

Imagination and imagery

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Imagination does not imply imagery since much imagination is of what is non-sensory, just as much memory consists in recalling dates, times, arguments, rather than faces and places, and cannot, therefore, contain any imagery. That is, what is described in describing what one here imagines could not be a picture. This is the case, whatever form of imagination we consider. For instance we can imagine, or be unable to imagine, what the neighbours will think or why someone should try to kill us, just as we can imagine that the neighbours envy us or that someone is trying to kill us. Yet none of these imagined situations is something picturable in visual, auditory or tangible terms and, therefore, none is something pertaining to imagery. If what we imagine is either doing something or ourselves or another doing it, what we imagine may be some picturable activity, such as putting out to sea or walking in a procession, or it may be some non-picturable activity, as when I imagine being unjustly accused, or imagine myself or you allowing so-and-so or agreeing to such-and-such. Furthermore, whereas imagining oneself or another doing something observable, for instance lying in the sun or mowing the lawn, could involve picturing oneself or him engaged in such action, imagining doing something observable, for example lying in the sun or mowing the lawn, does not involve imagining – nor, *a fortiori*, picturing – oneself or another doing it. It makes sense to say ‘I can picture myself or him mowing the lawn’, but not ‘I can picture mowing the lawn’. Equally, if what I can or cannot imagine is anything more unlikely than this or more silly than that, these are not things which are easily or at all reduced to imagery. I can also as easily imagine a difficulty or an objection as I can imagine an elephant or a bus. But only for the latter would the presence of imagery be at all plausible. Even when what we imagine is whether we perceive (see, hear, etc.) something, it is not *what* we think we perceive that we imagine, but *whether* we perceive it. Philosophers often misinterpret our common question ‘Did I see,

hear, smell so-and-so or did I only imagine it?’ as if the ‘it’ referred to ‘so-and-so’, whereas it really refers to ‘that I saw, heard, smelt so-and-so’.

[...]

If imagery implies the existence of images ... it is relevant that what we can have an image of can only be that which something else, namely the image, can resemble in some copyable way. It is because something can look like, sound like, feel like, smell or taste like, something else, that the former can be an image, as it can be a copy, of the latter. This is equally true when we include physical images, such as idols of wood or stone, phenomenal images, such as reflections in mirrors or pools, psychological images, such as after-images and hallucinations, or the mental images of dreams, memory and imagination. So something can look like a dagger, sound like a cat, or smell like gas, but however much something may seem, appear, or look, to be a difficulty, a solution, an insult or a hint, it cannot literally look like, sound like or smell like one, however metaphorically it may do so. This is why one cannot have copies or images of any of these. Even in the sensory, there are features which are imaginable, but not capable of being put in imagery. One can imagine, for example, that some man, no men or all men have red hair, that the black horse is here now or not there then, but there is no imagery for ‘some’, ‘all’ or ‘none’, or for ‘here’, ‘now’ or ‘there’. Imagining that so-and-so is not such-and-such is as easy as imagining that it is, but there is no image of so-and-so as not being such-and-such. Furthermore, though visual and auditory imagery is plausible on the analogy of pictures and echoes, the existence of olfactory and taste imagery is as debatable as that of paintings of smells and tastes.¹ Yet imaginary tastes and smells are as common as imaginary sights and sounds and we can ‘smell’ or ‘taste’ something in our imagination. It is easy to imagine that someone is in great pain, but what would imagery of a pain be like? Imagery is confined to the copyable and the picturable, but imagination is not. Because one can paint or draw how one imagined something looked or sounded like, it does not follow that one can paint how one imagined a problem could be solved. Similarly, my ability to imagine how a clock looked or sounded or would look or sound, but not my ability to imagine how a problem was or would be solved, might manifest itself in imagery as it might in drawings or recordings. Even the element of likeness or copying etymologically expressed in ‘image’ has its limitations in ‘mental’, as contrasted with sensation or physical, images. For what makes my image of my uncle an image of him is not

so much its pictorial likeness to him but that it is how I picture him, even if this is other than he is.

[...]

The possibility, and the common occurrence, of instances of imagining in various forms which do not or could not contain any imagery shows that imagination does not imply imagery. It is even clearer, as would now be generally admitted in contrast to the claims of Descartes and Hume, that the presence of imagery does not imply imagination. Imagery may occur in dreams, by night or by day, in memory and recollection, in expectation, wishing, and in various forms of thought. Various occurrences, such as the uttering or hearing of words, may arouse imagery in us without making us imagine anything. Even more vivid imagery, though perhaps imagery of a different kind, is an ingredient of after-images, hallucinations and, perhaps, some illusions. Imagery is also arguably a component of seeing one thing as another, as when one sees a particular figure as, for example, either a set of steps or an overhanging cornice or sees the duck-rabbit as a duck.²

A more relevant and more debatable problem is whether the presence of imagery in imagination, when it is present, in any way contributes to making it an instance of imagination. In other words, does any imagery present play an essential role in the imagination? The short answer is that imagery has characteristics which imagination has not and lacks characteristics which imagination has.

