

Imagining and supposing

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Though one can be as mistaken in imagining that *p* as one can in supposing that *p*, supposing, unlike imagining, is something one can also be justified or unjustified in. Wrongly imagining is not quite like wrongly supposing, since though both are wrong because things are other than one imagined or supposed them to be, in supposing that *p*, though not in imagining that *p*, one has committed oneself to *p*, whether or not one thinks that *p*. Supposing that *p*, unlike imagining that *p*, is something it may be fair or unfair, reasonable or unreasonable, to do, something one may have good, bad or no reason for doing. To say that one cannot suppose that *p*, for example that the audience would be interested in the topic, is to suggest a limit on what one is justified in doing, whereas to say that one cannot imagine that *p* is to suggest a restriction on what one is capable of doing.

[...]

We have seen that though one can admit, either that one cannot imagine or that one cannot suppose that, for example, many people will be interested in this topic, the reason for the ‘cannot’ is of a different kind in the two cases, the former referring to one’s inability to conjure up such a possibility, the latter to one’s lack of justification for committing oneself to such a hypothesis. For the same reason, though one can either imagine or suppose, for example, that *A* killed *B* in Rome during the summer in order to rob him of his wallet, one can be sensibly asked ‘Can you imagine when or where or why *A* killed *B*’, but not ‘Can you suppose ...’. The reason is that one is being asked whether one can come up with or hit upon a possibly correct or plausible answer to the question. On the other hand, one can be asked ‘When or where or why, do you suppose, *A* killed *B*?’ but rather dubiously ‘When or where or why, do you imagine, *A* killed *B*?’ because one is being asked what is the answer, correct or not, which one does put forward either as a possibility or as a hypothesis. To suppose is here to hypothesize, that is, put forward as a hypothesis, not to

think of a hypothesis; whereas to imagine is to think of a possibility. Imagining an answer may call for a feat or a flight of imagination, but there are no feats or flights of supposition. One can say either ‘Imagine that a bomb has gone off in a crowded shop’ or ‘Suppose that ...’, but while one can add ‘Can you imagine what would happen?’, one cannot add ‘Can you suppose what would happen?’ Equally, there may be limits or bounds to one’s imagination, but not to one’s supposition. We say ‘I can’t imagine anything more dangerous (more beautiful, significant, evil)’, but not ‘I can’t suppose ...’.

Imagining, but not supposing, is something one can try to do and either succeed or fail in doing. This is why, though one can ask someone either to imagine or suppose, for example, that he has been marooned on a desert island, one cannot try to suppose, as one can try to imagine, this, nor complain or confess that one cannot suppose it, as one can complain or confess that one cannot imagine it. To imagine that *p*, but not to suppose that *p*, requires the exercise of a power, which some people may possess in greater degree than others. One can be good or bad at imagining, but not at supposing.

Imagining that *p* can be an activity in which one can spend a few minutes; but though one may for those minutes have also been supposing that *p*, this is not an activity in which one was then engaged. One can exercise or use one’s imagination, but not one’s supposition, about exile on a desert island. One can set one’s imagination, but not one’s supposition, to work.

[...]

The real difference is that to say ‘Suppose that *p*’ invites or introduces a statement of the consequences or implications of *p*, whereas to say ‘Imagine that *p*’ sets the stage for various kinds of embroidery. Thus, on the one hand, we commonly say ‘Suppose (supposing) that *p*, what then?’ but not ‘Imagine (much less ‘imagining’) that *p*, what then?’. On the other hand, we commonly say ‘I want you all to sit back and imagine for the next few minutes that you are marooned on a desert island’, but not, ‘I want you all to sit back and suppose ...’. We are inviting our audience to give free rein to their imagination but not to their supposition.