



AA308

Thought and Experience:
Themes in the Philosophy of Mind

BOOK 4

Imagination and Creativity

MICHAEL BEANEY

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The Open University
Walton Hall, Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA

First published 2005

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Edited, designed and typeset by The Open University.

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by [name and address of the printer].

ISBN 0 7492 9644 5

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207260b/aa308b4i1.1

... nothing invigorates the imagination more than a spell of sharp thinking ...

(Eva T.H. Brann, *The World of the Imagination*, 1991, 32)



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Preface

In much of western thought from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, the imagination was accorded a central role in human cognitive activity alongside that of perception and thought. Its nature and status were admittedly unclear, but in Romanticism, for example, it was attributed enormous powers, and was seen as underlying all forms of creativity. But perhaps in reaction to the mystification of the imagination found in Romanticism, imagination and creativity were relatively neglected in twentieth-century philosophy. There are notable exceptions. Mental imagery has been a fairly constant topic in philosophy of mind, as has artistic creativity in aesthetics, and both issues have been hotly debated in psychology and cognitive science. But there has been much less concern to offer philosophical clarification of our various concepts of imagination and creativity – of what it means to ‘imagine’, be ‘creative’, and so on – and the relationships between these concepts. In recent years, however, this has begun to change, and the central aims of this book are to explore some of the different conceptions of imagination that can be found in western philosophical thought and to introduce and elucidate some of the philosophical issues that arise concerning imagination and creativity.

After an introductory chapter looking at the range of different conceptions of imagination, this book divides into two parts. Part One (chapters 2 to 5) explores some of these conceptions in more detail, through the work of four giants of modern philosophy – Descartes, Hume, Kant and Wittgenstein. The central theme of Part One is the relationship between imagination, perception and thought. Part Two (chapters 6 and 7) is devoted to creativity, discussing what is meant by ‘creativity’ and considering the relationship between creativity and imagination.

There are six readings associated with chapter 1 and the two chapters of Part Two, which are collected together at the end of the book. In the case of Part One, since the passages I have selected are fairly short and often drawn from different sections of the relevant philosopher’s work, I have incorporated them into the text of the chapters themselves. There are activities throughout the book. These are intended to encourage thinking about the philosophical issues and as a guide through the selected passages and readings.

The first chapter offers initial clarification of the concept of imagination and an introduction to the philosophical issues with which this book is concerned.

Chapters 2 and 3 look at Descartes and Hume, respectively, and some of this, at least, should be familiar to anyone who has done first or second level courses in philosophy. Chapter 4, on Kant, and chapter 5, on Wittgenstein, are the most difficult chapters of the book. No account of imagination can even pretend to be adequate without some discussion of Kant, and no understanding of central themes and approaches in contemporary philosophy of mind would be adequate without some appreciation of Wittgenstein's philosophy. The topic of imagination provides a good route into the heart of Kant's and Wittgenstein's ideas. It may be advisable to allow additional time to work through chapters 4 and 5, but I hope that the benefits will outweigh the extra effort that these two chapters may require. Part Two, however, provides a chance to wind down. The debate about the nature of creativity is relatively easier to follow, even if the issues remain controversial; and the final chapter brings together the threads of discussion in earlier chapters in considering the role of the imagination in creativity.

In writing this book, I have benefited from the advice and support of colleagues in the Philosophy Department at the Open University: Alex Barber, Sean Crawford, Keith Frankish, Derek Matravers, Carolyn Price and Peter Wright. I am particularly grateful to Sean Crawford and Carolyn Price for detailed written comments on various drafts of this material, and to the Open University editors Nancy Marten and Peter Wright for suggested improvements to the penultimate draft. Gerry Bolton, Jan Cant and Michelle Wright have assisted in the production process, and Richard Hoyle and Audrey Linkman with the graphic design and illustrations. I have also received helpful comments on drafts of chapters from Tara Beaney, Ian Chowcat, Tim Crane, Berys Gaut, Jens Kulenkampff, Sharon Macdonald and Nick McAdoo. I am especially indebted to Thomas and Harriet Beaney, as well as to Sharon Macdonald and Tara Beaney, who have put up with my obsessions with imagination and creativity over the last few years, and with whom I have discussed many of the ideas and tried out many of the examples and illustrations. I have given talks on some of this material on various occasions, to the Open University Creativity Centre, to the British Society of Aesthetics, and at seminars at the Open University, the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg and the University of Lille. I would like to thank the audiences on these occasions for fruitful discussion. Above all, I would like to thank the imagined readership of this book for shaping what I have created. I hope my imagined readership does not prove to have been imaginary.

