

What makes a given mental exercise an exercise of the imagination?

We can point to three characteristics of imagination:

Directedness: In imagining *X*, I direct my imagining at something. When I imagine Trump's inaugural address, Trump is the object of my imagination.

Activity: To imagine *X* is to do something. Our imagination is generally subject to the will. This does not mean that my imagining is always intentional – sometimes it may be unbidden – but in general, I have control over what I imagine in a way in which I do not have control over what I believe. This feature also distinguishes imagination from both perception and hallucination.

Phenomenology: Imagining *X* has a qualitative character. The qualitative feel is essential to it; without an experiential aspect, my attitude will not be an attitude of imagining. The experiential aspect is similar to the one involved in hallucinating, dreaming, and perceiving.

These three features of imagination support the following claim:

Essentialist Claim: Mental images play an essential role in the imagination.

This claim allows us to make sense of all three features:

1. The representational aspect of mental images explains the directedness of imagining.
2. The active nature of the imagination derives from the operation of image formation.
3. The experience of having an image, which has qualitative character, explains the phenomenology of imagining.

What the essentialist claim commits us to is the following: If a mental exercise is an exercise of the imagination, then imagery is present. Mental imagery is necessary (but not sufficient) for an exercise of imagination.

It's important to distinguish this from two other claims that we might hold:

Individuation: mental images individuate imaginings. The image involved in an imagining is what makes it the type of imagining that it is.

Object claim: the image involved in an imagining is the object of the imagining.

Both claims are problematic.

Individuation is problematic because the same mental image can be involved in several, distinct imaginings. (Imagining your friend writing her essay, imagining your friend writing a short story.)

Object claim is problematic because when you imagine our friend writing her paper, your imagination seems to be about your friend, not about your mental image.

But the Essentialist Claim does not commit us to either of these problematic claims.

Once we have granted that imagination involves mental images, we can ask the following question: What are the correctness conditions for imaginings? What counts as successes and failures of imagination?

Set aside one kind of success: that of successfully imagining what one intends to. What we are interested in are correctness conditions.

Analogy to Perception

Insofar as one is impressed by the analogies between imagining and perceiving, it's tempting to think of imagination as following:

Imaginings are quasi-perceptual experiences in the absence of appropriate stimuli.

This is to take the veridicality conditions for imagination to be the same as those for perception. On this view, imaginings are always mis-representational.

We shouldn't do this. For visual perception, the notion of appropriate stimuli is tied to the functional role that perception plays in cognition. It provides information about how the world is before one, through ongoing causal interaction with the environment. This is why it makes sense to say that when you have a perceptual experience of a banana in front of you but there is no banana in front of you, something has gone awry.

But imagination does not play the same functional role as perception. To intend to imagine a banana is an appropriate cause of an imagining of a banana.

What's the cognitive role of imagination? It guides behaviour by telling us how things were, will be, could be, or are somewhere else.

Possibility

According to Yablo, imaginings represent things as possible. Imagining involves an assertoric modal attitude towards an imagistic content. This attitude only implies that the represented content is possible, not actual.

But this does not seem to give us the right account of the cognitive role. When I imagine that the couch will fit through the door and it doesn't I have misimagined, even if it's metaphysically possible for it to fit. We shouldn't think of imaginings as a class as veridical whenever their contents are possible.

Imaginative Attitudes

There are different kinds of imaginative attitudes with different correctness conditions.

One important kind of imaginative attitude are judgment-imagining. To judgment-imagine, is to make a judgment that involves mental images as proper parts.