

# Is Imagination Introspective?

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**Abstract** The literature suggests that in sensory imagination we focus on the imagined objects, not on the imaginative states themselves, and that therefore imagination is not introspective. It is claimed that the introspection of imaginative states is an additional cognitive ability. However, there seem to be counterexamples to this claim. In many cases in which we sensorily imagine a certain object in front of us, we are aware that this object is not really where we imagine it to be. So it looks as if in these cases of imagination, we are aware of the mere appearance of the imagined object, and hence introspection is a constitutive part of imagination. In this article, I address this contradictory state of affairs and argue that we should classify at least some forms of sensory imagination as introspective. For this purpose I use the appearance-reality distinction as a central notion for introspection. I also defend the thesis of introspective imagination against the objection that young children imagine without yet understanding the concept of experience.

**Keywords** Imagination · Introspection · Appearance-reality distinction · Consciousness · Sartre · McGinn

## Introduction

Consider following situation: You sit in a boring lecture and have a hard time staying awake. Suddenly you experience a craving for chocolate and your imagination<sup>1</sup> takes over. A nice chocolate bar is floating in front of you and in that moment there is nothing you would rather do than grab the bar and eat it. However, you refrain

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<sup>1</sup>The term imagination has been used very widely. It is often used for suppositional purposes, e.g. imagine the number of primes to be finite. It can also mean to put oneself into someone else's shoes, e.g. kids imagine themselves to be tigers and crouch on the floor. But I will only discuss imagination in the sense of sensorily imagining X, e.g. imagine a chocolate bar floating in front of you, imagine the beats of a load drum. In the visual sense we often use verbs like 'to picture' or 'to visualize' synonymously for 'to sensorily imagine'.

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from grabbing it, which suggests that you are aware that the imagined chocolate bar is merely an appearance. If it is true, as many accounts of introspection of experiential states claim, that in introspection a person is aware of the intentional object of his experience as an appearance, then this case of sensory imagination seems to be indeed introspective. In the first part of this paper I argue that sensory imaginings and perceptual states belong to the same class of experiential states but whereas perceptual states are caused externally, imaginative experiences are endogenously caused. I then show in the second section why it is incoherent to conceive of the introspection of a certain class of imaginative experiences as an additional cognitive act. In the third and last part I present the argument that introspection is constitutive of some forms of imagination formally and consider an objection from Noordhof (2002) who claims that young children can imagine without yet having the concept of an experience. I conclude that some cases of imagination belong indeed to the class of introspected states.

### Properties of Sensory Imaginings

The question whether some cases of sensory imagination belong to the class of introspected experiential states, hinges of course on the assumption that imaginative states are themselves experiential. David Hume (1739) famously regarded the difference between imaginative experiences and perceptual experiences as of degree and not of kind. The gradual difference consisted for him in the vivacity and phenomenal force that perceptual experiences display whereas imaginative experiences have a much fainter character. More recent developments in neuroscience and psychology provide substantial support in favour of Hume's view. During imaginative acts, areas are activated in the temporal and visual cortex which correspond to the areas that are also active during perception. More recently the discussion has even focused on how large these overlaps are in the early stages—V1 and V2—of visual perception (Kosslyn and Thompson 2003). Especially during the last century, psychological studies have been conducted to illuminate the structure of the imagination. In a classic experiment, Perky (1910) asked subjects to imagine a yellow banana on a white wall in front of them. Unknown to them, a picture of a yellow banana was projected right onto the wall. Many subjects confused the perceptual content with imaginative content. But not only do people confound perceptual experiences with imaginative experiences, lesions in the brain that affect the representational content of perceptual experiences can also compromise the content of imaginings. Bisiach et al. (1979) have demonstrated that people with unilateral neglect have great difficulties to recollect the left part of stored memory images.