Imagination: the missing mystery of philosophy?

Imagination, a licentious and vagrant faculty, unsusceptible of limitations and impatient of restraint, has always endeavoured to baffle the logician, to perplex the confines of distinction, and burst the enclosures of regularity.

(Samuel Johnson, *Rambler*, no.125, 28 May 1751)

In much of western thought, the imagination has an ambiguous status, seemingly poised between spirit and nature, mediating between mind and body – the mental and the physical – and interceding between one soul and another. For Aristotle, the imagination – or *phantasia* – was a kind of bridge between sensation and thought, supplying the images or ‘phantasms’ without which thought could not occur. Descartes argued that the imagination was not an essential part of the mind, since it dealt with images in the brain whose existence – unlike that of the mind – could be doubted. Kant, on the other hand, held that the imagination was fundamental to the human mind, not only bringing together our sensory and intellectual faculties but also acting in creative ways, a conception that was to blossom in Romanticism and find poetic expression in the works of Coleridge and Wordsworth. More recently, the role of the imagination in empathy has been stressed: the ability to identify with our fellow human beings and with fictional characters being regarded as crucial in accessing other minds, enriching our own experience and developing our moral sense. In fact, in the history of western thought, the imagination has been seen as performing such a wide range of different functions that it is problematic whether it can be understood as a single faculty at all. In imagination we are able to think of what is absent, unreal or even absurd, and so it appears to grant us almost unlimited conceptual powers. Yet it also seems to inform our perception of what is present and real and everyday, and so permeates the most basic levels of our daily lives. In this first chapter, we will be concerned with some of the different ways in which the imagination is talked of and conceived, exploring just what the imagination might be and what philosophical issues it raises.

The chapter is divided into two main sections. In the first, we will look at the range of conceptions of imagination, address the question of whether ‘imagining’ can be defined in any useful way, and consider the implications of this for a philosophical understanding of imagination. Despite the important role that is often accorded to the imagination in our mental activities, the topic has been somewhat marginalized in the philosophical literature, particularly (and perhaps surprisingly) in contemporary philosophy of mind. This has led one writer to call imagination the ‘missing mystery’ of philosophy, and in explaining the approach and themes of the book I will say something about what this mystery is meant to be, and how one might go about ‘demystifying’ the imagination. In the second main section, we will examine the relationship that imagination has to imagery and supposition, both of which have been seen as closely connected to, and sometimes even identified with, imagination. I will end with a review of the discussion and a preview of what is to come.

The varieties of imaginative experience

What would life be like without imagination? Perhaps, in this very first question, we have found something that is impossible to imagine. Imagination infuses so much of what we do, and so deeply, that to imagine its absence is to imagine not being human. Some people, I am told, think about sex every five minutes. For them, I presume, a sudden loss of imaginative powers would be devastating. Some people (not necessarily the same ones), at certain points in their lives, think about getting married or having a child. They might imagine the sanctity of a white wedding or the horrors of having all their relatives in one place at one time, the patter of tiny feet or the exhaustion of sleepless nights. As they play, children imagine all sorts of things, and their ideas of what they want to be and do when they grow up are fundamental in their development. Most people have ambitions of one kind or another. Imagining being promoted, or seeing something you have done recognized publicly, plays an essential role in motivation. In our idle moments too, or in diverting ourselves amidst tedious tasks, we might imagine winning the lottery or our hero scoring the winning goal in a match or, more sinfully, an obnoxious colleague falling under a bus. When we meet or talk to anyone, whether we are assessing them as potential friends or enemies, lovers or colleagues, for either ourselves or others, we are imagining what they would be like in certain circumstances.

