

CONCEIVABILITY AND APPARENT POSSIBILITY

Dominic Gregory

1. Introduction

Certain sorts of mental states tend to lead us to certain sorts of beliefs. Thus what we seem to see and hear affects our beliefs about the external world, and what we seem to remember affects our beliefs about the past. Here are two questions which we can ask in such cases. First, whether we *ought* to form the relevant beliefs—does our having been in the previous mental states really justify them? And, second, why it *is* that we form them—what are the features of the previous mental states that lead us to the subsequent beliefs?

We often base ascriptions of possibility upon our conceivings. So we can pose versions of the above two questions about those beliefs. Ought we to base beliefs about possibility upon what we conceive, then? And why do we pass so readily from conceivings to ascriptions of possibility? My focus in this paper will primarily be on an approach to that second descriptive question, although I'll consider how answers to it might be relevant to the task of justifying conclusions about possibility.

2. More preparatory material

There are various things which we may mean when we state that something is 'conceivable'. For instance, as Yablo (1993) observes, one who states that *P* is 'conceivable' may mean merely that *P* is believable, or merely that *P*'s possibility is believable. But the only types of conceivings which are relevant to what follows are

those which count as uses of our *imaginings*. That restriction partly serves a practical function, by narrowing the field of investigation. But it also reflects an important fact, namely that the fundamental instances of inferences from ‘conceivability to possibility’ start from exercises of our imaginative powers.¹

I’ll also concentrate upon certain sorts of imaginings. I’ll often be considering what are commonly known, following Yablo (1993), as *objectual* imaginings.² Objectual imaginings are imaginings of objects, where the imagined objects may of course be imagined to have properties and to stand in relations to other things, as when one imagines a man wrestling with a crocodile. As Yablo (1993) points out, propositional imaginings—imaginings *that* such-and-such—often ride piggyback on objectual imaginings.³ For instance, I can imagine that there is a cow with fangs by imagining a fanged cow.

I’ll also discuss examples of *perceptual* imaginings and *sensory* ones. Those are experiences which are imagined ‘from the inside’, like when one imagines what it feels like to have a sore throat and an itchy nose. I’ll assume that ‘perceptions’ feature veridical sensory appearances⁴, ones which correspond to how things really are. So I’ll take ‘perceptual imaginings’ to feature imaginings of sensory appearances which are imagined to be veridical—that is, which are imagined to capture what things are like in the imagined situation in which the appearances are enjoyed. Objectual imaginings often ride piggyback on perceptual ones, just as propositional imaginings often ride piggyback on objectual ones: we commonly imagine an *F* by imagining a

¹ Thus the search in Yablo (1993) for an account of ‘philosophical conceivability’ arrives at an imaginative notion of conceivability (see pp.25 – 30).

² See Yablo (1993), p.27.

³ Yablo (1993), p.27.

⁴ As far as I know, there’s nothing in this paper which essentially depends upon any contentious views about the natures of sensory appearances or appearances of other kinds. For instance, I’ll typically speak as though there are certain things, sensory appearances, which often feature in our sensations. But that can be treated as a picturesque way of capturing the idea that, in the course of sensory episodes, things often appear to us to be the case.

perceptual encounter with an *F*. (We can, for example, imagine a heron by imagining seeing—in the factive sense—a heron sitting on a cow’s back.)

When I speak of ‘sensory imaginings’, by contrast, I will be talking about imaginings which don’t decide whether any imagined sensory appearances featuring in the imagining are veridical or not. (We can imagine having visual sensations which match those which one might have if, for instance, one were to see a heron sitting on a cow’s back, without thereby either imagining a heron or imagining that a heron isn’t present.) Similarly, when I talk about our capacity to have ‘sensations’ of various sorts, I’ll merely be speaking of our capacity to enjoy sensings involving certain sorts of sensory appearances, whether those appearances are veridical or not, or to enjoy sensings which don’t involve appearances at all.

While I take it that perceptual and sensory imaginings are naturally regarded as ‘imagistic’—as imaginings whose contents derive entirely from the sensory imagery at their hearts—the relations in the other direction aren’t immediately clear. For example, we often imagine objects using visualisation. Some philosophers claim that, in those cases, we imagine seeing the visualised items.⁵ A weaker view states that visualisings may involve the use of distinctively visual imagery to imaginatively represent objects without our thereby imagining those objects *as seen*. I think that the weaker of those two views is correct, and that there are consequently imagistic imaginings which are neither sensory nor perceptual, but none of the arguments below will trade on that assumption.⁶

The next section will isolate a strategy which one might hope to use to answer the descriptive question why we tend to ascribe possibility to what we imagine. I’ll

⁵ See the discussion in Martin (2002), for instance, from p. 404, See also Peacocke (1985), p. 21.

⁶ Thanks to Rob Hopkins for pointing out to me that earlier versions of this paper didn’t attend carefully enough to questions about the relationships between imagistic imaginings and perceptual plus sensory ones.

then briefly discuss how one might hope to fit that strategy into an answer to the justificatory question whether imaginatively-based ascriptions of possibility are justified, before attempting to assess, over the course of sections 5 – 7, whether the described strategy can really be applied to various sorts of imaginings.

3. An analogy with some other mental states

There are especially intimate links between sensory appearances and many of our beliefs about the outside world. Indeed, the links are so intimate that some philosophers have identified sensory appearances with beliefs, or with the acquisition of beliefs.⁷ That identification is too strong—the appearances persist when we’ve not got any inclination to trust them—but there is something right about it: part of what it is for sensory appearances to be *appearances* is that they can be accurate or inaccurate in just the way that beliefs can be. As Heck puts it, ‘both [sensory appearances and beliefs] ... have assertoric force’.⁸

If we are seeking to explain the links between sensory appearances and the beliefs about the external world which we form in direct response to them—our *perceptual* beliefs, for short—we therefore don’t have to look far beyond those appearances themselves. For instance, suppose that I seem to see a cat sitting on a wall, and assume that I trust what my senses are telling me to be the case. Then I will form the belief that a cat is sitting on a wall.

⁷ See Armstrong (1968), pp.216 – 26 and Pitcher (1971), pp.64 – 96.

⁸ Heck (2000), p.508. For similar claims, see for example Burge (2003), p.542; Martin (2002), pp.386 – 92; Peacocke (2004), p.99; Pendlebury (1986), p.95; Yablo (1993), p.5. One should be wary of overstating the assertoric force of our sensations, however. So consider the after-imageish visual effects which occur, among other times, when one is in the dark; it’s far from clear that those sensations purport to present us with how things are.

To take another example, there are equally strong connections between our apparent first-personal memories and our beliefs about the past. If someone has an apparent first-personal memory, it thereby appears to the person that a certain event once occurred; and those appearances amount to more than mere beliefs or mere inclinations to form beliefs. Part of what it is for apparent first-personal memories to involve appearances of pastness is for the former to feature states which have the same assertoric force as belong to *beliefs* to the effect that something once happened. Again, the matching force of the appearances figuring in apparent first-personal memories and beliefs about the past means that we can easily explain our tendency to base the latter upon the former.