Whereas the intrinsic properties of imaginative and perceptual experiences seem to share a common experiential core, there can be no doubt that the relational properties of imaginative experiences are fundamentally different from those of perceptual experiences. Perceptual experiences are caused by outside stimuli but imaginative experiences seem to be caused endogenously by stored memories or through the activation of concepts. This claim of endogenous causation is mostly motivated by two characteristics of imaginations, (1) their voluntariness and (2) their quasi-observational character. Many (Wittgenstein (1967), White (1990), McGinn (2004)) argue that voluntariness is an important mark of

imagination, e.g. “[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.” (White 1990, p.91). It is of course true that sometimes images just spring to one’s mind without any conscious intention. However, although we do not consciously intend to entertain certain imaginative experiences, we consider ourselves always as authors of these images. In contrast, we never consider ourselves to be the authors of our perceptual experiences. The other main reason to suppose that our imaginative experiences are caused by stored memories and concepts is their quasi-observational character, a notion used by Sartre. He argues:

The image teaches nothing: it is organized exactly like the objects which do produce knowledge, but it is complete at the very moment of its appearance. If I amuse myself by turning over in my mind the image of a cube, if I pretend that I see its different sides, I shall be no further ahead at the close of the process that I was at the beginning: I have learned nothing. (1950, p.16)

The most plausible explanation of why an image is complete at the moment of its appearance—why we can only quasi-observe the image—is that these images were caused by concepts and memories which are already possessed by the imagining person.

Not only did Sartre correctly observe that images are complete at the moment of their appearance, he also noticed that in imagination we

can posit the object as non-existent, or as absent, or as existing elsewhere; [...] This positional act—and this is essential—is not superimposed on the image after it has been constituted. The positional act is constitutive of the consciousness of the image. (1950, p.20)

Sartre considers different ways objects can be posited in imagination. All of them clearly differ from perception in which objects are posited as existent. In what follows I will only consider cases of sensory imagination in which the imagined objects are posited as non-existent, e.g. the chocolate bar case. Before I show why cases in which objects are posited as non-existent are real counterexamples to the claim that imagination is non-introspective, I discuss the widely accepted thesis that imaginative experiences can be introspected. The easiest way to deny the thesis that introspection is constitutive of some cases of imagination, is to show that it is simply possible to introspect our imaginative states. If the introspection of imaginative experiences is an additional cognitive act, then imagination cannot itself be introspective.

### **Can we Introspect our Imaginative Experiences?**

Most philosophers believe that imagination is non-introspective in nature and that instead we can introspect our imaginative states. McGinn states that

No doubt I can perform this act in certain circumstances, by turning my attention to the image itself in an act of introspection—much as I can introspect my percepts if I choose to. But in ordinary pre-reflective consciousness my focus is on the outer objects of apprehension. (2004, p.175)

Moreover, adversaries in the imagery debate discuss the significance of introspection as a tool to determine whether imaginings are more like images or like descriptions, and simply assume that we can introspect our imaginative experiences:

.. when I introspect a mental image, I am not introspecting a description. ... In introspecting an image I am certainly not aware of it as a description; but if images are descriptions, then what I am aware of is one. (Tye 1991, p.64)

If McGinn and Tye are correct, then, through spelling out the concept of introspection in greater detail, we should see that it is indeed possible to introspect one's imaginative experiences. There are at least three common ways to illuminate the notion of introspection of experiential states which I will discuss in order to investigate whether they can be applied to one's imaginative states: reportability of inner states, bracketing the existence of objects, and the appearance-reality distinction.

First, it has been argued (Dennett 1991; Rosenthal 2000) that a hallmark of introspection is the ability to report one's inner states. When we are perceptually conscious we normally report just the intentional content of a perceptual state, e.g. 'there is a cup of coffee', but in introspective consciousness we do report the state itself, e.g. 'there seems to be a cup of coffee' or 'I have an experience of a cup of coffee'. In the chocolate bar example, however, we never report just the intentional content of that state, e.g. 'there is a bar of chocolate', but report the mental state we are in—'I imagine a chocolate bar', or 'it would be nice to have a chocolate bar like the one I just imagined.' Hence, there is no reason to suppose that we need introspection as an additional cognitive ability to report the imagining of the chocolate bar.

Second, the phenomenological tradition (Husserl 1965, see also Metzinger 2003) speaks of the bracketing of the existence of objects (or of the 'taking back the existence assumption') in order to introspectively describe phenomena. It is, however, impossible to take back the existence assumption of an object that is already posited as non-existent—as is the case in the chocolate bar example.

Third, the arguably most common way in contemporary literature to elucidate the notion of introspection is by way of the appearance-reality distinction. Rosenthal states that introspection "tells us only how things appear, not how they actually are" (2000, p.237); Dretske argues that in introspection "we are conceiving of how things seem" (1994, p.266-7). But again, it looks as if it is impossible to focus on how things appear to us in imagination because we are already aware that the intentional object of our imagination is just an appearance. Thus further introspection could only reveal how an appearance appears to us, which is meaningless because the notion of appearance does not allow for regression.