But the imagination is not just involved in thinking of ourselves or other people. When I look at a painting, or read a novel, or hear a piece of music, or taste a wine, I bring my imagination to bear in its appreciation. I imagine other things to compare it with, or simply allow my imagination free flight, making no effort to control the images that spring to mind. Or in creating something myself, I may conjure up an image or images of what I want to realize. Imagination is also involved in the most ordinary experiences. When I go for a walk, I might imagine what it is like to live in a particular house I see, or if it is dark, I might suddenly imagine that there is something following me. In thinking what to cook for dinner, I imagine what I can do with the ingredients I have. In choosing clothes, I imagine what they would go with and the occasions on which I might wear them. In perceiving anything, I might imagine it transformed in some way, coloured differently, radically restructured, or simply moved to another location. And even if I do not deliberately transform it in my mind, previous or anticipated experiences may influence how I perceive it.

Clearly, we talk of imagination across the full range of human experience. Indeed, it may be hard to find an experience in which the imagination is not somehow involved. But if this is so, then does ‘imagination’ really have a single sense or refer to a single faculty? Can any order at all be brought into the varieties of imaginative experience? What conceptions of imagination might be distinguished? And what philosophical issues arise, or are reflected, in our attempts to do so? We will explore these questions, in a preliminary way, in the first part of this chapter.

Meanings of ‘imagination’

A natural starting point is to consider the ways in which ‘imagination’ and related terms such as ‘imagine’ and ‘image’ are used in everyday contexts.

- 1 Imagine someone asking you to define ‘imagination’. What would you say?
- 2 Can you think of any cases where we would talk of ‘imagining’ but not of ‘images’?
- 3 Consider the connotations of the term ‘imaginary’. What do they suggest as to how the imagination is sometimes regarded?

ACTIVITY

- 4 What is it for someone to be ‘imaginative’? How do the connotations of ‘imaginative’ compare with those of ‘imaginary’, and what does this suggest as to our talk of imagination?
- 5 How would you explain the difference between ‘imagination’ and ‘fantasy’ (or ‘fancy’), as those terms are used today?

DISCUSSION

- 1 You may have suggested one or more of various possible definitions. Perhaps you characterized ‘imagination’ as ‘the power to form images’. Alternatively, or additionally, you might have mentioned the capacity to conceive of what is non-existent or to conjure up something new. The definition of ‘imagination’ in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (6th edn) runs as follows: ‘Imagining; mental faculty forming images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses; fancy; creative faculty of the mind.’ This covers most of what might be thought of in an initial specification, although there is no indication here of the relationship between the various meanings.
- 2 One such case occurred in posing the first question: ‘Imagine someone asking you to define “imagination”.’ In answering this question, you do not need to conjure up any image in your mind. Perhaps an image of a particular person did go through your mind, but it is not essential. It is certainly not essential in the way in which an image might seem required if you were asked to imagine a hairy monster with six legs. In imagining that I have perfect pitch, or that everyone speaks Gaelic, or that there are parallel universes, what I am doing is conceiving of a possibility. There is a difference, then, between ‘imagining’ and ‘imaging’: imagining may involve imaging, but there is a broad sense of ‘imagining’ in which conjuring up images is not a necessary condition for imagining to occur. This is well brought out in the definition of ‘imagination’ that Simon Blackburn provides in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (1994, 187): ‘Most directly, the faculty of reviving or especially creating images in the mind’s eye. But more generally, the ability to create and rehearse possible situations, to combine knowledge in unusual ways, or to invent thought experiments.’ As we shall see, however, even this more general characterization does not do justice to the full range of meanings of ‘imagination’ in the philosophical literature.
- 3 ‘Imaginary’ is contrasted with ‘real’. More specifically, what is ‘imaginary’ may be said to be ‘fanciful’ or ‘illusory’. It is with these senses in mind that

