

## Imagination and Perspective Shifting

### **1. Introduction**

L.A. Paul (2014) has argued that our perspective shifting abilities face deep limitations. Part of Paul's argument concerns the fact that perspective shifting cannot inform one about what beliefs one will have after undergoing a "transformative experience", and thus does not constitute a rational decision procedure. In what follows, I briefly explain Paul's arguments concerning the limitations of perspective shifting. I then turn to philosophical and empirical literature concerning the epistemic capabilities of imagination, which indicates that imagination is capable of effecting changes in our beliefs. I then argue that imagination's ability to affect belief can be used to improve our epistemic position. By taking part in specific, concerted imaginative simulations we can incrementally enrich our stock of warranted beliefs. This places serious doubt on Paul's claims. Imagination can inform us about our relevant post-transformative experience beliefs by changing our beliefs—and beginning the transformation—in the here and now.

### **2. Paul's argument**

For Paul, transformative choices are choices about whether or not to undergo, or partake in, a "transformative experience"—e.g., receiving a cochlear implant, or having a child. A typical decision procedure for such important life choices involves the individual imagining what it might be like, for instance, to have a child. However, Paul argues that such experiences change us both personally and epistemically. That is, they have the potential to change our beliefs, how we feel, and how we behave. Ultimately, she argues, a decision procedure based on

the imaginative simulation of, or imaginative projection into, the “future lived experience” is not one that allows for rational choice.

For example, whether or not having a child will be a positive experience for you will depend on what your preferences, behavioral dispositions, and beliefs will be after having the child. But, because having a child is a transformative experience, your emotions, dispositions, and beliefs will be different from the ones you have while making the decision. This suggests that your current mental landscape is not something you can call upon for adequate evidence. The evidence you need in order to make a rationally informed decision is inaccessible, she argues, because you cannot gain access to it until after you have undergone the transformative experience. Paul writes,

You can't evaluate different possible outcomes involving the lived experience that results from having a transformative experience by attempting to cognitively project forward and consider those possible subjective futures for yourself, because you cannot know what the relevant outcomes are like until you've actually experienced them (p. 52).

In other words, before I actually go through the experience of having a child, I have no way of knowing exactly how that experience will change my preferences and beliefs. Thus, if I were to try to make the decision to have a child by imagining what that might be like for me, I would be making such a decision on insufficient evidence. I would, Paul argues, have no idea how my future self would respond to such an experience, and therefore would not be in the right epistemic position to judge whether or not the experience would be positive or negative.

### **3. Imagination and cognitive transmission**

The next two sections will present data on cognitive transmission, the Availability Heuristic, and imagination's ability to cause false beliefs. Before proceeding, I want to address a potential worry. One might object that this data shows that imagination can give rise to

unreasonable beliefs, which can't possibly help us in making informed decisions about future experiences. It is correct to think that the literature on the Availability Heuristic and false beliefs demonstrates the imagination's ability to cause in us unreasonable, or biased beliefs. However, it is important to note at the outset that my aim in presenting this data is simply to demonstrate that imagination has the ability to affect our belief states. Once I have established that undergoing imaginative exercises can affect our beliefs, I present a positive view about how to harness the imagination to improve our epistemic position.

Tamar Gendler argues that imagination can affect our perceptual states and evidential standards, naming this phenomenon "cognitive transmission." Gendler cites Tversky and Kahneman's (1973) work on the Availability Heuristic as evidence. The Availability Heuristic marks our tendency to see certain events or objects as more likely, or frequently occurring, based on the availability of those events or objects to our memory, perception, and *imagination*. That is, our perceptual states and evidential standards can be altered not just by the availability of certain objects and events that are either in our immediate environment or in our memory, but also in our imagination (Gendler, p. 148). Our everyday experience seems to accord with this notion. Many of us have experienced changes in our perceptions and evidential standards as a result of something we are thinking about, where that thing is not present in our immediate environment. If, for instance, I spend the next hour imagining bats, it is likely that such an imaginative activity will impact my perceptions and evidential standards.<sup>1</sup> I may begin to perceive certain sounds in my house, e.g. the squeaking of the laundry machine, as the chirping of a bat. I may begin to mistake the birds outside my window as bats, and so on. And my belief in the likelihood of the presence of a bat increases as a function of how long, and how vividly, I

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<sup>1</sup> This example is drawn from Gendler, p. 148.

imagine one. Importantly, I may become convinced that something is a bat on lesser evidence than I would have if I had not taken part in the imaginative activity. I may actually come to believe that a leaf blowing by my window is a bat, whereas I would not formulate such a belief if I had not spent so much time imagining bats. My standard for evidence changes as a result of the imaginative episode, influencing my belief formation in turn.<sup>2</sup>

#### **4. Imagination and false beliefs**

I now want to turn to some different empirical literature which further supports the notion that imagination can affect what we believe. Again, I want to emphasize that this research is simply meant to establish that imagination can indeed change our beliefs. At the end of this section I will argue that this research has the intriguing further implication that imagination can give rise to new, true beliefs.

