

The Snowman's Imagination

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Abstract: Not all imaginings are successful; sometimes, when an imaginer sets out to imagine some target, her imagining involves some kind of mistake. The error can be diagnosed in two ways: (1) the imaginer imagines her target in a way that mischaracterizes it; or (2) the imaginer fails to imagine her target at all, rather she imagines something else that is similar in some ways to that target. In ordinary day-to-day imaginings, explanations of type (1) seem most natural, but in discussions of philosophical imaginings, philosophers tend to adopt explanations of type (2). This paper argues against this tendency.

Olaf, the dimwitted but lovable snowman from Disney's recent movie "Frozen," inhabits a world that has been magically transformed into a state of perpetual winter. But that does not stop him from dreaming of summer; as he tells us, "sometimes I like to close my eyes and imagine what it'll be like when summer does come." During the whimsical sequence that follows, Olaf pictures himself in a variety of summer scenarios, from a romp in a field of flowers to a soak in a hot tub. In true Disney fashion, his imaginings are accompanied by song:

Bees will buzz,

Kids will blow dandelion fuzz

And I'll be doing whatever snow does in summer

A drink in my hand,

My snow up against the burning sand

Probably getting gorgeously tanned in summer

I'll finally see a summer breeze blow away a winter storm

And find out what happens to solid water when it gets warm

And I can't wait to see

What my buddies all think of me

Just imagine how much cooler I'll be in summer.¹

Unfortunately, however, Olaf would undoubtedly be quite disappointed if he were ever to experience the heat of summer. He's not going to be able to frolic in the midday sun, or relax on the hot sand, or take a swim in a warm lake. He may be a magical snowman, but he's still a snowman. So any experience that Olaf could possibly have of summer would have to be a very short one, for there's no getting around the simple, awful truth he's yet to learn: Snow melts.

Clearly Olaf's imaginings have in some way gone astray. But how, exactly, did they go wrong? There seem to be two ways we might diagnose his imaginative error:

(1) Though Olaf has indeed imagined his target, he's done so very badly. He is mistaken about what would happen to a snowman in these situations. Call this a *mischaracterized target explanation*.

(2) Olaf hasn't really imagined his target. Though he aims to imagine a snowman in summer, and in the sun, and on a hot beach, he hasn't succeeded in doing so. Rather he's imagined something else – perhaps he's imagined a snowman in a season that occupies the summer months but doesn't have the usual characteristics of summer, or perhaps he's imagined a creature who superficially resembles a snowman but who's not made of snow, or so on. Call this a *missed target explanation*.

Undoubtedly, Olaf himself would opt for a diagnosis of the first sort. As he lies melting after having been exposed to the sun, I suspect that his regretful musings would much more likely be something along the lines of: "Oh summer heat, you were nothing like I imagined you" than something along the lines of: "Oh summer heat, I never really managed to imagine you at all." Interestingly, however, it seems that many philosophers discussing the imagination seem to be committed to rejecting Olaf's own assessment of the situation and instead offering a diagnosis of the second sort – and this would be true not only for Olaf's imaginings, but for many others as well. As I will suggest in what follows, this commitment is a mistake.

I. The IIP Strategy

Like Olaf, we too make mistakes in the course of our day-to-day imaginings. Consider cases where such imaginative errors come into play: I meet a longtime internet correspondent for the first time and I'm surprised by what he looks like; I make a dessert from a new recipe and am caught off guard by the sweetness of the result; I accept delivery of a sofa ordered from a catalog and am disappointed by how it looks in the living room. In explaining my surprise and disappointment, I'd most naturally opt for a diagnosis of the first sort – he was much shorter than I'd imagined him, the dessert wasn't as sweet as I imagined it would be, the sofa was a brighter shade than I imagined it to be. It's not that I failed to imagine my internet correspondent, it's that there was a striking disconnect between how I imagined him to look and how he actually looks. Likewise for the dessert and the sofa. And think how presumptuous it would be, in ordinary conversation, if someone were to suggest otherwise. Surely the only appropriate response would simply be an incredulous stare were someone else, in conversation, to reject my mischaracterized target explanation in favor of a missed target explanation.