we might talk of ‘merely imagining’ something, or of something existing ‘only in the imagination’. ‘Did you really see the knife in the bedroom, or did you only imagine it?’ ‘Her happiness was just a figment of his imagination.’ What these uses suggest is a connection between imagination and fancy or delusion, a connection that we can certainly find in the literature (both philosophical and non-philosophical). When we talk of someone having an ‘active imagination’, for example, we may well be using the phrase in a derogatory sense. But while important, these uses are only one strand in our complex talk of imagination. Imagining can occur without what is imagined being ‘imaginary’. I can imagine something that really happened or that genuinely could happen, and if images are indeed involved, then these may well have been acquired from previous actual experience.

- 4 If imagining always involved imaging, then someone who is ‘imaginative’ would be someone who is good at conjuring up images. If what is imagined is always ‘imaginary’, then someone who is ‘imaginative’ would be someone who is frequently deluded. But what we normally have in mind in calling someone ‘imaginative’ is the more general sense of ‘imagination’ that Blackburn specified. Someone who is imaginative is someone who can think up new possibilities, offer fresh perspectives on what is familiar, make fruitful connections between apparently disparate ideas, elaborate original ways of seeing or doing things, project themselves into unusual situations, and so on. In short, someone who is imaginative is someone who is creative. As far as the connotations of ‘imaginative’ are concerned, they suggest a more positive view of ‘imagination’ than do the connotations of ‘imaginary’. But taken together, it might be argued, the two sets of connotations indicate the two poles between which our talk of imagination takes place.
- 5 Nowadays, ‘fantasy’ has more connotations of unreality or delusion than ‘imagination’ does, although, as suggested in answer to the third question, ‘imagination’ can also be used with these connotations. In the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (6th edn), ‘fantasy’ is defined as follows: ‘Image-inventing faculty, esp. when extravagant or visionary; mental image, day-dream; fantastic invention or composition, fantasia; whimsical speculation.’ The noun ‘fancy’ is defined in a similar way. Compare this with the definition of ‘imagination’ cited above. ‘Fancy’ is given as one of the meanings of ‘imagination’, but there is no talk in the latter case of anything ‘extravagant’, ‘whimsical’ or ‘fantastic’. (The *Concise Oxford*

Dictionary treats ‘fantasy’ and ‘phantasy’ as mere variants, but it is sometimes suggested in literary contexts that ‘phantasy’ indicates a more elevated or visionary power; see Brann 1991, 21.)

Etymologically, ‘imagination’ derives from the Latin word *imaginatio*, while ‘fantasy’ and ‘fancy’ derive from the ancient Greek term *phantasia*. In the works of Plato and Aristotle, *phantasia* meant the power of apprehending or experiencing *phantasmata* (‘phantasms’). Arguably, what *phantasma* originally meant was an ‘appearance’ – an occurrence of something appearing to be such-and-such, as when the sun looks to us as being only a foot across. But even in Aristotle’s work, it was also used to mean ‘mental image’, which is how it was subsequently understood. *Phantasia* came to be translated by *imaginatio* and *phantasma* by *imago* in Latin, preserving the etymological and conceptual connection here, although the original Greek terms were also used in their transliterated form (i.e. employing the Latin rather than Greek alphabet, as I have done here) alongside their Latin correlates. In the seventeenth century, as Latin lost its place as the official language of philosophy, the terms that replaced *phantasia* and *imaginatio* in English were ‘fantasy’ – or ‘fancy’ or ‘phantasy’ – and ‘imagination’. In this initial period of English usage, there seems to have been no established distinction between the two terms. In his *Leviathan* of 1651, for example, Hobbes claimed that what ‘the Latins call *imaginatio* ... the Greeks call ... *fancy*’ (I, ii). By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the distinction between fantasy and imagination had more or less settled down into its current sense. In his *Dissertations Moral and Critical* of 1783, James Beattie wrote: ‘According to the common use of words, Imagination and Fancy are not perfectly synonymous. They are, indeed, names for the same faculty; but the former seems to be applied to the more solemn, and the latter to the more trivial, exertions of it. A witty author is a man of lively Fancy; but a sublime poet is said to possess a vast imagination’ (quoted in Engell 1981, 172).

