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Revisiting Modal Imagination

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Abstract

Conceivability arguments are quite common in philosophy. Given the continued prevalence of such arguments, the philosopher would do well to consider whether the inference from conceivability to possibility is in fact justified. In this paper, I reject Alex Byrne's skeptical arguments against David Chalmers's account of *modal imagination*. I suggest that, in regard to mental imagery, Byrne's account of *sensuous imagination* is committed to the dubious claim that mental images are sufficient to individuate imaginings, whereas Chalmers's account is not. On the contrary, in order to be successful, some imaginings must involve or co-occur with further, non-imagistic features or faculties that are necessary for their individuation. I briefly consider some such possible features and conclude that modal imagination as conceived of by Chalmers does not reduce to sensuous imagination. Consequently, the reliability of modal imagination as a guide to possibility is not necessarily undermined by Byrne's broader critique of sensuous imagination.

I. Introduction

Conceivability arguments are quite common in philosophy. Broadly speaking, such arguments include a claim that some state of affairs is conceivable, from which it supposedly follows that the same state of affairs is (at least) possible. Familiar representatives of this kind include Cartesian arguments for mind-body dualism, contemporary zombie arguments in favor of dualism, and some formulations of the ontological argument for the existence of God. Given the continued prevalence of such arguments, the philosopher would do well to consider whether the inference from conceivability to possibility is in fact justified. Many capable philosophers have defended the basic validity of this move, offering thorough and careful accounts of what conceivability is and of what kind of justification it affords. Stephen Yablo, for example, has argued that imagining¹ that *p* is a reliable defeasible indicator that

¹ Or "conceiving." Henceforth, I favor the term *imagination* and its cognates, though I will later distinguish between Amy Kind's image-based account of imagination and what David Chalmers calls *modal imagination*, which, on his account, does not require imagery

possibly p , where the relevant kind of *imagining* is “objectual” (Yablo 1993: 27) and involves imagining “a world”—or else some fully determinable situation—that seems “to verify p ” (Yablo 1993: 30). On the other hand, some philosophers have demurred, claiming that the leap from conceivability to possibility is *not* justified. Alex Byrne has recently raised several objections to Yablo’s account,² all of which culminate in the overall claim that “sensuous imagination” (2007: 134)—that is, *objectual* imagination in Yablo’s sense—is not a reliable guide to possibility because people of normal cognitive capacities can imagine impossibilities.

In this paper, I reject Byrne’s further claim that sensuous imagination and David Chalmers’s “modal imagination” (Chalmers 2002: 151) are “one and the same” (Byrne 2007: 138). To do this, I first sketch accounts of both sensuous imagination and modal imagination (§II) and explain Byrne’s alleged reduction of the latter to the former (§III). I suggest that, in regard to mental imagery, Byrne’s account of sensuous imagination is committed to what Amy Kind calls the “individuating claim” (2001: 99), but I argue (in agreement with Kind) that the individuating claim is false: mental images are not sufficient to individuate imaginings (§IV). In order to be successful, some imaginings must, therefore, involve or co-occur with further, non-imagistic features or faculties that are necessary for their individuation. I briefly consider some such possible features in §V. I conclude (contra Byrne) that modal imagination as conceived of by Chalmers does not reduce to sensuous imagination because a successful account of modal imagination can easily sidestep the individuating claim while accommodating non-imagistic features that serve to individuate imaginings. Therefore, the reliability of modal imagination as a guide to possibility is not necessarily undermined by Byrne’s broader critique of sensuous imagination.

II. Sensuous Imagination and Modal Imagination

Byrne’s first suggestion is that in “ordinary talk,” imagining p involves “more than merely entertaining p ” (2007: 130). In order truly to *imagine* “that there are tailless kangaroos, say . . . Something extra is needed: a mental image of a tailless kangaroo is *sufficient*—and perhaps it is also necessary” (Byrne 2007: 130; emphasis added). Here I take Byrne to be saying that, in accordance with everyday usage, to imagine that p , it is enough for a person to have a particular mental image *as of* p . A consequence of this view is that the content p of a mental image is uniquely similar to the content p of a corresponding sensory experience. “Visualizing,” for instance, “is a special case of sensuously imagining” that “involves ‘visual representations’—mental representations that are proprietary to the sense of sight. . . . When one visualizes a tiger, one is in a state with a distinctively visual content, a pared-down version of the content of the state of seeing a tiger” (2007: 135). Extrapolating to purported cases of nonactual

