

Is imagery a kind of imagination?

Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft

Source: Currie, G. and Ravenscroft, I. (2002) *Recreative Minds: Imagination in Philosophy and Psychology*, ch.2, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp.24–6.

We have said that mental imagery is a kind of recreative imagination. In this respect we agree with the tradition of Aristotle, Hume, and Kant, which placed so much emphasis on imagery. It is also traditional to think of mental images – visual ones, at least – as involving mental pictures. Largely because of the work of Wittgenstein, Ryle, and Sartre, the idea that having a mental image of a mountain is really a matter of seeing a mental picture of a mountain is now universally rejected. But attacks on the traditional view of mental imagery have gone beyond scepticism about mental pictures; some authors claim that imagery is not a kind of imagination at all.¹ We consider four arguments in favour of this conclusion, and reject them all.

The first argument is this:

Imagery occurs in dreams, memory, expectation, wishing, illusion and hallucination: all cases where the subject has minimal or no control over the imagery. But imagination is under voluntary control. (A. White 1990: 91)

We all agree that imagery is sometimes under voluntary control. We should all agree that imagination is sometimes not under voluntary control; you can find yourself imagining things you very much don't want to imagine, and be surprised to find that you are imagining something you were previously unaware of imagining (Budd 1989, ch. 5). Perhaps the supposed difference between imagination and imagery is that all cases of imagination could have been under voluntary control, while some cases of imagery, namely the cases of it that occur in dreams, illusions, etc., could not have been under voluntary control. There is a sense in which imagery, as it occurs in dreams and illusions, is not under voluntary control. It does not follow that an image occurring in a dream or an illusion could not have occurred in some other context where it

was under voluntary control. And the same can be said about imagination. It is true that there are episodes of imagining that are not under voluntary control. It does not follow that an involuntary episode of imagining could not have occurred in some other context where it would have been voluntary.

A slightly different argument is this.

While my imagining may, on any particular occasion, be something beyond my control, imagining is always something that I do; imagining something involuntarily is not like having a pain. But having a mental image is not – at least not always – something that I do. (A. White 1990: 91)

Let us agree that imaginings are doings. As the objector notes, they are not always doings that one is able to control, as when one cannot help imagining something unpleasant. We see no reason to think that it is different with imagery. There is a sense in which imagery ‘can come and go independently of one’ (A. White 1990: 91),² but this is just the sense in which unwelcome imaginings can come and go independently of one. The contrast between imagining something and having a pain seems also to hold between having an image and having a pain. We have been given no reason for thinking that imagery is not imagining.³

It may be replied that images have features which indicate that their coming and going is less dependent on the self than is the coming and going of imaginings. For example,

imagery has an objectivity and independence; we can scrutinize our images, which often have unexpected features. But ‘One can’t be surprised by the features of what one imagines, since one put them there’ (A. White 1990: 91).⁴

We can be surprised by features of what we imagine. I can imagine a scheme for murdering someone and then be surprised to discover a flaw in it, and a playwright can be surprised by the richness of her own imaginative construction. I can be surprised when it is pointed out that I was imagining Sherlock Holmes to have a full set of teeth, when I was not conscious of doing so and certainly was not forming an image of them. There may well be potentially surprising features of images that are not potentially surprising features of belief- or desire-like imaginings. That is to be expected on the assumption that these are imaginings of different kinds. Once again there is no reason here for thinking that imagery is not a kind of imagining.

Finally,

imagery is particular and determinate, while imagining can be general and indeterminate. (A. White 1990: 92)

Images are usually indeterminate in some way, as my image of a tiger ascribes to it an indeterminate number of stripes (Lyons 1984). What of particularity versus generality? The claim that imagery is a kind of imagining is, more specifically, the claim that imagery has perception as its counterpart; it is a kind of imagining which apes certain identifying features of perceptual experience. Perceptual experience is always of the particular rather than the general. So we would expect that perceptual imagining would always be particular also. The right conclusion here seems to be that there are kinds of imaginings that are always particular, and kinds of imaginings that are not. Visualising is one of the former kinds.

Notes

¹ A. White (1990) is an energetic and economical assault on imagery as imagining as well as on the picture theory of imagery. An engaging source for the history is Warnock (1976).

² The argument we are considering here seems to be one that White endorses, though this is not entirely clear from his exposition.

³ See also the beginning of Ch. 8.

⁴ See also Sartre (1940: 7-8).

References

- Budd, M. (1989), *Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Psychology* (London: Routledge).
- Lyons, W. (1984), 'The Tiger and his Stripes', *Analysis*, 44: 93–5.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1940), *The Psychology of the Imagination* (London: Routledge).
- Warnock, M. (1976), *Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- White, A. (1990), *The Language of Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell).