to exist and the other not to exist but rather that the imaginings present the buildings differently. (Indeed, if they didn’t, if my imagining of the Longaberger basket building presents its object as non-existent in exactly the way that my imagining of the Maybelline lipstick building presents its object as non-existent, then my imagining of the Longaberger

basket building would be importantly misleading in a way it doesn't seem to be.) The fact that the non-existence view must deny any such difference counts against it.¹⁹

Presumably, the proponent of the non-existence view will deny that there is any such difference. Consider, for example, Sartre's discussion of a case in which he imagines his (actual) friend Pierre who is presently far away in Berlin. For Sartre, an imagining of Pierre as he is at this moment is more like an imagining of a centaur, an object known not to exist, than like a memory of Pierre: "What is common between Pierre as imaged and the centaur as imaged is that they are two aspects of Nothingness." (Satre 1940/2010: 182) But this suggests a related problem for the non-existence view, namely, that of explaining how an imagining of Pierre is really an imagining of *Pierre* at all. Compare, for example, Kriegel's claims about his own imagining of Barack Obama: "As I close my eyes and picture him, the Obama hovering just there on the other side of my desk is something I am aware of as unreal; the real Obama is in the White House talking to more important people." (2015: 192)

Despite these criticisms, there does seem to be something importantly right underlying the non-existence view, or at least in the vicinity of the non-existence view. For imagining does take us away from the here and now, and there does seem to be a sense in which imagined objects, unlike perceived objects, are not presented as being before the senses. While they may not be presented as non-existent, they do seem to be presented as not present, i.e., not before the senses. Since Sartre himself sometimes speaks of the imagined object being

¹⁹ I pursue this kind of objection against Kriegel's view in Kind (2016).

presented as *absent*, this view would seem to be very much in line with the motivations behind the non-existence view.

In exploring this sort of suggestion, McGinn explicates it in terms of embodiment and spatial-relatedness. While a percept always specifies a spatial relation to the perceiver's body, an imagining "is neutral about spatial relatedness." (McGinn 2004: 30) As such, the intentional content of imagining departs from that of perceiving: "The 'absence' of which Sartre speaks could as well be described as the absence of the body from imaginative intentionality, in contrast to the presence of the body in all perception." (2004: 30) But this way of construing the point opens it up to an analogous sort of criticism to one we raised against the impoverishment view above. When gifted imaginers produce images that are just as vivid as percepts, there is still an experiential difference between imagining and perceiving. Likewise, when gifted imaginers produce imaginings about spatial locations – when someone imagines her friend Pierre to be sitting across from her at the table, exactly four feet away from her, there is still an experiential difference between this imagining and the corresponding perception, even though this imagining is not at all neutral about spatial relatedness.

What should we make of this criticism? While it seems a compelling one, we might take it to show only that McGinn hasn't adequately captured the kind of absence that Sartre had in mind. Perhaps there's still something to the insight about absence that can lead us to a better view of imaginative phenomenology. In the final section of this paper I'll briefly explore this thought, but my conclusion will ultimately be a pessimistic one. Indeed, as I'll go on to suggest, we seem to have reason for a more far-reaching pessimism as well.

5. A Pessimistic Conclusion

Our discussion of the non-existence view ended with a speculative thought: Even if the view as stated is problematic, might there nonetheless be a related view in the vicinity that's more promising? In particular, can we build on the insight that imagined objects don't seem to present themselves to the senses in the way that perceived objects do? Though McGinn's notion of spatial relatedness does not seem to work, might there be a nearby alternative that does better?

As compelling as the basic insight seems to be, however, I think it is unlikely to bear fruit. In particular, I worry that there can be no way to spell out this insight in a contentful way. For what is it to say that the imagined objects are not presented as being before the senses other than to say that the imagined objects are not presented as being perceptually available? Rather than *explaining* the difference between imaginative phenomenology and perceptual phenomenology, we have simply restated it: Perceptual phenomenology presents objects as being perceptually available while imaginative phenomenology does not.

Attempts to spell out the phenomenal difference between different kinds of perception – between vision and audition, for example – often seem to face a similar problem. How do we explain the difference in phenomenology between seeing a plane flying overhead and hearing a plane flying overhead? Though there is no question that these two experiences are phenomenologically different, it's hard to say anything contentful about the difference. Rather, all we end up being able to say is that the one experience presents the plane in a visual sort of way while the other does not. Finding the words to explain what makes something have a

visual feel rather than an auditory feel proves to be an enormously difficult task. Qualia – the phenomenal properties of experience – have generally been thought to be ineffable. Ned Block makes this point, for example, when he invokes Louis Armstrong’s famous comment about defining jazz – “If you got to ask, you ain’t never gonna get to know” – as an analogy for the enterprise of defining qualia. (Block 1978: 281) We can experience qualia but there are no adequate words to describe them.