This brief consideration of some of the uses of ‘imagination’ and related terms illustrates the range of the meanings involved here, and hints at some of the philosophical issues that will concern us in what follows. Does it make sense to talk of a single faculty of imagination? Can ‘imagining’ be defined? What role do images play in imagination? How does imagining differ from perceiving? What contribution does the imagination make to our thought processes? To

what extent does the imagination involve distortion or illusion? What is the relationship between imagination and creativity?

Twelve conceptions of imagination

Can we say anything more systematic about the different ways in which we talk of imagination? In a paper entitled ‘Twelve conceptions of imagination’ (2003), Leslie Stevenson distinguishes the following meanings of imagination, which I list here (in italics) as he formulates them, together with my own examples to illustrate each one:

- 1 *The ability to think of something that is not presently perceived, but is, was or will be spatio-temporally real.* In this sense I might imagine how my daughter looks as I speak to her on the phone, how she used to look when she was a baby, or how she will look when I give her the present I have bought her.
- 2 *The ability to think of whatever one acknowledges as possible in the spatio-temporal world.* In this sense I might imagine how my room will look painted in a different colour.
- 3 *The liability to think of something which the subject believes to be real, but which is not real.* Stevenson talks of ‘liability’ rather than ‘ability’ here to indicate that there is some kind of failure in the cognitive process. In this sense I might imagine that there is someone out to get me, or Macbeth imagines that there is a dagger in front of him.
- 4 *The ability to think of things one conceives of as fictional, as opposed to what one believes to be real, or conceives of as possibly real.* In this sense I might imagine what the characters in a book are like, or imagine the actors in a film or theatre as the characters they portray, aware that the characters are only fictional.
- 5 *The ability to entertain mental images.* Here I might conjure up an image of a large, black spider or a five-sided geometrical figure.
- 6 *The ability to think of (conceive of, or represent) anything at all.* Here I might imagine anything from an object before me being transformed in some way to an evil demon systematically deceiving me.
- 7 *The non-rational operations of the mind, that is, those kinds of mental functioning which are explicable in terms of causes rather than reasons.* Here I

might imagine that smoking is good for me since I associate it with the cool behaviour of those I see smoking in films. It may not be rational, but there is a causal explanation in terms of the association of ideas, upon which advertisers rely so much.

- 8 *The ability to form beliefs, on the basis of perception, about public objects in three-dimensional space which can exist unperceived, with spatial parts and temporal duration.* Here I might imagine that the whole of something exists when I can only see part of it, or that it continues to exist when I look away.
- 9 *The sensuous component in the appreciation of works of art or objects of natural beauty without classifying them under concepts or thinking of them as practically useful.* In looking at a painting or hearing a piece of music, for example, I may be stimulated into imagining all sorts of things without conceptualizing it as a representation of anything definite, or seeing it as serving any particular purpose.
- 10 *The ability to create works of art that encourage such sensuous appreciation.* In composing a piece of music, the composer too may imagine all sorts of things without conceptualizing it in any definite way in the sense, say, of having a message that they want to get across.
- 11 *The ability to appreciate things that are expressive or revelatory of the meaning of human life.* In contemplating a craggy mountain range at dusk, for example, or a painting by Caspar David Friedrich depicting such a scene, I may imagine how much we are subject to the awesome power of the natural world, and yet ourselves have the conceptual and imaginative power to transcend it all in thought.
- 12 *The ability to create works of art that express something deep about the meaning of human life, as opposed to the products of mere fantasy.* Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Goethe's *Faust*, Beethoven's late string quartets or Wagner's *Ring* cycle might all be offered as examples of this final conception of imagination.