Not only does the above discussion show that we cannot exercise introspection on imaginative experiences in which objects are posited as non-existent, it also supports the thesis that introspection is constitutive of imagination because all three notions seem to apply already to sensory imagination. In those cases in which imagined objects are posited as non-existent, (i) the imagining person reports his imaginary state, not the intentional content of the imagination, (ii) by default, he has taken back the existence assumption of the imagined object, and (iii) his behaviour towards his

imagination indicates that he is already aware that the imagined object is only an appearance.<sup>2</sup> It is more difficult to analyse these three notions of introspection for cases in which a person imagines objects to be existing elsewhere (in contrast to non-existent), e.g. when a person imagines a temple in Bagan. This person might report the intentional content of his imaginary experience, e.g. ‘the temple is beautiful’, and not the mental state itself. Thus, I will restrict my discussion to cases in which imagined objects are posited as non-existent.

### Introspective Imagination Thesis and Noordhof’s Objection

So far I have accumulated evidence in favour of the thesis of introspective imagination. Let me now present the case of the counterexample to the widely accepted claim that imagination is not introspective, in a more formal manner:

- (1) If person S is aware that the way things appear to him in his experience E is distinct from how things are, then S is introspecting E.<sup>3</sup>
- (2) In imagination S is not introspecting.
- (3) Thus, in imagination S is not aware that the way things appear to him in his experience E is distinct from how they are.

Counterexample to (3): If S imagines a chocolate bar in front of himself, then he is aware that the way the chocolate bar appears to him is distinct from how things are.

The counterexample clearly contradicts conclusion (3), which is a valid inference from premises (1) and (2). Premise (1) states a sufficient condition for the introspection of experiential states. Premise (2) is the widely held claim that imagination is non-introspective. Thus, it seems that the only way to reject the thesis that some cases of imagination are introspective is to deny premise (1). In other words, one would need to show that the antecedent of (1) is not sufficient for introspection. It is notoriously difficult to define the concept of introspection. However, we have seen that many philosophers (e.g. Rosenthal, Dretske, Tye) think that in introspection we conceive of the way things appear to us. Moreover, other instances of introspection of sensory states lend support to this sufficiency claim: (i) If a person hallucinates and becomes aware that the hallucinated object only appears to him, then that person is said to be introspectively aware of the experience; (ii) in lucid dreams people are aware that the appearances in their

<sup>2</sup> It remains of course possible for authors like McGinn and Tye to use a different notion of introspection to make sense of the claim that we can introspect our imaginative states. However, Tye (2003, p.32) thinks of introspection very much like Rosenthal and Dretske as a matter of focusing on how things appear to be. McGinn states that “Introspection is the name of the faculty through which we catch consciousness in all its nakedness. By virtue of possessing this cognitive faculty we ascribe concepts of consciousness to ourselves.” (1993, p.8) It thus seems to me that reportability of inner states does encompass McGinn’s conception of introspection.

<sup>3</sup> It is important not to confuse the distinction of appearance and reality with a possible difference in content between an appearance and reality. In other words, the veridicality of experience E is not at stake. In hallucinations, dreams and sensory imaginations, objects are usually not located where they are represented as being, whereas in perception, objects exist where they are represented in one’s experience.

dreams are distinct from the real world,<sup>4</sup> (iii) people are said to be introspecting a perceptual state, if they are aware of the distinction between the appearance and reality of the content of their current experience.

My counterexample, but also examples of hallucination and dreaming, come with the implicit assumption that the introspecting person possesses the concept of an experience. We can make explicit this underlying assumption by making premise (1) more precise:

- (1') (a) If person S is aware that the way things appear to him in his experience E is distinct from how they are, and (b) if S understands this distinction through the concept of experience, then S is introspecting M.