² In Byrne, A. 2007. *Imagination and Possibility. Philosophical Perspectives 21: Philosophy of Mind.*

possibility—such as the existence of a purple polar bear—this account entails that if I can successfully visualize a purple polar bear, then, in doing so, I succeed in sensuously imagining a purple polar bear—and according to Hart, this would mean that a purple polar bear *could have* existed.³ Similarly, if I can successfully visualize myself winning a gold medal in the 100-meter dash, then, in doing so, I succeed in sensuously imagining myself winning a gold medal in the 100-meter dash, by which I gain *prima facie* justification for my belief that such a situation is possible, broadly speaking. In both of these cases, my imagination is *directed* at something—a fictional creature on the one hand, a counterfactual situation on the other. In other words, my imaginings have an “objectual character” (Byrne 2007: 135). Per Byrne’s account of sensuous imagining, this objectual character ensures that a particular set of mental images (where a set might contain a single image) is sufficient to represent the particular content of any imagining.

David Chalmers thinks that his account of modal imagination has a similarly “mediated objectual character” (Chalmers 2002: 151), but he denies that a particular set of mental images is sufficient to represent the particular propositional content of each and every imagining. On Chalmers’s view, to modally imagine a situation is “to imagine (in some sense) a specific configuration of objects and properties” (2002: 150). More precisely, “One modally imagines that P if one modally imagines a world that verifies P, or a situation that verifies P” (Chalmers 2002: 151). Chalmers is confident that modal imagination “is used . . . as a label for a certain sort of familiar mental act” (2002: 151). However, Chalmers also thinks that many imaginable situations are not potential objects of a perceptual experience and thus cannot be sufficiently represented by mental imagery. He contends that a situation can fail to be the potential object of a perceptual experience in three ways: (1) the situation can lie “beyond the scale of perception” (Chalmers 2002: 151), as in the case of an electron orbiting the nucleus of an atom; (2) the situation can be “unperceivable in principle,” as in the case of “an invisible being that leaves no trace on perception” (Chalmers 2002: 151); and (3) the situation can be “perceptually indistinguishable” (Chalmers 2002: 151) from another situation, as in the case of a configuration of chess pieces that amounts to a win for one player and a loss for the other.

In cases like these—which Chalmers assumes are imaginable—mental imagery is neither necessary nor sufficient to represent the particular content of each imagining; instead, “One has a *positive intuition* of a certain configuration within a world, and takes that configuration to satisfy a certain description” (Chalmers 2002: 151; emphasis added). In modally imagining Garry Kasparov’s defeating Anatoly Karpov, I might imagine a particular configuration of pieces on a chessboard. In modally imagining that I am President of the United States, I might imagine certain relevant objects or states of

³ “There are no purple polar bears, but each of us is convinced that there could have been, and what convinces us is that we can visualize a polar bear dyed purple” (Hart 1988: 30).

affairs, such as the tally of winning votes, my various campaign promises, the members of my cabinet, and possible decorations for the White House. Chalmers's preferred example is the victory of Germany in the Second World War: "one might imagine a world in which certain German armies win certain battles and go on to overwhelm Allied forces within Europe" (2002: 151). Chalmers takes this imagined (counterfactual) scenario to be a "part" of a possible world "in which Germany won the Second World War" (Chalmers 2002: 151)—on which account, Chalmers thinks we are justified in believing that Germany could have been victorious. Accordingly, if Chalmers is correct, modal imagination is broader than Byrne's conception of sensuous imagination; both types of imagination have an objectual character, but whereas sensuous imagination is "grounded in imagery" (Chalmers 2002: 151), modal imagination is not. For Chalmers, the upshot is that modal imagination need not involve imagery essentially—nor do mental images suffice for the imagination of certain situations that are simply not amenable to imagery.

