



The imagination: Cognitive, pre-cognitive, and meta-cognitive aspects

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to situate imagination within consciousness complete with its own pre-cognitive, cognitive, and meta-cognitive domains. In the first sections we briefly review traditional philosophical and psychological conceptions of the imagination. The majority have viewed perception and imagination as separate faculties, performing distinct functions. A return to a phenomenological account of the imagination suggests that divisions between perception and imagination are transcended by precognitive factors of sense of reality and non-reality where perception and imagination play an indivisible role. In fact, both imagination and perception define sense of reality jointly according to what is possible and not possible. Absorption in a possible world depends on the strengths of alternative possibilities, and the relationship between core and marginal consciousness. The model may offer a parsimonious account of different states and levels of imaginal consciousness, and of how “believed-in imaginings” develop and become under some circumstances “lived-in experiences.”

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Keywords: Consciousness; Cognition; Imagination; Possibility; Absorption; Meta-cognition

You can't depend on your eyes if your imagination is out of focus
Mark Twain

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1. Theories of the imagination and imagery

1.1. Historical overview

Philosophers can generally be divided into those who have attributed imagination a subordinate role such as Sartre, Plato, or Hobbes and those for whom it took on a super-ordinate, almost mystical role as with Kant, Coleridge, and Schelling (Brann, 1991). Aristotle can be placed in between these opposite positions as he primarily viewed imagination as a distinct faculty operating in a wide variety of cognitive processes. In particular, for Aristotle imagination referred to the process by which an image is presented to us, and may have been part of the same faculty associated with perception, the only difference being whether the image occurs in the presence or absence of sensory input. This link between sensory perception, imagery, and imagination has persisted. Table 1 gives a summary of the history of ideas up to 1900 when imagination effectively dropped off the philosophical map.

The current status of the philosophy of the imagination, or lack thereof, is traced back by Thomas (1997, 1999) to the linguistic turn in philosophy with its emphasis on the association between thought and language. In psychological theorizing, the behaviorist turn in psychology, denied the experience of mental images all together. Freud (1900) compounded the death of imagination by relegating it as a surrogate satisfaction of basic instincts along with fantasizing and hallucinations. Subsequently, in recent times, however, the phenomenological–existential tradition has addressed imagination as a separate and parallel faculty to perception. In Sartre's (1940) terms, imagination concerns itself with 'absence,' perception with "presence." Sartre and in particular Merleau-Ponty

Table 1
Conceptions of the imagination

Imagination as a faculty	Imagination as memory and or a picture in the mind	Imagination as originality, creativity, and transcendence	Imageless imagination
<i>Aristotle</i> : The process by which an image is presented to us, and present in all cognition	<i>Hobbes</i> : Imagination as a decaying sense	<i>Bacon</i> : Imagination influenced from above serving creativity, religion, and poetry	<i>Ryle</i> : Imagination as a form of pretending
<i>Sartre</i> : Imagination situates the unseen in time and place	<i>Aquinas</i> : Storehouse of forms received through senses	<i>Kant</i> : Imagination as the power to gain (transcendental) knowledge	<i>White</i> : Imagination is to think of something as possibly being so
<i>Kant</i> : Representation of an object without its presence	<i>Furlong</i> : Mental imagery is quasi-perceptual experience	<i>Fichte</i> : Imagination transcends the 'I' to produce non 'I'	<i>Wittgenstein</i> : Imagination is in the service of intention and is an echo of a thought in sight
<i>Descartes</i> : Imagination connects mind and body <i>Shelley</i> : Seeing similarity in difference	<i>Gibson</i> : Imagery as perceptual anticipation <i>Hume</i> : Imagination as the lost vivacity of sense impressions		

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