Perhaps the connections between conceivings and beliefs about possibility are as close as those holding between sensory appearances and our perceptual beliefs, and between apparent first-personal memories and beliefs about our own pasts. As Yablo points out⁹, that idea is suggested by one reading of Hume's articulation of 'an establish'd maxim in metaphysics, *That whatever the mind clearly conceives, includes the idea of possible existence*'. And Yablo himself endorses it in the following passage:

Just as [for it to appear sensorily to one] that *p* is to be in a state that (i)
is veridical only if *p*, ... to find *p* conceivable is to be in a state which (i)
is veridical only if possibly *p* ...¹⁰

⁹ Yablo (1993), pp.4 – 5. The proposed reading of Hume's comment (which is also employed in the editors' introduction to Gendler and Hawthorne (2002), on p.17) is, in some respects, slightly strained. A more natural construal, briefly discussed below, takes Hume's remark to state that imagining an *F* involves imagining a possible *F*.

¹⁰ Yablo (1993), p.7. Although Yablo is there concerned with propositional conceiving, he eventually explains propositional conceiving in terms of objectual conceiving (p.29), and claims that 'to imagine an *X* is *thereby* to enjoy the appearance that an *X* could exist' (p.30).

How, in more detail, is the position supposed to run? Its central component, as I'll understand the view, is the thesis that one who imagines a thing, sensation or perception thereby enjoys the appearance that an item of the imagined kind is possible.¹¹ But if that's right, then imaginings, involving as they do appearances of possibility, have the same assertoric force as beliefs about possibility. Our tendency to move from the conceiving of a thing of some type to a belief that such items are possible may then be explained as arising from our inclination to take our conceivings straight; that is, as a product of our inclination to ascribe possibility to what our conceivings tell us is possible. More generally, I'll say that an explanation of our tendency to ascribe possibility to the objects of a range of imaginings is an *appearance-based* explanation just in case it assumes that imaginings in the relevant range produce the appearance that there could be things of the sort that has been imagined.

Of course, if appearance-based accounts are to have any explanatory power at all, the notion of someone's enjoying an appearance that a thing of some kind is possible must come to something other than the person's simply being inclined to form the belief that such items are possible. The relevant appearances must be, in that sense, *nondoxastic*. But that isn't a problem. The general notion of a nondoxastic appearance evidently cries out for further philosophical examination, but we've already seen that sensations and apparent memories generate distinctive ranges of

¹¹ When one imagines something, what one imagines will generally fall under various categories, and one will be unaware of its falling under some of them. So strictly speaking, for example, when I talk below about imaginings producing the appearance that there can be things of 'the' sort that one has imagined, I should instead talk about something like 'the appearance that there can be things of each of the types which one has explicitly imagined being exemplified'. I've ignored such complications, however, as doing so avoids unenlightening verbiage. In the case of sensory imaginings, an important point to note is that each of the sorts which one imagines to be instantiated (whether knowingly or not) meets the following condition: one's having a sensation of that sort doesn't entail that one has a perception. (For recall that any sensory appearances which one imagines having when one engages in a sensory imagining aren't imagined to be veridical.)

such appearances, so it is unclear why there should be any immediate objections of principle to the view that imaginings do so too.¹²

Some additional clarificatory remarks are now in order. We can easily explain our propensity to ascribe possibility to what appears to us to be the case through the workings of our senses. For instance, suppose that it looks to us as though a magpie is sitting on a roof. The veridicality of that appearance very obviously requires that a magpie *can* sit on a roof. So if we trust the appearance, we will profess that a magpie can sit on a roof.

The power of that explanatory strategy depends crucially upon the fact that we find it very obvious that actuality implies possibility. If that weren't transparently clear to us all, the previous explanatory mechanism wouldn't account for the way in which it is immediately obvious to everyone that accurate sensory appearances correspond to possibilities. For example, if we could only see that actuality implies possibility through the formulation of an esoteric argument, the readiness with which everyone ascribes possibility to what their sensations present to them as factual would be unexplained.

Because it's so obvious to us that actuality implies possibility, it makes good to allow that—in a slightly extended sense—sensory appearances provide us with 'appearances of possibility', although those latter appearances are mediated by more fundamental appearances of actuality. I'll therefore allow that imaginings may produce appearances of possibility even if they only do so in the sort of mediated fashion just described; that is, by the production of some appearance whose accuracy

¹² 'Small children can imagine things, but it's ridiculous to suppose that they enjoy anything as sophisticated as appearances of possibility!' I've got some sympathy with this objection when it is aimed at the idea that imaginings invariably produce appearances of possibility in an unmediated manner (see the next paragraph in the main text for an explanation of what means), but we'll see shortly that there are other ways of developing the idea that imaginings produce appearances of possibility.

seems to everyone very obviously to require the possibility of the type of thing which has been imagined.¹³

Appearance-based explanations of our inclination to ascribe possibility to what we imagine contrast with numerous other explanations which don't assume that imaginative states somehow present things as being a certain way. For example, it might be claimed that we tend to move from conceivability to possibility merely because we were taught to do so as children. Or it might be said that the tendency is owed to our having remarked a correlation between imaginability and possibility in the past.¹⁴

Appearance-based positions may get some specious plausibility from their conflation with a quite different view, one that is also suggested by Hume's remark that 'whatever the mind clearly conceives, includes the idea of possible existence'. For example, suppose that somebody asks you to imagine a furry desk. Would your response to that request have differed in any substantial way from your response to the request to imagine a *possible* furry desk? Surely not. So, making the obvious extrapolation from that case, it may seem that our imaginings carry a commitment to the possibility of their objects, as appearance-based views claim.

¹³ The relevant notion of 'seeming very obviously to everyone to require' clearly needs further elucidation, but it's meant to mark the sort of obviousness which is present in traditional examples of analytically valid inferences. Someone might claim that imaginings evidently produce mediated appearances of possibility, using the following argument: first, one who imagines an object, sensation or perception thereby enjoys the appearance that he's imagined what he's imagined; but, second, imaginability seems very obviously to imply possibility. If the arguments in section 5 below are sound, though, it is wrong to claim that imaginings always produce mediated appearances of possibility in the manner just described; the error presumably arises because imaginability doesn't always seem very obviously to imply possibility.

¹⁴ Noordhof (2002), p.453 briefly suggests an inductive account of 'the legitimacy of appealing to imagination to establish that something is possible', which would obviously dovetail nicely with the above associative explanation of why we make those appeals. Also, somebody might claim that imaginings present their objects as being a certain way, even though those appearances can't then be used to explain why we tend to ascribe possibility to what we imagine. For instance, Sartre claims that imaginings posit their objects as absent in a certain sense (Sartre ([1940] (2004)), pp.11 – 14), and it is unclear how to get appearances of possibility from appearances of absence.

That there's something wrong with the previous argument becomes obvious when one reflects on analogous cases. So, one who imagines an *F* doesn't need to alter his imagining to comply with the request to imagine an existing *F*. But our imaginings don't typically carry a commitment to the existence of their objects; one who imagines an *F* doesn't usually thereby enjoy the appearance that an *F* exists.¹⁵ Why should we think that the relationships between imagined possible existence and appearances of possibility are any different? In summary, Hume's claim about imaginings and possible existence is perhaps clearly true when construed as stating that possible existence is invariably among the imagined properties of imagined objects.¹⁶ But that doesn't establish that imaginings always impart appearances of possibility.

Sections 5 – 7 of this paper will examine the core of appearance-based theories, the idea that classes of imaginings yield appearances of possibility. But before considering whether any imaginings in fact produce such appearances, it will be helpful to consider how appearance-based views might fit within attempts to justify ascriptions of possibility. And the obvious place to look is at justificatory

¹⁵ The qualifications are present because there may be 'reflexive' cases in which one who imagines an *F* does thereby enjoy the appearance that an *F* exists; consider someone who imagines an imaginer, for instance. A similar point arises below, in the discussion of supposition-like elements of nonimagistic imaginings.

¹⁶ If Hume's claim *is* true on that reading, that raises the question why it is true. One might suggest that the imagined features of an imagined object are, for us, partly determined by the a priori obvious consequences of the features which we explicitly imagine the thing to have. (So, for example, we cannot imagine a nonmale bachelor because it is a priori obvious to us that all bachelors are men.) The inevitable inclusion of possible existence among the imagined features of the things which we imagine would then merely manifest the a priori obviousness of entailments of the form 'an *F* is *G*' to 'it is possible that an *F* exists'. That approach has the nice feature that it doesn't require that conceptually unsophisticated imaginers like small children and animals should have to explicitly ascribe possible existence to the things which they imagine. But it needs further development. For instance, assume that *P*'s entailing *Q* amounts to the impossibility of *P* and not-*Q*. Then the a priori obviousness to us of an entailment from 'an *F* is *G*' to 'it is possible that an *F* exists' amounts to its being a priori obvious that it cannot be both that an *F* is *G* yet it is impossible for an *F* to exist. But why should that affect our assessment of our imagining of an *F* which is *G* unless we have already specified that we are imagining a *possible F* which is *G*?

strategies which are, like appearance-based explanations themselves, inspired by the relationships between our sensations and our perceptual beliefs.

4. Appearances of possibility and the justificatory task

Here is a crude reliabilist account of why our perceptual beliefs are (prima facie) justified¹⁷. First, some beliefs are justified if they are the product of a belief-forming process that reliably produces true beliefs when employed within the environments in which the believer is typically placed. Second, the sensory processes which lead us to perceptual beliefs do work reliably in the situations in which we ordinarily find ourselves. Hence, third, our perceptual beliefs are justified.

That account may, for all I know, correctly identify one of the sources of the justification which attaches to the beliefs which it discusses. But it is hard to believe that it tells the whole story. For instance, suppose that somebody is inclined to form beliefs about the weather in Timbuktu whenever she feels an itch on her left calf.¹⁸ And suppose that the beliefs which the person thereby forms tend to be true. Then, regardless of whether or not the beliefs which the foregoing process produces are warranted, it seems odd to assimilate perceptual beliefs to the beliefs figuring in that example. For that move completely ignores one of the central features of our sensations—that in having sensations we often enjoy nondoxastic appearances.

¹⁷ Some writers, like Burge, preserve talk of ‘justification’ for ‘warrant by reason that is conceptually accessible on reflection to the warranted individual’ (Burge (2003), p.505). I’m not following that practice; in Burge’s terms, I’m classifying beliefs to which we have an ‘entitlement’ as justified (alternatively, I’m identifying the class of justified beliefs with the class of ‘warranted’ ones).

¹⁸ The following sort of case often features in critical discussions of reliabilist theories of knowledge. I’m not interested in the issue whether the people figuring in such cases end up with knowledge, however. My interest is rather in the very obvious contrast between such cases and what happens when we form perceptual beliefs.

But why, someone might now ask, should that phenomenological fact about our sensations be relevant to an account of why our perceptual beliefs are justified? Isn't the phenomenology merely relevant to that small part of the beliefs' etiology which occurs in our consciousnesses, and entirely incidental to whether or not the beliefs are justified? That might turn out to be so. But if one is seeking to explain why our perceptual beliefs are justified, it is at least natural to suspect that sensory appearances will play a major role. It is therefore also natural to suspect that the simple reliabilist position described at the start of this section is missing something important.

How might sensory appearances pull their weight in an account of why perceptual beliefs are justified? A simple thought is that the appearances just do the justifying. To quote Pryor:

In my view, it's not the irresistibility of our perceptual beliefs, nor the nature of our concepts, which explains why our experiences give us the immediate justification they do. Rather, it's the peculiar "phenomenal force" or way our experiences have of presenting propositions to us. Our experiences represent propositions in such a way that it "feels as if" we could tell that those propositions are true—and that we're perceiving them to be true—just by virtue of having them so represented. ... It is difficult to explain what this "phenomenal force" amounts to, but I think that it is an important notion, and that it needs to be part of the story about why our experiences give us the justification they do.¹⁹

¹⁹ Pryor (2000), p.547 (in fn. 37).

It would clearly be a major job to demonstrate the view endorsed by Pryor, and it's not one that I'm about to undertake. But let's suppose that the position is a workable one. Let's assume, that is, the following: if we form a perceptual belief that p by trusting a sensory appearance that p , the very way in which our senses have presented p to us as obtaining means that our belief is justified (unless we have grounds for distrusting our senses on that occasion²⁰). Then can advocates of appearance-based explanations use related ideas in arguing that some of our beliefs about possibility are justified?

That depends upon why it is that we are entitled to accept as being the case what our senses tell us to be the case. If what's doing the work there is the peculiarly *sensory* nature of the appearances, the previous strategy won't be adaptable to the imaginative case. But if what's working is the simple fact that sensory appearances are *appearances*, it will be adaptable. More precisely, suppose that we are entitled to accept whatever is presented as obtaining by some nondoxastic seeming. Then appearance-based views look set to do some justifying.

The idea that we are always entitled to accept nondoxastic appearances is suggested by one of the many a priori principles of entitlement which Burge identifies, namely the Acceptance Principle:

A person is a priori entitled to accept a proposition that is presented as true and that is intelligible to him, unless there are stronger reasons not to do so, because it is prima facie preserved (received) from a rational source, or resource for reason; reliance on rational sources—or

²⁰ I'll make this qualification tacit from now on.

*resources for reason—is, other things being equal, necessary to the function of reason.*²¹

It is also a theme in the work of some of the authors who have recently marched under the rationalist banner. So, for instance, Bealer distinguishes sensory and non-sensory seemings, labelling the latter ‘intuitions’. And, he claims, just as sensory seemings may provide us with prima facie justification so too do intuitions.²²

Here is one way of incorporating appearance-based approaches to the imagination within a scheme for the justification of ascriptions of possibility. Begin with the idea that we are entitled to accept whatever is presented as being the case by some nondoxastic seeming. Next, take some occasion on which you imagine an *F*, with something’s thereby appearing to you to be the case, where the accuracy of the foregoing appearance seems very obviously to imply the possibility of *F*s. Then (and assuming that you’re entitled to assume that the previous implication holds) you are entitled to accept that *F*s are possible. Hence your belief was in fact justified by your initial imagining.

I don’t know whether the fundamental assumption of that justificatory schema, that we are entitled to trust nondoxastic seemings, is correct. The schema is merely meant illustrate one fairly natural, and not obviously wrong, way of linking the descriptive claims featuring in appearance-based accounts to the problem of justifying

²¹ Burge (1993), p.469.

²² Bealer (2002), pp.73 – 4. Bealer is rather hostile to the idea that that conceivability can provide evidence for possibility (see pp.75 – 7). He claims that the notion of conceivability is rather obscure and argues that modal intuitions are anyway the proper justificatory basis for modal claims. The first worry can be circumvented by fixing on particular notions of conceivability; in particular, imaginings are no more obscure than Bealer’s intuitions. And the second one will be compatible with our assigning an important place to the imagination in modal epistemology, if some imaginings are themselves modal intuitions. Bealer recognises the option of holding that imaginings produce appearances of possibility, but he thinks that attempts to justify beliefs about possibility using that view take us ‘right back to relying upon modal intuitions’ (fn. 4, p.76). (The point of that last remark is perhaps that the justificatory force of imaginings will then be entirely inherited from the evidential force of nondoxastic seemings more generally, and so we should be concentrating on the latter.)

beliefs about possibility. But suppose that the schema's fundamental assumption is correct. That will only enable us to justify some beliefs about possibility if imaginings sometimes produce appearances of possibility. Do they?