Any attempt at bringing order into discussions of the imagination runs the risk of arbitrariness and distortion, and many alternative divisions are possible. Indeed, Stevenson subdivides some of these conceptions and offers various illustrations, which might be taken to warrant adding to the main list. As a subdivision of the first conception, for example, he identifies 'the ability to think about a particular mental state of another person, whose existence one infers from perceived evidence' (2003, 241), which might be thought to

deserve separate recognition. Nor are the conceptions he distinguishes either exhaustive or exclusive, as he admits himself, and there are many interrelationships that are, at best, only implicitly indicated. But the twelve conceptions he distinguishes provide a useful initial framework for locating the philosophical issues.

With any division – and particularly with a division into as many as twelve things – there is always the question, ‘Why this many?’ Why not, in this case, thirteen, or just two with further subdivisions? Looking down the list of the twelve conceptions, are there any ways of simplifying or bringing further order into the division, or any obvious omissions?

ACTIVITY

It seems to me that the twelve conceptions fall naturally into three groups of four. The first four articulate ways in which the imagination is seen as differing from ordinary sense perception. The second four reflect more general conceptions of imagination, in which its relation to thought is stressed more than its relation to sense perception. The final four are concerned with the role of the imagination in aesthetic appreciation and creation. It is hard to think of any omissions, given the generality of the second group of conceptions, and in particular the sixth, ‘the ability to think of anything at all’. But you might feel that more specific conceptions deserve to be brought out from under the cover of the ones listed here. For example, the ability to see or make connections, to link what might initially seem disparate things or fields, is also an important conception in both the arts and the sciences – and not least in philosophy.

DISCUSSION

As far as the first four conceptions are concerned, the contrast with sense perception is fundamental to imagination. In sense perception we have some kind of conscious awareness of something that is actually before us in the spatio-temporal world. Where we are aware of something that is not actually before us in the spatio-temporal world, we speak of ‘imagining’ it. But this can take several forms. What we imagine can be real (but just not present at the time), merely possible, or even impossible; and where possible or impossible, we can believe it to be such or not. (There is argument over what kind of impossibility is allowed, however. Can you imagine a round square, for example? Or imagine that a banana is a gun? Or imagine being an insect?) This gives us Stevenson’s first four conceptions. One or more of these conceptions

is involved in every (more complex) conception of imagination that can be found, as we will see in the chapters that follow.

Taken together, the first four conceptions already suggest a certain generality to imagination. Imagination may be said to be involved whenever we think of something not actually present to us. Even when we think of something present to us, i.e. perceive something, that (perceptual) thought may be informed – rationally or non-rationally – by thoughts of other things; so it is a natural move to see the imagination at work in all thought. This gives us the second group of conceptions, numbered 5 to 8 in Stevenson's list. If thinking of something involves having a mental image of it (a view which we will examine shortly), then we have the fifth conception. The sixth is the most general of these conceptions, and the seventh restricts the imagination to the non-rational operations of thought. The eighth makes specific the supposed role of the imagination in perception. Stevenson identifies a source of the fifth conception in Aristotle's work, as already noted above (p.6), and mentions Descartes too in this regard, whose views we explore in the next chapter. All four conceptions he finds illustrated in Hume's philosophy, which we consider in chapter 3, and the eighth in particular is also characteristic of Kant's philosophy, as we will see in chapter 4.

The final four conceptions, numbered 9 to 12, concern the role of the imagination in aesthetic experience, and highlight the creative aspects of imagination. In the eighteenth century, when aesthetics as a discipline itself emerged, a distinction was drawn between the beautiful and the sublime. Flowers and birds were often given as examples of what is beautiful, while towering waterfalls in a thunderstorm and the starry firmament above provide good illustrations of what was seen as sublime. The beautiful gives rise to a kind of calm and comforting pleasure, while the sublime generates a more exhilarating pleasure, but one tinged with pain or fear. If we make use of this distinction, then we could say the following. Imagination is required in both the aesthetic appreciation and artistic creation of what is beautiful, which gives us the ninth and tenth conceptions, and also in both the aesthetic appreciation and artistic creation of what is sublime, which gives us the eleventh and twelfth conceptions. We will consider creativity and the creative imagination in the final two chapters of this book.

A first attempt at defining ‘imagining’

So far I have made some preliminary remarks on the meanings of ‘imagination’ and related terms, and considered one attempt at distinguishing different conceptions of imagination. In a broad sense, ‘imagining’ means thinking in some way of what is not present to the senses. Imagining may involve, but is not the same as, imaging. In a derogatory sense, ‘imagining’ may mean ‘fantasizing’, as suggested by their etymological roots in Latin and Greek, and our use of the term ‘imaginary’; in a more appreciative sense, it may mean ‘creating’, as suggested by our use of the term ‘imaginative’. In considering the twelve conceptions of imagination that Stevenson distinguishes, I divided them into three groups of four. The first group, numbered 1 to 4, highlight the point that, in imagining, I am aware of something that is not actually present to the senses. The third conception captures the sense of ‘imagining’ as ‘fantasizing’. In the second group of conceptions, numbered 5 to 8, we have both the conception that imagining is imaging (the fifth conception) as well as further recognition that there may be an element of ‘fantasy’ or ‘delusion’ in imagination (the seventh conception). The creative aspects of imagination are explicitly reflected in the third group of conceptions, numbered 9 to 12.

What emerges from this is the possibility of defining ‘imagining’, in its most basic or core sense, as ‘thinking of something that is not present to the senses’. As I have noted, this sense certainly underlies Stevenson’s first group of conceptions, which are divided according to whether what is thought is real (but just not present), possible or impossible, and if possible or impossible, whether it is believed to be such or not. We also saw how we might move from the first to the second group of conceptions. One way to think of what is not present to the senses is to conjure up an image of it, which gives the fifth conception. The sixth conception might seem even more general than the core sense. But if it is possible to think of anything regardless of whether it is present to the senses or not, then we might be tempted to identify the heart of any thinking with ‘imagining’. (We will return to this shortly.) As far as the example illustrating the seventh conception is concerned, it can certainly be claimed that what I ‘imagine’ – the goodness of smoking – is unreal, and hence cannot be present to the senses. So too, in my example illustrating the eighth conception, when I imagine that the whole of something exists when I can only see part of it, the part I do not see is not, of course, present to the senses. It is possible to argue, then, that the core sense of ‘imagining’ just suggested underlies Stevenson’s second group of conceptions of imagination as well.

How might this core sense be seen as involved in the third group of conceptions, concerning aesthetic appreciation and creation? In all four conceptions, we have the idea of imagining all sorts of things without fixing on any single definitive conceptualization or representation. So here too we have thinking of things that are not directly present to the senses, things which go beyond what is strictly or literally perceived or created, although the thought of those things may well be triggered by what lies before the senses.

What Stevenson's conceptions suggest, then, is this. If it is possible to identify a core sense of 'imagining', then an obvious candidate is 'thinking of something that is not present to the senses'. Admittedly, this is rather vague and general. But any sense that might be offered as underlying all twelve of Stevenson's conceptions is bound to be vague and general. And there may be virtue in its vagueness. For bearing it in mind may make us less likely to restrict our attention to just a few kinds of case, and more willing to consider the complex relationships that 'imagining' has both to other mental acts and to the wider context in which it occurs. Vague and general though it may be, it is also a sense that has often been articulated and, as we will see, has had a role to play in talking of imagination.

ACTIVITY

Consider the following case. You look out of the window and see a small tree with two branches sticking out from its sides that look like arms and a clump of leaves on top that looks like a head. You know very well that it is a tree, but you 'imagine' it as a person. Is this a counter-example to the claim that imagining is thinking of something that is not present to the senses?

DISCUSSION

In one way, it might seem obviously not. For are you not imagining something – namely, a person – that is not present to the senses? On the other hand, there is certainly something present to the senses that provides a kind of sensory basis for what you imagine. Merely talking of 'thinking of something that is not present to the senses' arguably does not do justice to what is going on here. What you are imagining is that something that *is* present to your senses is something else. So one might feel that some kind of qualification is needed.

