

# Imagining and Knowing

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## 1. Introduction

Most philosophers writing on the imagination have insisted that we cannot gain knowledge by relying on imagining – in contrast, say, to perception or inference – as our source of knowledge. Their doubts have not concerned the widely acknowledged fact that imagining a situation may help or enable us to acquire certain pieces of knowledge – for instance, when we visualise geometrical figures or patterns of numbers to come to know mathematical facts (cf. Giaquinto (1992) and (2007)), or when we engage in thought experiments or other imaginative projects to gain philosophical knowledge (cf. Gendler (2000), and Gendler & Hawthorne (2002)). Instead, what is traditionally rejected is the idea that mental episodes of imagining can ground or constitute knowledge in the same way in which episodes of perceiving, remembering or judging can do so.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I would like to defend this last idea with respect to the visual imagination as a potential basis for visual knowledge: episodes of visualising can, under the right circumstances ground knowledge. The claim at issue is, more specifically, that - if embedded in the right kind of context - visualising that  $p$  can ground non-introspective, knowledge-constituting judgements that  $p$  (where  $p$  concerns some contingent fact about the external world). For example, by visualising a certain arrangement of boxes in the interior of a removal van, we may - in the right kind of circumstances - come to know that the respective number of boxes, if thus arranged, fits inside the van.

And, as I also intend to illustrate, this claim about the potential epistemic role of visualising has important philosophical consequences, not only for how best to account for the nature and features of imaginative episodes, but perhaps also for discussions about certain issues in epistemology and the philosophy of mind, such as the idea of epistemic responsibility, or the idea of motivating normative judgements.

I aim to proceed as follows. First of all, I will formulate my main argument and the related main examples of knowledge-grounding episodes of visualising (cf. sections 2 and 3). Then, partly by making reference to these examples, I will provide support for - and answer some objections against - the two premisses of the main argument, which together entail the desired conclusion that episodes of visualising can ground knowledge (cf. sections 4 and 5). And finally, I will sketch some of the philosophical consequences

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<sup>1</sup> This idea is explicitly rejected in Hume (2000), Husserl (1980) and (2001), Sartre (2004), Wittgenstein (1984), Scruton (1974), Casey (1976), and O'Shaughnessy (2000) – though only O'Shaughnessy tries to properly defend this rejection (cf. Dorsch (2007a) for further discussion)).

mentioned, both for theories of imagining and for other issues in epistemology and the philosophy of mind (cf. sections 6 and 7).

## **2. The main argument**

My main argument consists of two premisses and the desired conclusion:

(P.1) An episode of visualising that *p* grounds knowledge that *p* if three conditions are met:

- (a) the episode is non-accidentally veridical (i.e., matches reality in a non-arbitrary way);
- (b) we have some kind of conscious awareness of this non-accidental veridicality;
- (c) we judge that *p* on the basis of the episode and our conscious awareness of its non-accidental veridicality.

(P.2) There really can be an episode of visualising that *p* such that the three conditions are met.

(C) Hence, there really can be an episode of visualising that *p* which grounds knowledge that *p*.

What is important to note is that the three conditions (a)-(c) are taken to be sufficient for grounding knowledge, but not necessary. The condition (a) is meant to capture the externalist idea that sensory grounds of knowledge have to be linked to reality in the right kind of way (e.g., reliably, or via counterfactual dependence), ensuring the truth-conduciveness of the process of judgement-formation involved. Similarly, the condition (b) is meant to accommodate the internalist idea that knowledge requires some form of conscious access to the epistemic standing of potential grounds of knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

But even if knowledge (or justification) is understood in entirely externalist terms, the form of access mentioned in (b) retains at least some psychological or motivational significance. The condition (c) addresses the (rather trivial) fact that the acquisition of knowledge requires the actual formation of a knowledge-constituting judgement (or state of knowledge) in response to the grounds in questions. However, since episodes of visualising - in contrast, say, to perceptions - normally do not move us by themselves to endorse their contents, something additional is needed: we have to take the respective episode of visualising to be non-accidentally veridical in order to endorse its content.

## **3. The examples**

It seems undeniable that episodes of visualising are generally at best accidentally veridical, and that this is mainly due to the fact that they lack the required intrinsic link to reality (in contrast, say, to perceptions;

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2 See Pollock & Cruz (1999) for a discussion of externalism and internalism in epistemology.

cf. O'Shaughnessy (2000)). But this still leaves room for the possibility that episodes of visualising can become appropriately linked to reality and hence non-accidentally veridical in an extrinsic way - for instance, if they are actively formed by us in the right way. My aim is to render plausible this possibility by focussing on examples like the following<sup>3</sup>:

(i) We want to move house and rent a sufficiently large removal van. Thus, while we look inside one of the vans at the rental place, we want to find out how many of our book boxes (all of equal size) fit into a row at the back of the van. We recall the size and shape of the boxes and begin to visualise some of them inside the van, thereby mentally moving and rotating them, while trying to keep their sizes and shapes constant, to see how we can best use the space available to us. We end up with an episode of visualising representing four boxes fitting into a row at the back if arranged in a certain way (e.g., two normal, and two upright).