The obvious way of tackling that question is to look and see—to examine the introspective evidence. Perhaps it is naïve to think that such a direct approach could work, but I don't know of any reasons for thinking that it is doomed to utter failure. So that's the method I'll use.²³

5. Universal appearances of possibility?

The *simplest appearance-based view* states that imaginings always generate appearances of possibility. If that is right, and if the justificatory schema described in the previous section holds water, we will always be entitled to infer that what we imagine is possible. It will be helpful to have some examples in front of us before we start evaluating the simplest appearance-based position:

[A] Imagine merely having auditory sensations of the type which you might have if you were to hear a nearby car (that is, without imagining that any of the auditory appearances which you've imagined having either are or aren't veridical).

One who follows that command—who performs an *[A]-imagining*, as I'll say—performs a sensory imagining. The next command is very different:

²³ Introspection certainly makes a compelling enough case for the view that, say, memories provide us with appearances of pastness but hopes don't. The perplexities arising in section 7 suggest that additional resources may be needed, though.

[B] Imagine a universe which contains infinitely many stars.

For, I take it, one who performs a [B]-imagining performs a nonimagistic imagining: one whose content isn't fixed by the content of the sensory imagery at its centre.

The simplest appearance-based view implies that anyone who obeys one of commands [A] and [B] will thereby enjoy the appearance that what she has imagined is possible. And [A]-imaginings do seem to impart something which we might be tempted to regard as appearances of possibility. So, for instance, perform an [A]-imagining. If you're anything like me, the sort of sensation which you've imagined will clearly seem like something which could be enjoyed, and enjoyed by you. And it's not just that you happen to form the belief that you could hear a suitable series of sounds. Rather, the felt nature of your [A]-imagining makes the claim that there couldn't be a hearing of the imagined sort seem mistaken.

How do those phenomena arise? In particular, do the putative appearances meet the demands which I earlier made of appearances of possibility, having at least arisen in the mediated manner described in section 3? I'll answer those questions in the next section. For the moment, though, it will be useful to bear [A]-imaginings in mind, as providing a benchmark against which we can measure the plausibility of assigning appearances of possibility to other imaginings.

Now reconsider command [B]. We are, I think, perfectly capable of performing [B]-imaginings. Do [B]-imaginings produce appearances of possibility? Perform a [B]-imagining. Your imagining probably inclines you towards a belief that is incompatible with the claim that there cannot be universes with infinitely many stars. But is that because your imagining produces some appearance, where the

accuracy of the produced appearance seems flatly incompatible with the claim that each universe must have only finitely many stars?

Reconsider, first, our [A]-imaginings. If we were to accept that we cannot have sensations of the type specified in [A], we would view our [A]-imaginings as having misinformed us about our sensory capacities; in that respect, our imaginations would have generated illusions. But if we were to accept that universes can only have finitely many stars, we wouldn't similarly regard our [B]-imaginings as misinforming us about what's possible—our [B]-imaginings wouldn't themselves have had an illusory character. For a [B]-imagining has the force of a simple supposition to the effect that there is a universe with infinitely many stars.²⁴ And our making the supposition that there is such a universe hardly makes it seem to us that there could be one, not even in the mediated sense introduced earlier.

Anscombe makes a related point in her discussion of Hume's argument that it is possible for something to come into existence without a cause. She writes:

But what am I to imagine if I imagine a rabbit coming into being without a cause? Well, I just imagine a rabbit coming into being. That this *is* the imagination of a rabbit coming into being without a cause is nothing but, as it were, the *title* of the picture. Indeed I can form an image and give my picture that title. But from my being able to do *that*, nothing

²⁴ Peacocke says that the differences between distinct imaginings with a shared imagistic core arise through 'differences in which conditions are *S-imagined* to hold', where "S" is for "suppose" (p.25). He distinguishes S-imagining from supposing, but says that 'it shares with supposition the property that what is S-imagined is not determined by the subject's images, his imagined experiences'. If the claims in the text are correct, Peacocke's label is apposite for more than the reason which he mentions—S-imaginings also have a merely suppositional force.

whatever follows about what is possible to suppose “without contradiction or absurdity” as holding in reality.²⁵

Anscombe perhaps overplays her hand in the final sentence of that quotation, as the possibility of a rabbit’s just springing into existence may in fact be implied by the imaginative feat which she describes. But what I take to be her central point is a good one.

An imagining of a rabbit which just pops into existence involves the imaginative imposition of certain conditions which transcend those which are derivable from the imagining’s imagistic aspects. Indeed, that holds quite generally of nonimagistic imaginings. But our enforcing of such conditions is achieved through something like²⁶ our merely supposing that, say, an imagined rabbit has come into being without a cause. Or, to put the point in Anscombe’s manner, the conditions are enforced through something like our simply labelling an imagined rabbit as ‘a rabbit that came into being without a cause’.

In particular, our imaginative imposition of nonimagistic constraints is like mere supposition and mere labelling in the following respect: our having imposed the constraints doesn’t generally make their satisfaction appear possible, no more than mere suppositions and mere labellings typically produce appearances of possibility.²⁷ In that sense, nothing generally ‘follows from’ a nonimagistic imagining concerning

²⁵ Anscombe (1974), p.150. Many thanks to Jonathan Webber for pointing me towards Anscombe’s paper.

²⁶ This qualification is important. The range of things which we are capable of supposing outruns the range of things which we are typically happy to regard as imaginable. For instance, we can suppose that explicit contradictions hold, but most people deny being able to imagine explicit contradictions. I have no idea why this discrepancy exists.

²⁷ The qualifications are needed because there may be cases in which our imposition of the constraints does make their satisfaction appear possible. So, to continue the analogy with suppositions, although one’s supposing something doesn’t standardly make the content of the supposition seem possible, it may sometimes have that result—consider suppositions to the effect that someone is supposing something, for instance.

the possibility of its objects. The simplest appearance-based view is therefore wrong, and wrong for a very wide range of our imaginings.²⁸

It has sometimes been assumed, though, that there will be a constant account of how imaginings connect to appearances of possibility. Yablo's final description of the relationships between imaginings and apparent possibility, for example, explicitly uses the principle that 'to imagine an *X* is *thereby* to enjoy the appearance that an *X* could exist'.²⁹ That assumption of constancy has little to recommend it besides its explanatory virtues, however.

6. More on sensory imaginings

We saw earlier that our [A]-imaginings somehow conflict with the claim that there could be no sensations of the sort which you imagined in response to command [A]. But do [A]-imaginings produce appearances of possibility in the sense articulated

²⁸ Note that, even if that last comment is correct, we may still be convinced that very much of what we nonimagistically imagine is possible; it's just that appearances of possibility arising from those imaginings won't typically be what produces those convictions. Nonimagistically imagine a hundred-sided polygon, for instance. Then you're probably certain that what you've imagined is possible; but that isn't because your imagining makes the imagined shape seem possible. (Perhaps, for example, your knowledge that certain polygons are possible combines with your implicit acceptance of a recombinatory principle for possibilities to make it look obvious to you that the sort of shape that you've imagined is possible.) Many thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on these issues.