Though one can produce imagery to order, as when one indulges in day-dreams, or recalls what one has perceived in the past, in a way that one cannot produce sights or sounds to order, imagery often has an objectivity and independence of the imager. One can contemplate, inspect and scrutinize one's imagery. Like a picture or drawing, an image, especially an eidetic or an after-image, often lies passive before one. One's imagery often presents one with unexpected features. It can come and go independently of one. Having imagery, but not imagining, is an experience. Imagination, on the other hand, is very much under one's voluntary control, even though often one can't help imagining that, for instance, one is being persecuted or that one has heard a noise. What one imagines is what one conjectures, not what is present to one. One can't be surprised by the features of what one imagines, since one put them there. One reads off from one's imagery, but puts in what one imagines. One's inability to imagine when, where or why something is or to imagine X as

a Y is not an ability to produce imagery, but to think of a possibility. To explain someone's inability to produce imagery by citing the poverty of his imagination is not to explain something by itself. Imagination is active and, as many philosophers ancient and modern have emphasized,³ very much subject to our will.

Imagery lacks the essential features of imagination. It is particular and determinate, whereas imagination can be general and indeterminate.⁴ One is imagining exactly the same thing when one imagines that, for example, a sailor is scrambling ashore on a desert island, however varied one's imagery may be. We can imagine being chased by a striped tiger without imagining how many stripes it has, but the striped tiger of our imagery must have a definite number of stripes.⁵ On the other hand, though one can easily imagine that one is being chased by ninety-nine tigers and one's friend kills thirty-three of them, it is difficult to believe that any imagery one has would distinguish this case from that in which one imagined that one was chased by ninety-seven tigers of whom thirty-one were shot by one's friend.⁶

Even more importantly, imagery does not express anything, whereas imagination does. Merely to ask someone to have or produce imagery of a sailor scrambling ashore is no more to ask him to imagine anything than if one were to ask him to draw a picture of such a scene. A sign of a stag crossing a road does not say that the stag is crossing. To have an image of red grass is not necessarily to imagine grass being red or that grass is red. The imagery of a sailor scrambling ashore could be exactly the same as that of his twin brother crawling backwards into the sea, yet to imagine one of these is quite different from imagining the other. The imagery of such different things as memory, expectation, day-dreaming and imagining could be identical. Our imagery, like a sound film, of someone saying something does not differ from that of someone criticizing, explaining, commending, repeating, or replying to something, but there is a world of difference between imagining each of these. The difference between having imagery and imagining explains why we don't, despite what philosophers say, usually talk simply of 'imagining X', but of 'imagining that X is Y', 'imagining what or when or where X is', 'imagining X Ving', 'imagining X as Y', 'imagining X in certain circumstances'.⁷ To have an image of X is not necessarily to imagine anything.

Notes

¹ E.g. Ryle 1949, and Vendler 1984; contrast Hume *Treatise*, and Matthews 1971, 160–2.

² Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* p. 213; Ishiguro 1967; Dilman 1968.

³ Aristotle, *De Anima* 427b; Locke, *Essay* II.xxx; Sartre 1940; Wittgenstein, *Zettel* 621, 627; Berkeley, *Principles* 28, 29, 36; *Three Dialogues* 215, 235.

⁴ Cp. Berkeley, *Principles* s.10; Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A141 = B180; Aristotle, *De Memoria* 450a 1–5; contrast Sartre 1940, ch. 1.5.

⁵ This is currently highly debatable. Dennett 1969 says yes; contrast, e.g., Bennett 1971 s.7, Mackie 1976, 123, Fodor 1975, 177–95, Block 1983, who argues (a) a picture need not be photographic – e.g. a line of print could be shown as a squiggle – and (b) there need be no determinate answer to the number of stripes in a (mental or physical) picture of a tiger. He suggests that mental pictures may be more like drawn than looked-at pictures. The debate at least suggests that mental images are in many ways unlike physical images such as pictures.

⁶ Descartes, *Meditation* VI, because he assimilates imagining and imagery thinks that this indistinguishability would hold for both.

⁷ Wittgenstein, *Zettel* s.69, says that to imagine X in situation Y is to imagine that X is in situation Y; cp. Ryle 1949, 256.

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