What we have here is a case of what is called 'seeing-as'. We see the tree *as* a person, and in this case at least it also seems reasonable to describe what is going on as 'imagining' the tree as a person. We will be exploring seeing-as in chapter 5, when we consider Wittgenstein's remarks on the topic.

Wittgenstein does not talk of ‘imagining’ in all cases of seeing-as, which we might take to indicate – if we agree with him – that what we have here is a special kind of case. We could still claim, in other words, that the definition of ‘imagining’ as ‘thinking of something that is not present to the senses’ captures its core sense, while allowing qualifications or even departures from it in certain cases, which might then be counted as ‘non-standard’. But we should keep in mind that such qualifications or departures may be necessary.

Any adequate definition of a term should lay down both necessary and sufficient conditions for its applicability (in all the main kinds of case). If we can handle such cases as imagining a tree as a person, then we might take ‘thinking of something that is not present to the senses’ as a necessary condition of imagining. If I imagine something, then I am thinking of something that is not present to my senses. Without such thinking, there could be no imagining. But is it a sufficient condition? If I am thinking of something that is not present to the senses, then am I imagining it? The core sense suggested by Stevenson’s twelve conceptions is admittedly vague and general. But is it too general?

Can you think of (imagine?) any examples of ‘thinking of something that is not present to the senses’ that you would not describe as imagining?

ACTIVITY

There are various possible counter-examples that might be suggested. Here is one important kind of case. What is involved when you remember something? Are you not thinking of something that is not present to the senses (at that time)? Yet remembering something is not the same as imagining it. What we have, then, is a case of ‘thinking of something that is not present to the senses’ that would not be described as imagining. Thinking of something that is not present to the senses is not a sufficient condition for imagining.

DISCUSSION

What is the difference between remembering and imagining something? When we talk of remembering something, we imply that what is remembered actually happened or is true. (We need the clause ‘or is true’ to cover cases such as remembering a mathematical equation or remembering that I have an appointment tomorrow.) There is no such implication in talk of imagining something. But did I not admit, in illustrating Stevenson’s first conception, that I can imagine something that actually happened or is true? We can indeed imagine what actually happened or is true, but when we talk of imagining it,

there is nevertheless a recognition that we *could* be wrong (even if we are not). That what we are imagining actually happened or is true is a merely accidental or contingent feature of our imagining, in the following sense. If it had not happened or were not true, then we would still talk of imagining it; whereas if something that we claim to remember had not actually happened or were not true, then we would regard talk of ‘remembering’ here as illegitimate.

What this suggests, then, is that the definition of ‘imagining’ as ‘thinking of something that is not present to the senses’ is inadequate as it stands. While it arguably lays down a necessary condition for imagining, it does not lay down a sufficient condition. The definition is too general, since it includes things – such as remembering – that we would not count as imagining. If what we have said in distinguishing imagining from remembering is right, then in imagining something we are not just thinking of something that is not present to the senses, but also thinking of something that *need not* have actually happened or that *need not* be true. But can more be said about this additional requirement? Or are there alternative or better specifications? One attempt to offer a more restricted definition has been made by Berys Gaut in a paper entitled ‘Creativity and imagination’ (2003), which is included as Reading 6.

Gaut’s analysis of imagination

Berys Gaut’s main concern in his paper is to provide an account of the relationship between imagination and creativity, and we will examine this account in detail in the final chapter of this book. But in section 2 he offers an analysis of the notion of imagination, which we will look at here.

ACTIVITY

Read the introduction to Gaut’s paper and then section 2, entitled ‘Imagination’. You should read the whole section at least once through first, and then consider each paragraph more carefully as you answer the following questions, which are partly intended to guide you through a more detailed reading. The penultimate paragraph, in particular, packs in a number of different issues. You should concentrate, at least initially, on picking out the main point or points.

- 1 In the first three paragraphs of section 2, Gaut distinguishes four uses of the term ‘imagination’. What are these four uses, and how do they relate to what I have already said, and to Stevenson’s conceptions?