²⁹ Yablo (1993), p.30. (I should mention that, in a footnote attached to the quoted passage, Yablo proposes converting the previous claim into a stipulation concerning the range of imaginings with which he is concerned. The problem with this move is that, if the arguments in this section and section 7 are correct, it isn't clear that how much will be contained in the resulting class of imaginings.) This may be the place to mention some slightly puzzling features of Yablo's position. His account of 'philosophical conceivability' on p.29 states that a proposition is conceivable if one can imagine a world which one takes to verify the proposition. In the discussion that leads to that statement, Yablo seems to identify worlds with *possible* worlds. And, one might think, the presumed possibility of those worlds is meant to play a role in explaining why imaginings provide appearances of possibility. If that were right, Yablo would be heading for an implausible position on which imaginings provide appearances of possibility by presenting their objects—namely, possible worlds of various sorts—as existent. But the assumed possibility of the imagined worlds seems in fact to be unnecessary for Yablo's purposes, because he is committed to holding that one who imagines a world of some sort (no mention of possibility needed) thereby enjoys the appearance that there could be a world of the relevant sort. The most likely explanation of what's going on is perhaps that Yablo's earlier apparent identification of worlds with possible worlds is trading on the later principle just quoted in the main text, which implies that, in imaginings, worlds always get presented as possible.

earlier? That is, do [A]-imaginings make something appear to be the case, where that thing's obtaining seems evidently to require that there could be sensations of the imagined sort? They do, and their doing so can moreover be traced back to some of the peculiarities of sensory imaginings.

There is a clear way in which imagined auditory sensations are like real ones.³⁰ And those phenomenological relationships are the source of the stark clash between an [A]-imagining and the claim that sensations of the sort specified in [A] are impossible. So perform an [A]-imagining. Then it seems very obvious that you would have sensations of the imagined type if things were to be a certain way for you auditorily, a way which you identify with your 'inner ear'. But, and taking the experience of performing an [A]-imagining unquestioningly, how could it be impossible for you to hear *those sounds*? Accordingly, it seems very obvious that you could have a sensation of the sort which [A] specifies.

More fully, take some sensory imagining; a [C]-imagining, for example:

[C] Imagine merely having visual sensations of the sort which you might have if you were to see a single pink crow against a cloudless blue sky.

It seems apparent that we would have a sensation of the type specified in [C] if things were to be a certain way for us sensorily; and our sensory imaginations present the relevant way that things might need to be for us in a mysteriously sensory manner.

We can put things more sharply by referring to the phenomenal character of our imagined sensation using what I'll term *quasi-perceptual* demonstratives—we can

³⁰ Hume thought that imaginings and perceivings differ with regard to their 'vivacity' ('force', 'liveliness' and 'strength'). The idea that imagined sensations are less 'viviacious' versions of the real thing provides a nice way of marking the way in which imagined sensations and real ones are similar yet different, but it doesn't provide a good theory of the differences between real sensations and imagined ones.

say that it seems very obvious to us that we would have a sensation of the imagined type if things were to be like *that* for us.³¹ But the phenomenological similarities between our imaginative grip on feeling like *that* and the real thing means that our sensory imagining produces the appearance that we could indeed feel like *that*. And this appearance is a nondoxastic one. For the remarked phenomenological similarities would be there even if we weren't inclined to believe that we could have sensations of the sort described in [C].

Our sensory imagining therefore produces a mediated appearance of possibility. For, first, the imagining produces the nondoxastic appearance that things could be like *that* for us. But, second, it seems obvious that if things were to be like *that* for us, we would have a sensation of the imagined type. And so, third, the accuracy of the initial appearance produced by our sensory imagining seems evidently to require that we could have a sensation of the imagined kind.

There is, of course, a lot that is very puzzling here. How can the similarities between real and imagined sensations lead to imagined sensations making real sensations seem possible, for instance, when there are other respects in which imagined sensations and real ones are very different? And what does it mean to say that a particular sensory imagining makes it appear that we would have the sensations of the imagined variety if things were to be like *that* for us? Doesn't the relevant demonstrative need to single out a real instance of a type of sensations, rather than a merely imaginary sensation? How, then, can the special way in which imagined sensations are presented to us in sensory imaginings amount to anything at all, let

³¹ I'm tempted to think that sensory imaginings (and perceptual ones) always license the use of quasi-perceptual demonstratives, and the rest of this paper assumes that thesis for simplicity's sake. But there may be exceptions to that claim. If there are exceptions to it, I'm happy to allow that the relevant sensory imaginings may also fail to make the imagined sensations seem like ones which can be had.

alone enough to ensure that the sensations of the relevant kind appear to be ones which we could have?

Those are good questions and I've not got answers to them. A fully comprehensive explanation of how sensory imaginings produce appearances of sensory possibilities would doubtless involve mention of facts about the relationships between the neural systems which underlie both imagined and real sensations.³² But the queries just raised don't undermine the claim that sensory imaginings produce appearances of possibility; they merely underscore how hard it is to provide a philosophically adequate description of what's going on when imaginings produce such appearances.

The previous line of thought, concerning how sensory imaginings produce appearances of possibility, can be further supported by considering other sorts of cases in which sensations are presented to us in the oddly sensory way in which we encounter imagined sensations in sensory imaginings. For appearances of possibility are produced in those cases too, and through the very pathways just described.

So obey command [D]:

[D] Recall some sensations which you've enjoyed, where those sensations are instances of some merely sensory type (that is, some type of sensations whose instances don't have to be perceptions).

Now suppose that your apparent [D]-memory is mistaken, and that you never had the sensation which you seem to remember. Your apparently recalled sensation is

³² There is a lot of data showing that imagined sensings and real ones activate related parts of the brain. So, to take the case of imagined proprioception, Decety (2002) reports that there are important relationships between the neurological activity which occurs 'during motor imagery, motor preparation, and actual motor performance' (p.301).

nonetheless presented to you in the special way that imagined sensations are presented to us in sensory imaginings—for instance, it seems obvious that you would have a sensation of the apparently remembered variety if things were like *that* for you.

It may be thought that one way in which apparent memories produce appearances of possibility is as follows: apparent memories present their objects as more than simply things that once happened—they present them as things which we witnessed; but it is obvious that if we underwent a sensation of some kind, a sensation of that type is possible; so the accuracy of the appearance of pastness produced by your apparent [D]-memory seems very clearly to require that you could have the sort of sensation that you appear to have recalled. Your supposition that your apparent [D]-memory is mistaken means that you've got no reason to trust any appearances of possibility which are produced in that manner, however.