(ii) We want to make a complicated shot in a snooker match, but avoid that two of the balls involved collide towards the end of the shot. We begin to visualise the movement of the balls on the table, thereby keeping their directions and speeds constant (with the respective adjustments due to boundaries and friction), to see whether they meet. We end up with an episode of visualising representing them as meeting at a certain location of the table.

(iii) We want to find out which of two melodies lasts longer (or, alternatively, how many measures it takes two rhythmic patterns slightly out of phase to become synchronised again - such as in the music of Steve Reich). We begin to auditorily imagine the two melodies simultaneously, while keeping their tempo constant, to see which ends first. We end up with an episode of auditory imagining representing a moment in time, at which the first melody finishes, while the second still continues.

What these three and similar examples have in common are the following important features.

First, they involve three elements: some perceptual or mnemonic input; a complex activity of sensory imagining; and, as its output, a sensory episode of imagining.

Second, the activity of imagining involved is deliberately aimed at the acquisition of factual knowledge about the external world. It is therefore guided by the intention to do whatever is needed to achieve this aim: generally, to produce a non-accidentally veridical episode of imagining that *p*; and, more specifically, to preserve the veridicality of the perceptual or mnemonic input (e.g., by keeping the seen or recalled sizes and shapes constant) and to mentally move, rotate or otherwise modify the imagined objects in the required ways.

This means that we actively take on epistemic responsibility in two important ways: we identify and set

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<sup>3</sup> Somewhat similar examples may be found in Gendler (2000).

ourselves the relevant constraints on non-accidental veridicality and knowledge; and we try to satisfy them while being engaged in the respective imaginative project.

Third, the activity of imagining extracts (i.e., makes accessible) new information from already stored and accessible information, without the acquisition of new empirical evidence. In this sense, the acquisition of knowledge at issue is more similar to apriori reasoning than to perception.

Fourth, what we come to know are contingent facts about the external world - that is, the same kind of facts which we may come to know by means of perception. In this respect, the examples do not constitute potential cases of where imagining might figure as a guide to possibility (or only indirectly in the sense that we can infer possibilities from facts). This is important for the fact that we can actually rely on the acquired knowledge in action in the intended ways. We can decide whether to rent the van because we come to know how many boxes in fact fit into its back; while knowing merely that it is possible for (a certain number of) boxes to fit into the van would not be of much help here.

And fifth, the acquisition of knowledge is not merely enabled by the imagining. Instead, the imaginative episodes really ground the knowledge. That is, these episodes - and only they - carry the information which is then endorsed in the knowledge-constituting judgement. When we judge that four boxes fit into a row in the van, we do not see or recall this fact, but only visualise it. As a result, the introduced examples differ strictly from cases in which imagining helps or enables us in some way or another to acquire knowledge, but in which the piece of information come to be known is not carried by an imaginative episode (or if, only by a cognitive element still present in an imaginative episode). By engaging in hypothetical reasoning, we may come to know that p and q imply r. But what we thereby suppose are p and q, but not the proposition that p and q imply r. Instead, the latter proposition is presumably judged on the basis of reflection on the complex act of reasoning as a whole. Similarly, when we visualise walking through a house and thereby recall the interior of each room and count the windows, our new knowledge about the total number of windows is epistemically based solely on recollection and calculation; while the visualising only helps us to engage in the recollection and the calculation.

#### **4. Support for the second premiss (P.2)**

Supporting (P.2) is a matter of two steps. The first is to show that the examples do satisfy the three conditions (a), (b) and (c) taken to be sufficient for grounding knowledge.

Ad (a). The final episodes of imagining are non-accidentally veridical in so far as the relevant perceptual or mnemonic inputs are non-accidentally veridical, and in so far as the activity of visualising is successful in its aim to preserve this veridicality.