Nothing much hangs on these day-to-day imaginative errors, but there are other cases where considerably more is at stake. "Motherhood is nothing like I imagined it," an exhausted new parent might snap. "Obama's presidency is nothing like I imagined it," a formerly optimistic liberal might complain in frustration. Yet even in these cases we're not inclined to reject the imaginer's assessment of their imaginative error. Reality turned out to be quite different from what these imaginers had predicted via their imaginings, but that doesn't give us

cause to deny that the exhausted mother had really imagined parenthood, or that the frustrated liberal had really imagined Obama's presidency.

It's surprising, then, that matters look so different when we consider what philosophers say about the imaginings invoked in philosophical discussion. There are a vast array of cases – ranging from body swaps to zombies to time travel – where philosophers have insisted on missed target explanations over mischaracterized target explanations. The question thus naturally arises: Why have they done so?

Frequently it seems that the motivation stems from a prior theoretical commitment to the claim that imaginability implies possibility. Consider, for example, Saul Kripke's famous discussion of a wooden table:

Now could *this table* have been made from a completely *different* block of wood, or even from water cleverly hardened into ice—water taken from the Thames River? ... [T]hough we can imagine making a table out of another block of wood or even from ice, identical in appearance with this one, and though we could have put it in this very position in the room, it seems to me that this is *not* to imagine *this* table as made of wood or ice, but rather it is to imagine another table, *resembling* this one in all external details, made of another block of wood, or even of ice. (Kripke 1980, pp. 113-14)

According to Kripke's view of the necessity of origins, this very table could not have been made of ice. It's this view that seems to guide his conviction that – despite how it might seem to us – no imagining in which we could engage would be an imagining of this very table made of ice. But of course, even if Kripke is right that this very table could not have been made of ice, that fact alone is not enough to show that we couldn't imagine this very table made of ice. There seems to be an unstated assumption here that we cannot imagine the impossible, that is, that imaginability implies possibility. Let's call this claim *IIP*.

IIP seems to underlie many other instances in which philosophers provide missed target explanations of imaginative errors. Consider, for example, the debate about zombies in discussions of phenomenal consciousness. When critics of physicalism take themselves to have imagined creatures that are molecule-for-molecule indistinguishable from conscious beings but which entirely lack consciousness, one common response involves denying the imaginability of zombies – a response which seems to be motivated by concerns about the impossibility of zombies. According to Daniel Dennett, for example, imaginings that purport to be of zombies invariably violate the very definition of zombies and thus can't really be imaginings of zombies at all. (Dennett 1995,p. 322)

We see a similar dialectic in debates about personal identity. Defenders of psychological theories of personal identity often ask us to imagine cases in which individuals switch bodies, as in Locke's case of the prince and the cobbler. Though it seems to many readers that we can successfully carry out this imaginative act, opponents who believe that

such body swaps are impossible often deny that we've managed to imagine *the very same person* first occupying one body and later occupying another.² Often, however, there seems to be very little independent motivation for this claim, that is, very little motivation that's independent of the intuition that the scenario in question is impossible.

In this context, consider Judith Jarvis Thomson's criticism of imaginings that purport to be of body swaps:

Can we imagine body-switching from inside? One is initially inclined to think it's easy. I close my eyes, and form a mental picture of Mary's lap as it would look to her if she were looking down at it, and of Mary's hands on the keyboard of her typewriter as they would look if she were looking down on them, and so on; and I think to myself, "Now I am imagining my having switched to Mary's body." But how does my having formed that mental picture warrant my saying that I am imagining my having switched to Mary's body? ... Why not instead as 'imagining how things would look to Mary if she were at her typewriter now'? Or as 'imagining myself under a delusion as to how my own lap and hands look'? (Thomson 1997, pp. 167-8)

On the surface, Thomson's argument may not seem to rely on IIP. Her worry seems to be the entirely different concern that an assessment of what's been imagined can never be fully determined by imagistic content. But it's not clear that this worry would even arise were not concerns of IIP lurking in the background.

Consider a related worry about linguistic content. The name “Mary” applies both to Mary Midgely and Mary Wollstonecraft , but that does not mean that my use of it is indeterminate between the two, or that I am not warranted in taking myself to have referred to Mary Midgely and not Mary Wollstonecraft when I use the name to do so. Likewise, the fact that the same mental image might be used in several different imaginative projects does not show that we don’t know what we’re imagining when we produce such an image. We don’t usually worry about whether I’ve succeeded in imagining Ashley Olson even though the image I produce could just as easily have been used to imagine her twin sister Make-Kate. Or, to use an example of Wittgenstein’s, we wouldn’t doubt that I’ve succeeded in imagining King’s College even though the mental image I produce equally resembles any number of similar buildings (Wittgenstein 1958, 39).³ So why would this kind of worry arise in body swap cases? Once we begin to reflect on the matter, it looks like some principle like IIP must be invoked even to get this worry off the ground.

Presumably, IIP can also be invoked to explain why a missed target characterization is appropriate with respect to Olaf’s imaginings. Since it is impossible for snow to survive exposure to heat, we cannot imagine snow surviving exposure to heat. So even though it might seem to Olaf that he imagines snow surviving exposure to heat, he must be mistaken – really, he is imagining something else. Importantly, however, the proponent of IIP need not insist that we give missed target explanations in the day-to-day imaginative error cases we considered above. My internet correspondent could have looked slightly different, and the dessert could have been a little less sweet. Thus, an account of imaginative error motivated by IIP has the

advantage of being compatible with our giving mischaracterized target explanations in at least some of the cases in which they seem natural.

The problem with this account, however, is that we have been given no support for IIP itself. Why can't we imagine the impossible? Without a defense of this assumption, there is no reason to prefer the missed target explanations over the mischaracterized target explanations in any cases. Moreover, it's not easy to see how such a defense might go, especially considering the fact that – in this context at least – it must proceed without assuming the appropriateness of missed target explanations; we can't defend the appropriateness of missed target explanations by invoking IIP and also defend IIP by invoking the appropriateness of missed target explanations. Here it's also worth noting more generally the delicate position in which one finds oneself when defending IIP. The significance of IIP stems in large part from its role in adjudicating philosophical disputes: It is put to work in support of one theory over another by demonstrating the possibility of certain states of affairs. But in order for this demonstration to succeed, we need to be able to tell whether something is imaginable. Imaginability can't yield us any meaningful insight into possibility if we have to rely on antecedent claims about possibility to determine whether something is imaginable.

II. The Impoverished Resource Strategy

As the discussion of the previous sections suggests, insofar as the case for missed target explanations depends on IIP, it doesn't seem that we should be persuaded to give up the more

natural mischaracterized target explanations. But perhaps there's a different way to make the case. Consider what Thomas Nagel has to say about attempts to imagine what it's like to be a bat:

Our own experience provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited. It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one's arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one's mouth; that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends the day hanging upside down by one's feet in an attic. In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for *me* to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task. I cannot perform it either by imagining additions to my present experience, or by imagining segments gradually subtracted from it, or by imagining some combination of additions, subtractions, and modifications. (Nagel 1974, p. 439)

Here we have another case of a missed target explanation. According to Nagel, my imaginative error when I try to imagine what it's like to be a bat does not consist simply in a mischaracterization of the target experience but rather in a failure to latch onto the target experience at all. Importantly, however, his argument here does not rely on IIP, or anything like IIP. Rather, it relies on the fact that we do not have the experience needed to produce an imagining of the right sort. Call this the *impoverished resource strategy*.

The impoverished resource strategy is attractive in many respects. Though we often aim to imagine things or states of affairs about which we lack quite a bit of information, and though this lack of information does not prevent us from latching onto our target, there are some cases in which we try to engage in imaginings when we are more or less completely in the dark about what we are imagining. And it does seem implausible that we'd be able to latch onto a target when in a state of such utter ignorance of it. Suppose someone is asked to imagine a vervet, and she has no idea whatsoever what a vervet is – she doesn't know enough even to say whether it's a means of transportation, or a kind of tropical fruit, or a kitchen utensil, or...⁴ Whatever imagining she produces, assuming she is able to produce an imagining at all, could hardly be said to be an imagining of a vervet.

Another way in which the impoverished resource strategy is attractive is that its proponent need not reject our natural inclination to adopt mischaracterized target explanations in the sorts of day-to-day imaginings we considered above. Though I've never met my internet correspondent, I know a fair amount about him – enough to be able to imagine him (however badly). And likewise for the dessert and the sofa. But what about Olaf? Here it seems the proponent of the impoverished resource argument would want to deny the appropriateness of a mischaracterized target explanation for Olaf's imaginings of summer, despite what Olaf himself might say. Olaf is considerably worse off with respect to summer than I am with respect to my internet correspondent. He lacks any experience with summer or even with anything like summer; he's never even experienced heat. Though we haven't been given an account of exactly what counts as being in a state of sufficiently impoverished resources, it seems likely that Olaf would meet whatever the conditions turn out to be; though

he knows that summer is a season, his understanding of it doesn't seem to be any better (and is perhaps worse) than our understanding of bat phenomenology. Thus, the proponent of the impoverished resource strategy will have to explain Olaf's imaginative error in terms of a missed target explanation.

That in itself is not too much of a problem. But even this brief discussion of the impoverished resource strategy points to a more serious difficulty with it, namely, that we need some way of determining when our resources are sufficiently impoverished to keep us from latching onto our imaginative target. What makes Nagel's bat case more like the vervet case than like the day-to-day imaginings we considered above? Where would our imaginings of body swap cases fit on the spectrum?

Though the impoverished resource strategy is quite different from the IIP strategy that we considered above, we now see that it faces a parallel difficulty in attempting to give a principled answer to this question. Since the proponent of the IIP strategy wants to use impossibility to explain why an imagining fails to latch onto its target, she needs an account of impossibility that's independent of unimaginability. Likewise, since the proponent of the impoverished resource strategy wants to use impoverishment to explain why an imagining fails to latch onto its target, she needs an account of impoverishment that's independent of unimaginability. And it's hard to see how such an account might be produced.

III. Taking Imagination Seriously

In fact, the parallel between the problems facing the IIP strategy and the impoverished resource strategy should not strike us as that surprising, since the two strategies can be seen as stemming from very similar motivations. Proponents of the IIP strategy take our imaginings to yield important insight into possibility. Imagining some state of affairs is supposed to give us reason to think that it is possible. Proponents of the impoverished resources argument also take our imaginings to yield important insight, only here the insight is not confined to mere possibility. Rather, such proponents see our imaginings as useful for teaching us some non-modal facts about the actual world – about what it is like to be a bat, or about summer, or about the appearance of my internet correspondent. Unfortunately, however, sometimes the alleged insights offered up by our imaginings – whether about possibility or actuality – seem mistaken, and this forces proponents of both arguments to a *modus tollens* maneuver. If I were really imagining that very table made of ice, then it would be possible for it to be made of ice, but it's not possible for it to be made of ice, so I must not really be imagining that very table made of ice. Likewise, if I were really imagining what it is like to be a bat, then I would know something about what it's like to be a bat, but I don't know (in fact, I can't know) what it's like to be a bat, so I must not really be imagining what it's like to be a bat.

As it happens, I agree with the claim that our imaginings can yield insight into more than just mere possibility, and I think this is an important fact about our imaginative capacities.⁵ To my mind, however, it is a mistake to think that acceptance of this claim forces us to adopt missed target explanations in cases where we're otherwise disinclined to, as in the case of Olaf. True, Olaf does not learn anything significant about summer from his imaginings. But that does not mean that we should deny that his imaginings are imaginings of summer. Rather, we

should simply accept that the ability for imagining to teach us about the world is limited. Not all imaginings of S teach us anything meaningful – or teach us anything at all – about S.

Instead, I'd recommend a different way of proceeding. Rather than searching for a way to explain why imaginings like Olaf's miss their target, we should instead search for a way to explain why only a subclass of the imaginings that hit their target have the power to teach us about the world. This approach has several important virtues. First, it allows us to be true to our strong sense that the imagination is a mental exercise of immense scope. In offering missed target explanations of imaginative error, proponents of both the IIP and impoverished resources strategies are forced to shrink our powers of imagination. In contrast, by accepting the widespread appropriateness of mischaracterized target explanations, the approach I'm recommending can remain true to claims about the freedom of imagination.

Second, this approach also allows us to remain true to the phenomenology of imagining. The imagination has been invoked to do important work in such a vast multitude of philosophical contexts that it ends up being pushed and pulled in all sorts of different directions.⁶ Rather than letting our theory of the imagination be dictated by the philosophical work that we want it to do, however, it seems that we'd be better off letting a correct account of imagination dictate what philosophical work it can do.

But what exactly does it mean to be true to the phenomenology of imagining? Here I have in mind that we take seriously how an individual herself assesses the imagining in which she is engaged. What imaginative project does she take herself to be pursuing? What target

does she intend to imagine? Does she take herself to have succeeded in doing so?⁷ It's the answers to these questions, I think, that largely fix the content of her imagining.

Of course, not every time that someone sets out to pursue an imaginative project does she succeed in doing so, and there may be many times when an individual sets out to imagine a particular target only to conclude that she is unable to do so. But when an imaginer sets out to imagine something and, on reflection, takes herself to have done so, it seems that these facts should be taken seriously by a theory of imagination. That is not to say that one can never be wrong about what she's taken herself to imagine. I leave open the possibility that there are cases where missed target explanations may be appropriate even when an imaginer supposes otherwise. But if we claim that an imaginer is wrong about what's she imagined, the case for this claim should rest on reasons *internal* to a theory of imagination.

Like Olaf, we sometimes go astray when we engage in imaginative exercises, though not all of our imaginative errors are as comical – or as potentially fatal – as his are. In diagnosing these mistakes, however, we should not be led further astray by externally-imposed constraints on a theory of imagination and how our imaginings hook up to the world. Too often in philosophical discussion we jump to the conclusion that such-and-such hasn't been imagined, or that such-and-such is unimaginable. As I have suggested here, however, in many cases the more appropriate judgment might simply be that such-and-such hasn't been imagined *correctly*.

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Notes

¹ Lyrics from http://disney.wikia.com/wiki/In_Summer. A video of the song is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFatVn1hP3o>.

² See Sorensen (1992, p. 40) for a related example stemming from debates about resurrection.

³ See my Kind (2001) for further discussion of the relation between imagery and imagination.

⁴ In fact, it's a kind of monkey.

⁵ I argue this in Kind (forthcoming).

⁶ See Kind (2013) for further discussion of the various contexts in which the imagination is invoked.

⁷ Not all imaginings are deliberate, and so it won't be true in all cases that an imaginer has an intention to imagine a particular target. I believe that the points made in the text could be easily extended to cases of spontaneous imagining by focusing on an individual's own retrospective assessment of her imagining. However, I also suspect that it's in cases where an individual simply finds herself imagining something – rather than having set herself the project to do so – that we might find a missed target explanation appropriate. I regret that I do not have the space here to develop these points in greater detail.