But, I take it, your supposition about the veracity of your apparent [D]-memory doesn't call into question the apparent information about your sensory capacities that the apparent memory provides. Why so? Well, apparent [D]-memories have the same sort of peculiarly sensory nature as sensory imaginings: for example, you can use quasi-perceptual demonstratives to characterise conditions under which you would have a sensation of the apparently remembered category. And, as we saw above when considering sensory imaginings, our apparent [D]-memories' being like that is *itself* enough to mean that they will produce mediated appearances of possibility, regardless of whether those apparent memories are accurate or not.³³

³³ Someone might suggest that the appearances of possibility resulting from sensory imaginings are owed to the intimate relationships between recalled sensations and sensory imagery. In particular, it might be held that our sensory imaginations work by suitably recombining components of sensory memories, and that the apparent pastness of those memories is somehow responsible for the appearances of sensory possibility produced by sensory imaginings. The points in the text suggest that that view is mistaken, however. For assume that the apparent pastness of the elements combined in a sensory imagining is what makes the imagined sensation seem like one which we could have. Then suitable suppositions about the accuracy of our recall of the combined components should remove our grounds for trusting the relevant appearances of sensory possibility. But the suppositions don't actually

The considerations rehearsed over the last couple of pages help to shed light on some further interesting features of sensory imaginings. Certain conceivings have traditionally been assigned an especially powerful role as proofs of possibility—namely, ‘clear and distinct’ ones. So, for instance, consider the following passage by Descartes:

the rule ‘whatever we can conceive of can exist’ is my own, [but] it is true only so long as we are dealing with a conception which is clear and distinct, a conception which embraces the possibility of the thing in question, since God can bring about whatever we clearly perceive to be possible.³⁴

(According to Descartes, a conceiving is ‘clear and distinct’ if ‘it is present and accessible to the attentive mind [... and ...] it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear’.³⁵)

Although Descartes’s attitude towards imagistic imaginings was rather dismissive, the idea that sensory imaginings can be rated with regard to their clarity is an appealing one, as is the idea that those variations feed into the relationships between sensory imaginings and our assessments of what’s possible. For instance, compare your [C]-imaginings (‘Imagine merely having visual sensations of the sort

have that effect. There are additional reasons for denying that the relationships between recalled sensations and sensory imagery are what’s responsible for the apparent possibility of imagined sensations. For instance, there could perhaps be human-like beings who have the capacity for, say, visualising but who lack working visual systems; they might have lost the capacity to see as a result of evolution. Their visual imaginings would make the imagined sensations seem to them like the sort of thing which they could experience, but those appearances of possibility obviously wouldn’t be owed to their memories of visual sensations.

³⁴ I’ve taken this quotation from Gendler and Hawthorne (2002), p.18—it is originally from Descartes’s *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*.

³⁵ Again, see Gendler and Hawthorne (2002), p.18, fn.39 for the source of the quotation (which is from Descartes’s *Principles of Philosophy*).

which you might have if you were to see a single pink crow against a cloudless blue sky') with your [E]-imaginings:

[E] Imagine merely having visual sensations of the sort which you might have if you were to see more than twenty but fewer than thirty pink crows against a cloudless blue sky.

[C]-imaginings are typically more clear than [E]-imaginings, in various ways.

For instance, the overall imagined sensory content of [C]-imaginings is usually more definite than that of [E]-imaginings. What [C]-imaginings tell us about what it might be like to have real visual sensations is therefore more clear than the information with which we are provided by [E]-imaginings. Also, the imagined sensory details figuring in [C]-imaginings tend to provide us with our basis for classifying those imaginings as [C]-imaginings. But our categorisations of imaginings as [E]-imaginings are less likely to stick so closely to imagined sensory details. So, our response to command [E] may well result in an imagining whose imagined sensory details don't really differ from our response to command [F]:³⁶

[F] Imagine merely having visual sensations of the sort which you might have if you were to see at least thirty pink crows against a cloudless blue sky.³⁷

³⁶ The context in which command [E] figures perhaps makes this less likely than it would otherwise be. When presented by [E] in isolation, we try to perform an imagining whose classification as an [E]-imagination is based more fully upon the imagined sensory details than it would be if we were to try to perform an [E]-imagining when reading a novel, for example.

³⁷ Descartes famously makes this sort of point in his discussion of our imaginings of chiliagons, at the start of the *Sixth Meditation*. Peacocke remarks that '[t]he images which serve in the fulfilment of a request to imagine a chiliagon (a thousand-sided figure) and in the fulfilment of a request to imagine a 999-sided figure may match: for an experience produced by a chiliagon and an experience produced by a 999-sided figure are not, for us, discriminably different' (Peacocke (1985), p.24). But the images

Again, then, the information which our [C]-imaginings provide us with is clearer than that with which our [E]-imaginings provide us.

As we've seen, sensory imaginings provide us with a very direct form of information about what it might be like to undergo sensings, and they thereby yield appearances relating to our sensory powers. But the variations in imaginative clarity just described arose precisely from differences in how clearly imaginings speak to us about what sensations might be like. One would accordingly expect such variations to be reflected by differences in the clarity of the appearances of possibility produced by the imaginings. And they are.

For instance, [C]-imaginings are generally very clear, in that their overall sensory content is relatively definite. And they also inform us that we are capable of enjoying fairly finely individuated sensory states. But [E]-imaginings provide us with a less firm grasp on what a real visual sensation might be like. The appearances of possibility associated with [E]-imaginings are correspondingly less clear, in a sense; what we learn about our sensory powers is much rougher.

This section has explored the particular means by which sensory imaginings generate appearances of sensory possibilities, and some of the complexities to which those means give rise. The next section looks at whether similar mechanisms can give us appearances of possibility which reach out into the world itself.

involved in [E]-imaginings and [F]-imaginings might be the same even though we surely could discriminate real versions of those imagined sensations. Our being prepared to use a single image in imagining types of sensations which could discriminate illustrates that the use of a single image in imaginative acts with distinct objects doesn't always correspond to our inability to discriminate the objects of the relevant imaginings; it sometimes results from our just not expending the effort required to fill in the details of the images in suitably different ways.

7. Perceptual imaginings

We often use perceptual imaginings when exploring modal matters. For instance, suppose that someone asks whether there could be a single pink crow against a cloudless blue sky. Then most of us will reply that there could be. And one fact which we would take to support that response is that we are capable of performing a [G]-imagining:

[G] Imagine seeing a single pink crow against a cloudless blue sky.

In that case, and in many others, we take a perceptual imagining to support a claim about how the external world might have been.

We've seen that sensory imaginings produce appearances of possibility: the sensations which we imagine having when engaging in sensory imaginings seem to be the kind of sensations that we could have. And we've seen that nonimagistic imaginings don't make their objects seem possible. But do perceptual imaginings make the imagined perceptions seem like ones which we could have?

One model of the perceptual imagination adapts a well-known picture of the relationship between genuine perceptions and mere sensations. According to the relevant 'highest common factor' picture of perception, one who sees a pink crow against a cloudless blue sky is in the same sensory state as one who suffers from a corresponding hallucination, an hallucination that seems the same from the inside. The difference between them lies merely in the relationships which their common sensory states have to the outside world. It might be suspected, then, that [G]-imaginings, for instance, work in a similarly bipartite way: we imagine enjoying a

certain range of visual appearances and, in addition, we suppose the relevant visual appearances to be veridical.³⁸

If that's right, it's natural to think that perceptual imaginings won't make the imagined perceptions seem like ones which we could have. For the nonsensory suppositional elements which that view ascribes to perceptual imaginings look very similar to the constraints which, as we saw earlier, figure in nonimagistic imaginings. And, as we also saw, the purely suppositional force of the latter conditions means that our imposition of them won't typically make their satisfaction seem possible, with the result that nonimagistic imaginings won't usually produce appearances of possibility.

Someone might object to that line of argument, however. When we perform [G]-imaginings, don't we just imagine having a certain perception, namely seeing a sole pink crow against a cloudless blue sky?³⁹ Do perceptual imaginings really have to tack veridicality suppositions onto imagined sensory appearances? The simpler view of perceptual imaginings suggested by those questions fits nicely with another philosophical picture of the connections between perceptions and mere sensations. The relevant 'disjunctivist' view states that perceptions and other sorts of corresponding sensations don't have a common sensory state at their core, that there

³⁸ More than mere veridicality suppositions may be required here; for instance, perhaps we also need to suppose that there are suitable causal connections between the appearances and items in the imagined situation. The veridicality bit is the only relevant factor for my purposes, however, so I'll speak as though veridicality suppositions are the only ones needed. Peacocke (1985), p.25 takes the sort of line currently being considered. He points out that the same imagery may be involved in 'imagining being at the helm of a yacht; imagining from the inside an experience as of being at the helm of a yacht; and imagining from the inside what it would be like if a brain surgeon were causing you to have an experience as of being at the helm of a yacht' (p.18). He states that the differences between those imaginings 'result from different conditions which the imagined experience is imagined to fulfil. In one case it is imagined that the experience is perceptual; in the second it is left open; in the third, it is imagined that it is produced by an intervening brain surgeon' (p.25).

³⁹ I'm here bracketing questions about the precise contents of perceptual appearances. So someone might deny that I could see a pink crow as opposed to, say, a pink bird-like thing that's at some distance from me; and similar claims might be made about what we can, in the strictest sense, perceptually imagine.

isn't a highest common factor which is shared by perceptions, corresponding hallucinations and the rest.⁴⁰

Let's assume, for the moment, that perceptual imaginings indeed involve the imaginative enjoyment of sensations which, by their very nature, present us with facts. Then won't perceptual imaginings produce appearances pertaining to what we can perceive, for precisely the same sort of reasons that sensory imaginings produce appearances of sensory possibilities? For example, perform an [G]-imagining. Then your imagining surely produces the appearance that things could be like *that* for you! And it seems very obvious that you would have a perception of the imagined kind if things were like *that* for you. So it seems very clear that the accuracy of the appearance produced by your [G]-imagining requires the possibility of the sort of perception specified in command [G].

Perceptual imaginings don't exhaust the range of imaginings of which we are capable. There may even be, as remarked earlier, imagistic nonsensory imaginings which also aren't perceptual. But if perceptual imaginings were to generate appearances of possibility in the way just articulated, we could use that fact to account for a vast swathe of the inferences from imaginability to possibility which we in fact make. Even if appearance-based explanations of inferences from imaginings to ascriptions of possibility cannot be universally applied, their coverage would then nonetheless be impressive.

⁴⁰ This is a pretty rough characterisation of disjunctivism but it's sharp enough for my current purposes. Someone might naturally wonder how we could be capable of sensory imaginings if the highest common factor view of imagined perceptions is incorrect. To adapt some remarks which Martin makes concerning imagined hallucinations (Martin (2002), pp.416 – 7), perhaps sensory imaginings themselves have the sort of complex structure which the first reply ascribes to perceptual ones. So maybe, for instance, [D]-imaginings build on our ability to perform [G]-imaginings: to perform a [D]-imagining, we perform a [G]-imagining; and then we imagine a situation which is indiscriminable from the one which we imagined when performing our [G]-imagining, but which may not in fact be as it appears to be.

Alas, the line of reasoning rehearsed in the penultimate paragraph goes too quickly. It's true that [G]-imaginings make it seem possible that things should be a certain way for us. But that doesn't settle the crucial question concerning the reach of those appearances of possibility—whether they really involve *perceptions* of the sort described in [G] or merely states which, in phenomenological terms, match perceptions of that sort. To put the point another way, suppose that the unitary conception of imagined perceptions is right. Then the accuracy of the appearances produced by perceptual imaginings like [G] might nonetheless only require that we can occupy disjunctive states like 'either seeing or merely seeming to see a single pink crow against a cloudless blue sky'.⁴¹

Anyhow, we can try to directly address the question of the moment. That is, consider those quasi-perceptually ostensible elements of perceptual imaginings which provide us with appearances relating to our sensory capacities. Do they make perceptions appear possible? Here is a fairly plausible series of considerations leading to the conclusion that they don't.

Perform a perceptual imagining. Then a certain range of sensations seem to be ones which you could enjoy: things could be, visually or whatever, like *that* for you. But there could surely be circumstances in which things were like *that* for you even though the sensation which you've imagined having featured nonveridical sensory appearances. That is, for instance, one imaginative source of the force belonging to certain sceptical strategies: we run through perceptual scenarios in our heads; and, as

⁴¹ Disjunctivists typically claim that perceptions have certain sorts of priority over subjectively indistinguishable nonperceptual states. If some such view is correct, perhaps the possibility of a disjunctive state like the one mentioned in the text implies the possibility of the corresponding and more fundamental perceptual state. And so, it might be claimed, if perceptual imaginings make disjunctive states seem possible, then those imaginings also produce mediated appearances of possibility, ones whereby the imagined perceptions seem like ones which we could have. That reasoning is flawed, however. Mediated appearances of possibility arise in the following manner: an imagining of an *F* makes it seem that something holds, where that thing's holding *seems very obviously* to imply that *F*s are possible. But it is very far from obvious to us that the possibility of the disjunctive states requires the possibility of the corresponding perceptions, even if it actually does.

we do so, we acknowledge that things could be like *that* even if all of the imagined sensations were to be illusions. More generally, perceptual imaginings make us seem capable of experiencing a certain range of ostensible stuff, but that stuff doesn't encompass the veridicality of the imagined sensory appearances.⁴²

If that's correct, perceptual imaginings don't make perceptions of the imagined type appear possible in the way that sensory imaginings make sensations of the imagined type seem possible. That doesn't imply that perceptual imaginings don't make perceptions of the imagined kind appear possible, of course. But, it's natural to wonder, how else is a perceptual imagining meant to make the imagined perception seem possible, if not in the mediated manner just considered? There are, then, pretty good reasons for thinking that perceptual imaginings don't make the imagined perceptions seem possible. But there are also reasons why one might be troubled by the argument just run.

Consider the following argument, which is at least superficially analogous to the one concerning perceptual imaginings run over the last two paragraphs: an apparently remembered sensation merely makes it seem like things were once like *that* for one; but, as shown for example by the force of familiar sceptical attacks, things could be like *that* for one even if any sensory appearances forming part of the sensation were nonveridical; hence the apparent memory doesn't make a perception proper seem like something which one underwent; but how else is an apparently remembered sensation meant to make a perception seem like something which one underwent ...?

⁴² Note that it's no objection to the remarks in the last paragraph that there also happens to be a perfectly acceptable use of the demonstrative 'that' on which, when I perform an [G]-imagining, things being like *that* for me requires that I am actually seeing a pink crow. For that is beside the point: if the remarks in the text are right, the stronger understanding of the demonstrative isn't associated with an appearance of possibility in the way that the weaker construal is.

That argument leads to the conclusion that one who seems to recall a sensation won't ever thereby enjoy the appearance that he perceived something. But one might well think that, if someone were apparently to recall a *perception*, he would thereby enjoy the appearance of having perceived something. So that most recent argument leads to the bizarre conclusion that nobody who ever seems to recall a sensation ever also seems to remember perceiving anything. Now there may be relevant ways in which the argument in the previous paragraph is unlike the earlier argument concerning perceptual imaginings. But breaking the analogies isn't easy.

This section must therefore end in aporia. On the one hand, it's hard to see how perceptual imaginings could make their objects seem possible, unless through a version of the process by means of which sensory imaginings produce appearances of possibility. But introspection suggests that perceptual imaginings won't produce appearances of possibility through a version of that process. On the other hand, the preceding considerations threaten to generalise disastrously.

8. Conclusion

The heterogeneity of our imaginings, with their various relations to our sensory powers, is reflected by differences in how they relate to appearances of possibility: a sensory imagining makes sensations of the imagined kind seem possible, but nonimagistic imaginings don't generally make objects of the imagined variety seem possible. And although the status of perceptual imaginings is unclear, the previous point is enough to raise the question why we are quite so prone to ascribe possibility to what we imagine. For our propensity to do so rides rough-shod over the distinction

between those imaginings which produce appearances of possibility and those which don't.

