

The Importance of Being Neutral: More on the Phenomenology and Metaphysics of Imagination

A Reply to Anne-Sophie Brügger

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In this reply to Anne-Sophie Brügger's comments to our target paper, we focus on three main issues. First, we explain that although our account of imaginative re-creation is in many respects metaphysically neutral, it allows for a taxonomy of imaginings that goes beyond mere phenomenological observations and pre-theoretical intuitions. Second, we defend our interpretation of the distinction between objective and subjective imagination and compare it with Brügger's own suggestions involving the notion of an empty point of view. Third, we insist that the notion of experiential perspective should be construed broadly and include cognitive or belief-like imagination.

Keywords

Cognitive imagination | Empty point of view | Objective imagination | Phenomenology | Re-creation | Subjective imagination

We would like to thank Anne-Sophie Brügger for her very interesting comments on our paper. In what follows, we try to respond to what we see as the central points raised in her discussion.

1 On the notion of re-creation

In our target paper, we use a notion of re-creation in order to set up a sophisticated taxonomy of experiential imagination. We also profess a certain neutrality with respect to this notion. Anne-Sophie

Brügger argues that our neutrality is only apparent, and that we in fact oscillate between two substantial notions of re-creation, which have quite different implications for the ontology of imaginings.

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Our professed neutrality concerns only the subpersonal underpinnings of imagination. We do not want to commit ourselves to the view that imaginings and their non-imaginative counterparts share neural or functional resources. We do not explicitly vindicate any neutrality with respect to the notion of re-creation at the personal level. However, we intend to be neutral at that level too, in the following respect. In our account, the phrase “X re-creates Y” should be used synonymously with the phrase “X is Y-like”, to mean that an imagining of type X has a phenomenal character analogous to the phenomenal character of a non-imaginative state of type Y. For instance, visual imagination is visual-like in the sense that its phenomenal character is more similar to visual perception than, say, auditory perception or belief. In general, what matters for our purposes is that there is a systematic correspondence between the imaginative and the non-imaginative realms; the metaphysical nature of this correspondence is left open.

Now, Brügger raises an interesting question, namely whether (notwithstanding our intentions) our account shows an oscillation between two different metaphysical conceptions of re-creation. On the first (mode-based) conception, there are different imaginative *modes* corresponding to kinds of experience in the non-imaginative realm. On the second (content-based) conception, which Brügger attributes to Mike Martin, all imaginings belong to a single imaginative mode but represent different kinds of experience as part of their *contents*.

Brügger suggests (following Martin’s 2002 interpretation) that Peacocke’s General Hypothesis (1985) already carries a commitment to the content-based conception. We disagree. The phrase “imagining being in some conscious state” (Peacocke 1985, p. 21) does not obviously entail that the conscious state is represented in the content of the imagining. It is compatible with taking the expression “being in some conscious state” to be a modifier of “imagining”, just as the internal accusative “a song” is a modifier of “singing” in “singing a song”. Perhaps we are wrong about Peacocke’s intentions, but we insist that our use of the General Hypo-

thesis can be metaphysically neutral in this sense.

What about the mode-based conception of re-creation? We concede that some of our formulations, especially when we introduce the distinction between objective and subjective imagination, evoke such a conception. As it happens, we have both rejected the content-based conception in other works (Dokic 2008; Arcangeli 2011a, 2011b). However, many aspects of our taxonomy can be re-formulated in terms more amenable to the latter conception. For instance, the distinction between objective and subjective imagination might be construed as a distinction between imaginings that represent external experiences and imaginings that represent internal experiences as part of their contents. Whether all aspects of our taxonomy can be re-formulated in this way is indeed something that should be explored further.

Brügger eventually recommends getting rid of the notion of re-creation, and going for a purely phenomenological taxonomy based on pre-theoretical intuitions. It is worth contrasting our methodology with hers. In many respects, our taxonomy rests on well-identified phenomenological types. For instance, all visual imaginings are clearly unified under a single phenomenological type. The latter can then easily be related to a kind of experience in the non-imaginative realm, namely visual experiences. In other cases, identifying non-imaginative counterparts is more difficult because the relevant imaginings do not form a well-identified phenomenological type. We agree with Brügger that there may not be a phenomenology of objective (as opposed to subjective) imagination. Still, there is no need to introduce a metaphysically-loaded conception of re-creation (either mode-based or content-based) to ground the distinction between objective and subjective imagination. It is enough that phenomenological contrasts can be drawn between particular cases of objective imagination and particular cases of subjective imagination in various domains. This is exactly how Vendler (1984) introduces the distinction in the domain of imagining actions. At this point, our method departs from phenomenology and becomes abductive and specu-

lative. In our view, the best explanation of the relevant phenomenological contrasts is that the imaginings correspond to different kinds of experience in the non-imaginative realm, namely external and internal experiences. We need not rely exclusively on pre-theoretical intuitions. Our taxonomy is indeed grounded in particular phenomenological contrasts, but it is also informed by (controversial) theoretical notions, such as the notion of an external (as opposed to an internal) experience.

2 On the distinction between objective and subjective imagination

Brüggen finds our distinction between objective and subjective imagination “very helpful” ([this collection](#), p. 9), but she is worried about the way we flesh out the distinction. We have already answered one of her worries, which is that our account of the distinction carries a commitment to the mode-based conception of re-creation. As we have suggested, our account is compatible with the alternative, content-based conception. Another worry of Brüggen’s is that it is unclear how our notions of objective and subjective imagination differ from Vendler’s. Brüggen grounds this worry in the fact that our account leaves room for the claim that both objective and subjective imagination always involve the self implicitly ([this collection](#), p. 5).