III. The Alleged Reduction

In spite of Chalmers's claims to the contrary, Byrne insists that modal imagination as such reduces to sensuous imagination—they are "one and the same" (Byrne 2007: 138). Byrne denies that situations such as "Germany's winning the Second World War" (Byrne 2007: 138) are beyond the scope of perception; he thus denies that such situations cannot be represented by way of mental imagery. He admits that "One can't see Germany . . . in the way one can see [a] red ball or [a] blue cube" and that "the property of winning the Second World War is not a perceptible property . . . in the way redness or sphericity are perceptible properties" (2007:138). However, he argues that a situation like Germany's winning the Second World War can still be perceived "in a genuine 'perceptual' sense" (2007: 138). For instance, if Germany *had* won the Second World War, a person could have seen Hitler waving from the balcony of Buckingham Palace, presiding over a file of German soldiers. And if a person could have perceived this counterfactual situation, then he or she can, in principle, imagine it by way of mental imagery. Byrne concludes from this: "one sees that Germany has won the Second World War" (2007: 138). To my mind, this is a very hasty move on Byrne's part. Why should we think that visualizing Hitler waving from the balcony of Buckingham Palace while German soldiers file past is sufficient for modally imagining that Germany has won the Second World War? Tellingly, Byrne neglects to consider each of Chalmers's criteria for a proposition's failing to be the potential object of a perceptual experience. He seems to focus on the first one, by which some situations can fail to be potential objects of perceptual experiences on account of their scope. They are not easily taken in "at a glance" like the red ball stacked on the blue cube. Byrne's response to this criterion seems to be that we can perceptually experience various constituent *parts* of certain situations in sequence—adding up the parts, we get the whole. Therefore, we can imagine the whole through perception-like representations of its parts. Nevertheless, Byrne fails to address Chalmers's third

criterion—that one situation can be “perceptually indistinguishable” (Chalmers 2002: 151) from another—which is problematic for the alleged reduction that Byrne touts, as I will now attempt to show.

IV. Mental Images Do Not Individuate Imaginings

Chalmers notes that two (or more) situations might be “perceptually indistinguishable.” I agree and claim that at least some imaginable propositions cannot be individuated in imagination by a particular set of mental images. This claim is essentially a denial of what Amy Kind calls the *individuating claim*: “that images serve to individuate imaginings” (2001: 99). According to the individuating claim, then, each imagining has a *particular* and *unique* image (or set of images) that distinguishes it from other imaginings. Kind herself ultimately rejects the individuating claim after considering a variety of alleged counterexamples to her “imagery-based account of imagination” (Kind 2001: 85). Kind suggests that the most feasible counterexamples are cases in which I might be perfectly capable of imagining x —where x is some determinable object—but I supposedly cannot imagine of x that q , where q is some property or state of affairs that cannot be visualized. Chalmers’s imagining that Germany won the Second World War appears to be an ideal representative of this kind. In imagining this situation, I can produce mental images of relevant objects—say, Hitler at Buckingham Palace or German soldiers in Trafalgar Square—but I seemingly cannot *visualize* the *victoriousness* of the Third Reich. This seeming inability might be taken as an indication that imagination need not involve imagery essentially.

Kind herself tries to get around this problem by suggesting that only the “*essentialist claim*”—that “mental images play an essential role in the imagination” (Kind 2001: 95)—is needed for a successful image-based account of imagination. To illustrate, she suggests that in imagining Bill Clinton doing budget calculations in his head, imagery plays an essential role, but the particular image(s) involved need not be unique to the particular imagining. It could be that my imagining Germany winning the Second World War features the exact same mental images as my imagining the Fuhrer visiting the Queen for tea or German soldiers on parade as part of a diplomatic peacetime demonstration or Germany’s having traded capitals with England—namely, Hitler on the balcony of Buckingham Palace, German soldiers marching along the Strand, or swastikas in Parliament. But if Byrne’s account is correct, this liberality of imagery engenders a dilemma for sensuous imagination. On the one hand, if sensuous imagination relies on the individuating claim—and I suggest that it does—then it runs afoul of counterexamples in which at least two imaginings share the same image(s). On the other hand, sensuous imagination might accept only the essentialist claim. But the essentialist claim alone does not explain how particular imaginings can be individuated and thus fails to explain how an imagining that cannot be individuated—that is, an imagining that cannot be specifically identified as representing a particular propositional content—could be a successful imagining that p . For my part, I will

assume that if I cannot distinguish between my imagining that p and my imagining that q , then I have failed to imagine that p or that q .

Now consider the following argument:

- (1) All imaginable propositions can be individuated in imagination by a particular set of mental images or by some non-imagistic feature or mental faculty.
- (2) Some imaginable propositions cannot be individuated in imagination by a particular set of mental images.
- (3) Therefore, some imaginable propositions can be individuated in imagination only by some non-imagistic feature or mental faculty.