Ad (b). We are consciously aware of this non-accidental veridicality of the resulting episodes of imagining in so far as we possess self-knowledge about what we are deliberately doing (i.e., to produce non-accidentally veridical episodes of visualising), and in so far as we expect that we are successful in so acting. The latter may be a matter of inductive knowledge on the basis of past engagement in such activities of visualising. But it may also be a matter of the phenomenology of the mental activity in question (cf. Dorsch (2007b)). It is typical of visual perception that real increases or decreases in size, or real changes in shape (e.g., when a sugar cube slowly dissolves in water), are phenomenologically salient. The idea is now that the same may very well be true of episodes of visualising. Hence, whether we succeed or fail to keep the sizes and shapes of the visualised boxes constant - and, hence, whether the activity of visualising is successful - should be phenomenologically salient as well.

Ad (c). We endorse the content of the episode of imagining in so far as we are consciously aware of this content, and in so far as we take this content to be non-accidentally veridical. Compare the case in which we are initially unsure about the trustworthiness of some source of information (e.g., a website or TV programme), but then learn about facts which strongly indicate that it is reliable and subsequently endorse the information presented by it.

The second element in support of (P.2) is to render plausible the idea that the examples under discussions are indeed real possibilities - that is, that they are indeed part of one or more possible worlds, in which human beings and the empirical laws are exactly as they are in the actual world. In fact, to achieve this aim, we do not have to look very far. For there are actual cases of skilled imaginers - architects, interior designers, snooker players, composers, musicians, and so on - who engage successfully in imaginative projects very similar to the ones described. Moreover, the nature, number and variety of examples indicates that it is evidentially more likely than not that such cases are metaphysically possible, and without requiring changes in human beings or empirical laws.

## **5. Support for the first premiss (P.1)**

The main positive support for (P.1) is provided by the fact that the judgements based on the sensory episodes of imagining in question will play the same proper role in belief and action as the knowledge-constituting judgements formed by two other methods: (i) by really perceiving actual changes in the world and their result (e.g., when we actually move around the real boxes in the real van); or (ii) by performing a corresponding experiment (e.g., when we produce a scaled cardboard model of the boxes and the van and actually move the miniature boxes around in the miniature van). In short, the activity of visualising functions as a mental experiment and acts as a substitution for real activity and perception in such a way that it establishes an alternative to other routes to knowledge.

In the case of the imaginative route to knowledge, the result may not seem to be knowledge because it

may involve a relatively high margin of error (or low degree of precision) or a relatively low degree of certainty (or confidence). But the margin of error and degree certainty may still be sufficiently low/high to render the resulting judgement to be knowledge.

Similarly, the judgement may not seem to be knowledge because it is based on an imaginative and hence non-committal sensory ground. Perceptions differ essentially from sensory episodes of imagining in that the former, but not the latter, involve a commitment to (or non-neutrality concerning) how things before one are (cf. Martin (2002)). And it may be thought that such a commitment is necessary for sensory ground of knowledge. But the commitment involved in perception is non-rational in that it is unresponsive to reasons. For instance, we do not stop to be committed (i.e., stop to perceive), when a perception loses warrant power because of being non-veridical or accidentally veridical and we recognise this (cf. perceptual illusions). But if perceptual commitment is so independent of epistemic reasons, it should also be possible that we gain sensory warrant, when a sensory image is non-accidentally veridical and we recognise this, despite thereby not becoming committed (i.e., not beginning to perceive).

And finally, what the episodes of imagining ground are indeed judgements capable of constituting knowledge, and not merely informed guesses - mainly because examples of guessing, but not the examples of imagining, involve a practical choice between epistemically (more or less) equally supported options (cf. Owens (2003)).

## **6. Consequences for theories of imagining**

Theories of imagining should identify a single fundamental feature which: (i) is common to all central cases of imagining, whether they are episodic or complex in nature (e.g., visualising, supposing, daydreaming, emplatishing, etc.); (ii) is responsible for their being instances of imagining; and (iii) helps to satisfactorily explain why these imaginative phenomena possess certain other important features.<sup>4</sup>

Among the last features should be counted their epistemological role. In the light of the preceding discussion, theories of imagining should explain why: (1) episodes of visualising are essentially non-committal; (2) intrinsically, episodes of visualising lack the required link to reality enabling them to ground knowledge; (3) they can none the less acquire such a link extrinsically, namely if they are the result of the right kind of agency ensuring their non-accidental veridicality; and (4) the involved activity counts itself as a complex instance of imagining. My contention is that some theories of imagining fare better with respect to these explanatory desiderata than others.

The Agency Account of imagining, according to which imaginative phenomena are essentially mental

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<sup>4</sup> See Dorsch (2007a) for a detailed discussion of these desiderata for theories of imagining, and how various accounts of imagining fare with respect to them.

actions in the sense that when and what we imagine is (principally) up to us<sup>5</sup>, can satisfy these four desiderata. Ad (1): What we are committed to (i.e., what we perceive or believe) is not up to us. Hence, when we decide what to imagine, we cannot also decide to be committed to it, so that imagining ends up being non-committal (of course, we can become committed to what we imagine by means of further processes, such as the recognition of epistemic reasons in favour of what we imagine). Ad (2) and (3): It is a general feature of actions that what we want or intend to do is usually not reliably caused by, or counterfactually dependent on, how reality is like. But we can none the less decide to subject our agency to such a constraint - for instance, when aiming at the acquisition of knowledge. Ad (4): The activity of visualising is of the right kind: we have control over when and what we thereby visualise, and make active use of this form of control.

In contrast, the Representation Account, according to which imaginative phenomena are essentially (intentional or non-intentional) representations of perceptions, judgements, and so on<sup>6</sup>, faces two serious difficulties when trying to explain (1)-(4). The first is that it would be incompatible with the view that sensory memories are also representations of perceptions, given that the latter do involve a commitment and are appropriately linked to reality. And this view on sensory memories is plausible both for independent reasons (cf. Martin (2001)), and for the fact that one main motivation for endorsing the Representation Account is to explain the phenomenologically salient differences (e.g., in the immediacy of the link to the presented objects and features) between perceptions and sensory imaginings – differences which also distinguish perceptions from sensory memories (cf. Martin (2001)). And second, it cannot accommodate properly the active element of the examples discussed. In particular, another main motivation for endorsing the Representation Account has been the idea that not all instances of imagining are instances of agency (cf. O'Shaughnessy (2000)). But if this is so, it remains unclear why the complex activity of sensory imagining involved in the examples should count as imaginative (after all, it does not as a whole represent some cognitive phenomenon).

## 7. Other philosophical consequences

But accepting that episodes of visualising can ground visual knowledge promises to have consequences for other philosophical issues, three of which I would like to briefly highlight: rational motivation, intellectual imagining and knowledge, and epistemic responsibility.

*Rational motivation.* Although not a condition on sensory grounds of knowledge, perceptual commitment

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5 Versions of this view are defended by Wittgenstein (1984), Scruton (1974), McGinn (2004), and Dorsch (2007a).

6 Versions of this view have been put forward by O'Shaughnessy (2000) (regarding both sensory and intellectual imagining), Peacocke (1985) and Martin (2003) (regarding certain kinds of sensory imagining), and presumably Hume (2000) (though he speaks in terms of 'copies' rather than 'representations').

seems still relevant for epistemic motivation. The idea is that the fact that seeing that p can move us to judge that p by itself is best explained by reference to the phenomenologically salient commitment of perceptions: they move us to endorse their contents in judgement because we recognise their commitment (and as long as we are not aware of any defeaters). In contrast, since sensory episodes of imagining lack such a commitment, they can move us to judge that p only in conjunction with a normative (or evaluative) judgement about their non-accidental veridicality. This suggests that such normative judgements do possess motivational power - and perhaps not only in the epistemic, but also in the practical realm.

*Intellectual imagining.* So far, only sensory imagining has been discussed. What seems striking is that episodes of intellectual imagining cannot ground (or even constitute) knowledge - for instance, inferences cannot lead us from supposed premisses to believed conclusions (cf. Currie & Ravenscroft (2002)). The best explanation for this seems to take the following line. A supposition cannot ground knowledge because judgemental commitment (which is essential to judgements and beliefs, but lacking with suppositions or assumptions) is responsive to epistemic reasons. For example, once we recognise a judgement or belief to be unfounded, we normally give up our respective commitment to the truth of the proposition in question. However, since inferentially grounding knowledge on a supposition would require taking that supposition to be non-accidentally true, we would (if rational) end up developing a commitment to the truth of (i.e., a belief about) what we have so far only supposed, and our inference would take this newly acquired belief, and not the preceding supposition, as its starting-point. Similarly, suppositions cannot constitute intellectual knowledge since such knowledge requires belief, that is, intellectual commitment.

*Epistemic responsibility.* The idea of subjects being responsible for what they believe has often been rejected on the basis of the view that responsibility requires voluntariness, or practical freedom, while what we judge or believe seems to resist voluntary influence.<sup>7</sup> Instead, 'epistemic responsibility' (if this notion is kept at all) is strictly distinguished from genuine practical responsibility. However, even if this line of reasoning is accepted, it seems still to make perfect sense to speak of a genuinely practical and voluntariness- or freedom-related form of epistemic responsibility - namely in cases in which we deliberately set ourselves epistemic constraints and deliberately try to satisfy them. Similar considerations may then apply to notions such as epistemic duty or virtue.

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<sup>7</sup> See Owens (2000) for a discussion – and (different) rejection – of the view linking responsibility to voluntariness..

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