Before making some concluding remarks on that topic, I should note that the miscellaneous nature of our imaginings may have important consequences for the epistemological status of inferences from imaginability to possibility. For instance, it will do so if it implies that some of our imaginings, but not others, fit into the sort of justificatory schema outlined in section 4. And, more generally, it will do so if the production of nondoxastic appearances of possibility by imaginings of certain kinds is somehow relevant to the justification of any ascriptions of possibility based upon them.

Discussions of inferences from conceivability to possibility have nonetheless tended to handle our imaginings as if they form a homogeneous clump. Thus none of the discussions of justificatory issues in Chalmers (2002), Gregory (2004) and Yablo (1993) acknowledges that the differences between imagistic imaginings and nonimagistic ones might be relevant to the justification of modal beliefs.⁴³ Regardless of the different relationships to appearances of possibility noted here, it's surprising that modal epistemologists have paid so little attention to the fine structure of our imaginings.

To return to the question raised at the start of this section, if imaginings don't generally present their objects as possible, why are we so susceptible to ascribe possibility to what we can imagine? It would be good to have an account of why we ascribe possibility to the objects of our imaginings which makes sense of our very general propensity to reason in that way; an account which provides a charitable

⁴³ Peacocke thinks that the differences are relevant, however: see the discussion of 'W-imagining' on pp.31 – 2 of Peacocke (1985).

explanation of why, in a suitably wide range of cases, the conclusions which we thereby draw seem to us like evidently sensible ones.

The simplest appearance-based model holds out the hope of a theory which will meet that demand by assimilating the relevant inferences to those which underwrite many of our perceptual beliefs; and what could seem more reasonable than those? But if one endorses what this paper has suggested, that the appearance-based approach cannot generally be applied to nonimagistic imaginings and can't clearly be applied to perceptual ones, one might fear that no decent theory is to be had which has the attractive property just mentioned.

For instance, sensory imaginings produce appearances of possibility, so it's to be expected that we will ascribe possibility to the sort of sensations that figure in our sensory imaginings. Someone might therefore suggest that what produces the very general tendency remarked above is this: we just ignore the distinctions between sensory and nonsensory imaginings, and end up ascribing possibility on the basis of the lot of them. But that view makes our inclination to ascribe possibility to what we imagine seem rather foolish.

Or suppose that the appearance-based approach doesn't just break down for nonimagistic imaginings, but for perceptual ones as well. Then while imaginings of those types may in fact reliably correlate with facts about possibility, there is nothing in our very experience of them which leads us to think that their objects are possible. And so, somebody might conclude, although inferences from imaginings to beliefs about possibility seem to us to be patently reasonable ones even in the perceptual and nonimagistic cases, that is probably because they are inferences which we are simply used to making. But, again, that is a rather uncharitable explanation of why we ascribe possibility to what we imagine.

Finally, McGinn suggests that ‘modal beliefs are best seen as based on inferences to the best explanation with respect to acts of imagination’.⁴⁴ Now, the ascriptions of possibility which we base upon imaginings may turn out to be abductively justifiable. But it seems wrong to claim that the beliefs in fact seem to us like reasonable ones because they’ve resulted from our performance of inferences to the best explanation. For that doesn’t do justice to how obviously right such ascriptions of possibility seem to us to be. I typically find the modal inferences utterly compelling, for instance, but I can’t envisage any remotely plausible abductive reconstruction of them.

Whatever the proper response to the issues just considered, the descriptive question why we tend to infer possibility from our imaginings is both important and wide open. The wider ramifications of answers to that question—for example with regard to the justificatory issues concerning our modal beliefs which have tended to preoccupy philosophers—are also unclear. And it is surely a measure of the currently primitive nature of modal epistemology that it is a question on which the most well-developed accounts of modality are entirely silent.⁴⁵

REFERENCES

Anscombe, G.E.M. (1974), “‘Whatever has a beginning of existence must have a cause’: Hume’s argument exposed”, *Analysis* 34, pp. 145 – 51.

Armstrong, D.M. (1968), *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, London: Routledge.

⁴⁴ McGinn (2004), p. 138. He states that ‘modal belief relates to imagination in very much the way that ordinary knowledge relates to perception’ (McGinn (2004), pp. 138 – 9), thereby claiming that our perceptual beliefs are also produced using abductive inferences. That seems hugely implausible to me, and the worry briefly raised in the text for McGinn’s views about our modal beliefs can evidently be transformed into a problem for his views about our perceptual beliefs.

⁴⁵ Many thanks to Bob Hale, Rob Hopkins, Rosanna Keefe, Jonathan Webber and two anonymous readers for OUP, for lots of very helpful comments on earlier versions of this material. Many thanks also to Ross Cameron, for his thought-provoking comments on this paper at the Arché Modality conference in 2006, and to the audience at that talk for their very helpful questions.

- Bealer, George (2002), 'Modal epistemology and the rationalist renaissance', in Gendler and Hawthorne (eds.) (2002), pp. 71 – 125.
- Burge, Tyler (1993), 'Content preservation', *The Philosophical Review* 102, pp. 457 – 488.
- Burge, Tyler (2003), 'Perceptual entitlement', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67, pp. 503 – 548.
- Chalmers, David J. (2002), 'Does conceivability entail possibility?', in Gendler and Hawthorne (eds.) (2002), pp. 145 – 200.
- Decety, Jean (2002), 'Is there such a thing as functional equivalence between imagined, observed, and executed action?', in Meltzoff and Prinz (eds.) (2002), pp. 291 – 310.
- Foster, J. and H. Robinson (eds.) (1985), *Essays on Berkeley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gendler, Tamar Szabó and John Hawthorne (eds.) (2002), *Conceivability and Possibility*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gregory, Dominic (2004). 'Imagining possibilities', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69, pp. 327 – 348.
- Heck Jr., Richard G. (2000), 'Nonconceptual content and the "space of reasons"', *The Philosophical Review* 109, pp. 483 – 523.
- Hume, David ([1739] (1978)), *A Treatise of Human Nature* ed. P.H. Nidditch, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnston, Mark (2004), 'The obscure object of hallucination', *Philosophical Studies* 120, pp. 113 – 83.
- Martin, M.G.F. (2002), 'The transparency of experience'. *Mind and Language* 17, pp. 376 – 425.
- McGinn, Colin (2004), *Mindsight: Image, Dream, Meaning*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Meltzoff, Andrew N. and Wolfgang Prinz (2002), *The Imitative Mind: Development, Evolution, and Brain Bases*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Noordhof, Paul (2002), 'Imagining objects and imaginings experiences', *Mind and Language* 17, pp. 426 – 55.
- Peacocke, Christopher (1985), 'Imagination, experience, and possibility: a Berkeleyan view defended', in Foster and Robinson (eds.) (1985), pp. 19 – 35.
- Pendlebury, Michael (1986), 'Perceptual representation', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 87, pp. 91 – 106.

Pitcher, George (1971), *A Theory of Perception*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Pryor, James (2000), 'The skeptic and the dogmatist', *Noûs* 34, pp. 517 – 49.

Sartre, Jean-Paul ([1940] (2004), *The Imaginary* (trans. Jonathan Webber), London: Routledge.

Yablo, Stephen (1993). 'Is conceivability a guide to possibility?', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53, pp. 1 – 42.