According to my assumption above, a successful imagining that p must not be indistinguishable from another imagining that q . As far as the argument is concerned, perhaps imagining that p can be individuated by a particular set of mental images or by some non-imagistic factor. According to Byrne, sensuous imagining necessarily involves the former, which conflicts with (2) in the above argument. Chalmers, on the other hand, accepts (2). Consequently, if (2) is true, as I have endeavored to show and as Chalmers suspects, then Byrne has failed to show that sensuous imagination and modal imagination “are one and the same” (Byrne 2007: 138) because his account of sensuous imagination assumes the falsehood of (2).

V. Individuation in Imagination

What Byrne fails to appreciate is that, on Chalmers’s view, modal imagination can easily accommodate Kind’s claim that any “imageless” account of imagination will ultimately fail while at the same time maintaining that some non-imagistic features or mental faculties serve to individuate modal imaginings. But the question remains: what might these features or faculties look like? Some possibilities include *comprehending* semantic content—knowing what the relevant signifiers mean—and *understanding* logical relations. A good example of both is Descartes’s chiliagon: in order to modally imagine a chiliagon, I might first comprehend what the word *chiliagon* refers to—namely, a polygon with 1,000 sides—at which point I might attempt to understand the logical relations involved in a polygon’s having 1,000 sides—e.g., that each internal angle measures 179.64° . And while Descartes claims that he “cannot imagine the thousand sides of a chiliagon as [he does] the three sides of a triangle, nor, so to speak, view them as present” (Descartes 2004: 141), Kind might counter that imagining a similar shape—a circle, for instance—is an essential part of the overall process. Chalmers’s account is not threatened by this claim; he can suggest that, in the case of the chiliagon, visualizing something is necessary but not sufficient and that other faculties, such as comprehension and understanding, are necessary to individuate imaginings. Alternately, in keeping with Kind, he could argue that mental images are

not necessary for modal imagination and concede that modal imagination is not imagination *per se* as long as it still provides him with the desired results.

Another possible feature of modal imagination is rational (as opposed to physical) intuition. George Bealer characterizes intuition as “a *sui generis* propositional attitude” (Bealer 2002: 74), but as I suggest, it’s quite possible that modal imagination involves multiple propositional attitudes, including both imagination in Kind’s sense—where imagery plays an essential role—and intuition in Bealer’s sense—which requires no imagery whatsoever. In one rendering by Joel Pust, who shares Bealer’s conception of intuition as a unique propositional attitude, intuition can be defined as follows: “*S* has the intuition that *p* if and only if it intellectually seems to *S* that *p*” (Pust 9). Thus, broadly put, intuition is a kind of *seeming*. Consider how this concept of intuition might apply to Chalmers’s example of “an invisible being that leaves no trace on perception” (Chalmers 2002: 151). Here, I imagine something that cannot be perceived and thus cannot be visualized. How do I successfully imagine such a being? At least partially, I intuit this being’s characteristics. It simply *seems* to me that this being could exist and that I’m imagining it. Chalmers himself suggests this in his paper:

[W]e have an intuition of (or as of) a *world* in which *S*, or at least of (or as of) a situation in which *S*, where a situation is (roughly) a configuration of objects and properties within a world. We might say that in these cases, one can *modally imagine* that *P*. (Chalmers 2002: 151).

In imagining the imperceptible being, I intuit a situation: that a being with the prescribed properties exists. This intuition at least partially serves to individuate my imagining this being from my imagining some other object.⁴

VII. Conclusion

In this paper, I hope to have shown that Chalmers’s modal imagination is distinct from Byrne’s presentation of sensuous imagination. While sensuous imagination seems committed to the individuating claim, modal imagination is not. Moreover, modal imagination can accommodate non-imagistic features that serve to individuate imaginings. Thus, Byrne’s broader critique of sensuous imagination does not necessarily apply to modal imagination. The general upshot of this conclusion is that, regardless of their other virtues or drawbacks, theories of modal knowledge like that offered by Chalmers continue to withstand prevalent skeptical challenges and are likely to feature prominently in ongoing philosophical inquiry.

⁴ To be clear, Chalmers does not claim that an intuition alone is sufficient to justify belief in whatever is intuited—at least not within modal epistemology. My point is simply that intuition might help to individuate imaginings in modal imagination.

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