It seems though that (b) is not necessarily fulfilled in imagination which forms the basis for an objection from Noordhof (2002). The main target of Noordhof's objection is the dependency thesis of imagination which I do not have the space to discuss in this paper.<sup>5</sup> I believe though that Noordhof's objection can be equally mounted against the thesis that imagination is introspective. Noordhof argues that there are people who use the faculty of imagination but do not possess the relevant concept of experience. This claim seems to be well founded. Children under the age of three years show reliable signs of intensive imagination. These children, however, fail tasks in which their understanding of concepts like experience and belief are tested, e.g. young children fail the appearance-reality task which is a standard test to determine whether a child has already understood the concept of experience. A second source for Noordhof's objection are autistic children. These children often do not develop an understanding of the notions of experience and thoughts before the age of 10 although they demonstrate that they have similar imaginative capacities compared to children without this disability. If Noordhof's claim is correct, then people can imagine a chocolate bar and hence be aware of the imagined bar as distinct from an actual chocolate bar, but still fail to introspect their imaginative experience. Can an introspective theory still be salvaged?

There is no general agreement among developmental psychologists regarding the status of dreams and imaginings in young children. Some psychologists (Keil 1979) argue in favour of childhood realism, the view that small children do not make a categorical distinction between actual objects and objects which are merely thought about or imagined. Accordingly, children before the age of 3–5 believe imagined objects to be as real as physical objects and to share the same space. However, childhood realism has come under considerable attack. More recent experiments

<sup>4</sup> Lucid dreams provide further support for the thesis of introspective imagination. Lucid dreams are considered by many to be introspective in nature. Moreover, the state of dreaming resembles the state of imagination in that both dream experiences and imaginative experiences are caused endogenously and not through outside stimuli. The main difference between them is that dreams are not subject to the conscious will whereas imagination usually is. However, this difference is nullified when people dream lucidly because then people can steer their dreams. So it seems that if people think of lucid dreams as introspective, they should also consider classifying imagination as a kind of introspection.

<sup>5</sup> The Dependency Thesis of imagination states that if a person sensorily imagines x then he imagines an experience of x. I do not endorse the dependency thesis: On my account, if a person sensorily imagines x, then he simply imagines x. However, the imagining person is aware that the content of the imaginative experience only appears to him and is thus distinct from reality.

seem to show that children who have not yet understood the concept of experience think that “a dreamed dog, for example, is not identical to a real dog but more like a picture of a dog.” (Wellman and Estes 1986, p.911) Thus, although children consider imagined and dreamed objects to have some form of objective reality, it looks as if they distinguish them from actual objects. Piaget similarly claims that the image “is not real in the sense of representing real events, but as an image it does exist objectively. It is external to the child and is in no sense mental.” (2007, p.95)

A growing number of psychologists nowadays seems to believe that children understand dreams and imaginings gradually. Kohlberg (1969) argues that children first consider dreams as unreal before they think of them as private and then as located internal to a person after having grasped the concept of experience. If this gradual understanding of dreams in children is a correct description in the development of children, then I believe the thesis of imagination as introspective can be largely confirmed for people who possess the concept of an experience.

If children already imagine before they understand what an experience is, then there is no denying that some cases of sensory imaginings are not introspective at this stage. However, all that is needed for introspection to be possibly constitutive of imagination at a later stage, is that children make an initial distinction between imagined and actual objects. Children’s understanding of this distinction can then be developed into a distinction between actual objects and apparent objects once they have learned and grasped the concept of experience. Whereas small children imagine a certain content as distinct from reality but not yet as appearance, older children imagine introspectively because they think of the imagined content as merely appearing to them. It seems that Sartre was wrong to claim that generally in imagination objects are posited as non-existent or existing elsewhere. In imagination objects are posited only as distinct from reality. But in conjunction with the belief that this distinction is explained by private mental states, older children and adults are capable of positing objects as non-existent and hence introspect when they imagine.

## Conclusion

The literature on imagination is largely at odds with the claim that imagination is introspective. However, examples of imagination suggest that people are often aware that the content of their imaginative states only appears to them. I have thus argued that it seems impossible to introspect imaginative experiences in which objects are posited as non-existent, and that these imaginings should themselves be considered as introspected experiential states. Noordhof has presented a very powerful objection against the thesis that imagination is generally introspective: it seems very plausible to assume that small children can imagine without yet introspecting. A revised theory should therefore postulate a gradual change from an awareness of the content of imaginative experiences as distinct from reality to imaginative experiences as introspected states. Anyone who wishes to reject the thesis that introspection is constitutive of some cases of imagination, at least faces the challenge to explain why our most successful notions of introspection seem to cause us to draw this conclusion.

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