As far as objective imagination is concerned, our examples certainly suggest that when one objectively (e.g., visually) imagines oneself in an explicit way (e.g., as a rider or as showing a pinched face), one’s imagining can also be implicitly self-involving. This does not mean that the imaginer’s self is involved twice. Here the imaginer’s self is involved only in an explicit way (as we point out all too briefly in the beginning of section 4.1 of our target paper, our definition of implicit self-involvement excludes that the same self that is involved both implicitly and explicitly in a single imagining). The claim that objective imagination is *always* implicitly self-involving does not immediately follow from these examples, but it is admittedly consistent with our account.

Things are more complicated with respect to subjective imagination. We argue that the latter can be either implicitly or explicitly self-involving, although we also acknowledge that the latter is controversial, since it assumes that we can have an internal experience that explicitly represents the self as such. Taking for granted that some subjective imaginings can explicitly involve the self, it is hard to see how they can also be implicitly self-involving. This is so because of the very nature of the re-created internal experience. An internal experience can only be about a (physical or mental) state whose bearer is identical with the bearer of the experience itself. It is not possible to have a proprioceptive experience of another’s body, or to introspect someone else’s mental states. When a subjective imagining re-creates an internal experience that explicitly represents the self (the imaginer’s or someone else’s), the latter cannot but be the self of the re-created experience. Thus the imagining is not implicitly self-involving, according to our definition.

Moreover, even granting Brüggen’s claim that objective and subjective imagination always involve the self implicitly, we do not see how this leads us back to Vendler’s account of the distinction. For us, the key to the distinction is not the distinction between explicit and implicit self-involvement, but rather the distinction between external and internal experiences. Indeed, the latter distinction has to do with aspects of the self, since we have defined an internal experience as being normally *de se*; but, as we have seen, the *de se* nature of internal experiences can be explained independently of whether the self is explicitly or implicitly involved in the relevant imaginings.

Brüggen introduces the notion of an empty point of view as an additional tool for the theory of imagination. For instance, when a subject visually imagines the Panthéon, her imagining involves a perspective that is not occupied by herself or anyone else. In other words, it is not required that there be an observer *in the imaginary world* (the subject can visualize an unseen Panthéon). If this is the right interpretation of Brüggen’s notion of an empty point of view, we already have it in our toolbox. For we claim that

the first-person perspective from which the subject is imagining the Panthéon can remain virtual or counterfactual, in the sense that she is imagining a situation from a spatial perspective that a normally-sighted subject *would* have if she were suitably oriented in the imaginary world.

Brüggen suggests that we could use the notion of an empty point of view to “further sharpen” the distinction between objective and subjective imagination ([this collection](#), p. 6). The idea seems to be that objective imagination always involves an empty point of view, while subjective imagination never does. Let us grant that this idea is broadly correct. We still think that our account of objective and subjective imagination as re-creating external and internal experiences can provide a more fundamental explanation. One might claim that subjective imagination creates more ontological constraints on the imaginary world than objective imagination. A subjective imagining represents a state whose bearer can only be that of the re-created internal experience itself. If such a state is ontologically dependent on a bearer, one cannot imagine the former in a world in which the latter does not exist. Thus, subjective imagination imposes the existence of a self in the imaginary world, whether or not the self in question is explicitly represented. In contrast, since objective imagination re-creates an external experience, one might argue that it is free from the specific constraints of subjective imagination, and need not impose the existence of any self in the imaginary world.

Toward the end of her commentary, Brüggen also suggests that the notion of an empty point of view can help us to distinguish between imaginings and non-imaginative experiences. If we understand her correctly, her suggestion is that in contrast to imaginings, non-imaginative experiences *must* involve an occupied point of view. This is an interesting suggestion, and we do not see why we cannot take it on board. Brüggen thinks otherwise and writes: “Dokic and Arcangeli seem to think that imaginings mirror non-imaginative states with respect to the nature of the point of view involved (again probably partly due to the notion of re-creation)” ([this collection](#), p. 9). However, as de-

tailed above, our account is more neutral and does not carry such a commitment. We do not posit a specific relationship between imaginings and non-imaginative states, but for the sake of argument let us put in a good word for a less neutral view. Even if one claims that imaginings mirror (or simulate) non-imaginative states in the sense that they are dependent on the latter, thus holding an asymmetrical relationship between those kinds of mental states, one is not committed to the conclusion that imaginings mirror every aspect of non-imaginative states (e.g., the nature of the point of view). Further specifications are needed about what precisely is preserved and according to which mapping function ([Arcangeli 2011b](#)).

3 On cognitive imagination

Brüggen is hesitant about our classification of cognitive imaginings as experiential imaginings. Her main reason for being hesitant is not that the notion of cognitive phenomenology is ill-conceived. On the contrary, she is attracted by the view that beliefs have a special phenomenal character. She thinks that cognitive imaginings do not involve an experiential perspective because she construes the notion of experiential perspective quite narrowly, as a spatial egocentric perspective. In our view, Brüggen’s construal of the notion of experiential perspective is too narrow. On this construal, many non-cognitive imaginings turn out to be non-experiential as well. Some cases of sensory imaginings, involving auditory, olfactory, or gustatory imagination, do not always clearly involve a spatial egocentric perspective. Many imaginings that re-create internal experiences (excluding perhaps proprioception) do not involve such a perspective either. For our part, we do not see why the notion of experiential perspective should be restricted to the spatial egocentric case.

4 Conclusion

We have not tried to be exhaustive and answer every point raised in Brüggen’s rich commentary here. But we still hope that we have dealt with her main concerns. Despite the fact that

our minimal notion of re-creation does not introduce a substantial metaphysical relation between the imaginative and the non-imaginative realms, it should be conceived as a placeholder for such a relation. Our taxonomy can then be taken as a starting-point for, and perhaps a constraint on, a full-blooded theory of the ontology of imagination.

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