Though it’s hard to anticipate what other accounts of imaginative phenomenology could be devised, I suspect that they will suffer from analogous problems to those that have faced the three accounts considered in this essay. While we are very good at recognizing the difference between different kinds of phenomenal experience, we are much less good at capturing this difference in a meaningful way. This difficulty is not one that’s unique to imaginative phenomenology, and it thus shouldn’t be terribly surprising that the accounts of imaginative phenomenology that we’ve considered have seemed in various ways inadequate. Thus, though I’m here pointing us towards a pessimistic conclusion about the project of providing an account of imaginative phenomenology, this should not be seen as an indictment of imagination, or our understanding of it. Rather, it can be seen as part and parcel of a more general pessimism about descriptive phenomenology.

Thomas Nagel has famously argued that we can’t know what it’s like to be a bat. In contrast, we can – and we do – know what it’s like to imagine. But knowing what it’s like and being able to explain what it’s like are two different matters. And just as Nagel thinks that we lack the kinds of concepts that we would need to be able to explain the subjectivity of

consciousness in terms of the objective vocabulary of science, resulting in our present inability to explain what conscious experience *really is*, so too it may seem that we lack the kinds of concepts that we would need to be able to capture the nature of our phenomenology, resulting in our present inability to explain what our conscious experience *really is like*. Perhaps there is work that can be done to sharpen and deepen our phenomenological vocabulary, but in advance of that work, our attempts to capture imaginative phenomenology – like our attempts to capture phenomenology in general – seem doomed to fall short.²⁰

References

Arcangeli, M. (2014), 'Against Cognitivism About Supposition', in *Philosophia* 42: 607-624.

Balcerak Jackson, M. (2016), 'On the Epistemic Value of Imagining, Supposing, and Conceiving', in A. Kind and P. Kung (2016b), *Knowledge Through Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 41-60.

Block, N. (1978), 'Troubles with Functionalism', in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 9: 261-325.

Byrne, A. (2010), 'Recollection, Perception, Imagination', in *Philosophical Studies* 148: 15-26.

²⁰ For helpful comments on a previous draft of this essay, I am grateful to Uriah Kriegel, Peter Kung, and Frank Menetrez.

Budd, M. (1989), *Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Psychology* (London: Routledge).

Chalmers, D. J. (1996), *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Gendler, T. (2000), 'The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance', in *Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2): 55–81.

Gendler, T. (2011), 'Imagination', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 ed.), edited by Edward N. Zalta, available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/imagination/>.

Grandin, T., and Panek, R. (2013), *The Autistic Brain: Helping Different Kinds of Minds Succeed* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing).

Hobbes, T. (1651/1968), *Leviathan*, edited by Macpherson, C.D., (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books).

Hopkins, R. (2012), 'What Perky Did Not Show', in *Analysis* 72 (3): 431-439.

Hume, D. (1739/1985), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by P.H. Nidditch, (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Ichikawa, J. (2009), 'Dreaming and Imagination', in *Mind and Language* 24 (1): 103-121.

Ichikawa, J., and Jarvis, B. (2012), 'Rational Imagination and Modal Knowledge', in *Noûs* 46: 127–158.

Kind, A. (2001), 'Putting the Image Back in Imagination', in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62 (1): 85-110.

Kind, A. (unpublished ms.), 'Imaginative Vividness'.

Kind, A. (2016), 'Imaginative Phenomenology and Existential Status', in *Rivista Internazionale di Filosofia e Psicologia* 7: 273-278.

Kind, A., and Kung, P. (2016a), 'Introduction: The Puzzle of Imaginative Use', in A. King and P. Kung (2016b), *Knowledge Through Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1-38.

Kind, A., and Kung, P. (2016b), *Knowledge Through Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Kriegel, U. (2015), *The Varieties of Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Marks, D. (1973), 'Visual Imagery Difference in the Recall of Pictures', in *British Journal of Psychology* 64 (1): 17-24.

McGinn, C. (2004), *Mindsight: Image, Dream, Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

O'Shaughnessy, B. (2000), *Consciousness and the World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Perky, C.W. (1910), 'An Experimental Study of Imagination', in *The American Journal of Psychology* 21 (3): 432-452.

Russell, B. (1921), *The Analysis of Mind* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd).

Sartre, J-P. (1936/1962), *Imagination*, translated by Forrest Williams (Ann Arbor, Mich.: The University of Michigan Press).

Sartre, J-P. (1940/2010), *The Imaginary*, translated by Jonathan Webber (London: Routledge).

Savage, C. W. (1975), 'The Continuity of Perceptual and Cognitive Experiences', in R.K. Siegel and L.J. West, *Hallucinations: Behavior, Experience, and Theory* (New York: John Wiley), 257-286.

Sosa, D. (2006), 'Scenes Seen', in *Philosophical Books* 47 (4): 314–325.

Van Leeuwen, N. (2013), 'The Meanings of "Imagine" Part I: Constructive Imagination',
in *Philosophy Compass* 8 (3): 220-230.

White, A. (1990), *The Language of Imagination* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell).

Wittgenstein, L. (1948/1980), *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. II.*, edited by G.H.
von Wright and Heikki Nyman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).

Wittgenstein, L. (1967), *Zettel*, edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (Berkeley: The
University of California Press).