Mazzoni and Memon (2003) demonstrated that imagining an event can induce a false belief that the subject experienced the event. In the study, one group of participants were asked to imagine a frequently occurring event, and were given information about another event that never occurs. A second group of participants were asked to imagine an event that never occurs, and were given information about an event that frequently occurs.<sup>3</sup> One week after, participants in both groups were asked to describe any memories they had of either event. For both types of

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<sup>2</sup> Gendler is certainly not the only philosopher to question the notion that our beliefs are entirely quarantined from our imaginings. More recently, Susanna Schellenberg (2013) has brought up cases of “imaginative immersion” where individuals become so engrossed in an imaginative episode that they come to confuse their imaginings with reality.

<sup>3</sup> In the study, the frequently occurring event was “Having a milk tooth extracted by a dentist before the age of six.” The non-occurring event was “Having a nurse remove a skin sample from my little finger.” An extensive search revealed that in the United Kingdom, where the study was conducted, there are no records of anyone having a skin sample removed from their little finger by a nurse, whereas having a milk tooth extracted by a dentist before the age of six is relatively common.

event, imagination increased the number of memories reported, and increased the number of beliefs about actually experiencing the event. Of the results, the authors wrote:

Imagination alone, without any additional suggestive procedure, increased participants' convictions that an event had occurred in their childhood, and also produced false memories of the event. Additionally, the data indicate that the production of false beliefs and memories was not due to an increase in familiarity with the event...but instead depended on processes that occur specifically during imagination (p. 189).

The fact that the participants reported beliefs of experiencing an event that they simply imagined, regardless of the participants' familiarity with the event, and regardless of whether the event occurs, is quite telling. We now have results suggesting that imaginative processes can influence our beliefs. Before moving on, I should emphasize what I take to be an important and intriguing implication of this research: not only can imagining give rise to false beliefs; it can also give rise to (new) *true* beliefs. Regardless of whether the participants actually underwent the experience, imagination increased the participants' belief that they did. So, for instance, if a participant underwent an experience as a child, but didn't have a belief that she did, imagining the event has the ability to create in the participant a new, true belief that she underwent the experience.

## **5. Using the imagination for good**

We have clear evidence that our imaginings can affect what we believe, and even what we take to be proper grounds for the formation of a justified belief. Although the evidence presented thus far has focused primarily on biases and false beliefs, I want to argue that imagination's ability to give rise to new beliefs can be harnessed to put us in a better epistemic position than we would have been without using our imagination. This involves taking part in concerted, specific imaginative simulations. These specific imaginative simulations can be used to form similarly specific beliefs. Because we are using such specific imaginings to form quite

specific new beliefs, the process of bettering our epistemic position via the imagination is a slow, incremental one. If we spend enough time enriching our stock of beliefs, we can then be in a position to make an informed decision about how we would react to a transformative experience. In a nutshell, the changes to our beliefs and desires that would be wrought by a transformative experience need not happen entirely after the fact.

Consider some examples. Perhaps I am wondering about how I would react if I were to move to a small, rural town in the Midwest. I can imagine myself living there and form beliefs about what that might be like. Importantly, it is crucial that I don't simply imagine myself living in a non-descript town surrounded by cornfields. If I am really interested in understanding how I would react to the move, I should imagine quite specific things. For example, I should imagine myself hungry after a long day of work and craving Indian take-out, but not having the ability to get Indian take-out because the closest Indian restaurant is a 2-hour drive away. I then form the belief that I wouldn't like living in a town that didn't have Indian take-out. This, of course, is only one of many things I should imagine if I want to make an informed decision. I should also imagine, for instance, getting in bed and not hearing cars and sirens outside my door. That specific imagining then produces in me the belief that I will have an easier time falling asleep if I lived in a rural town. With enough of these specific, concerted imaginings I can incrementally place myself in an epistemic position to make an informed decision.

If I want to make an informed decision about whether to have a child with my partner, I could simply project myself into the future and imagine myself with a child in a quite general, vague sense, or I could imagine quite specific experiences. I could imagine what it would be like to spend Halloween with a child. Instead of dressing up and going to a party with my partner, we dress up and walk around the neighborhood trick or treating with our child. Based on that

concerted and specific exercise, I can develop a belief about whether I would enjoy that experience. If I want to be in a solid epistemic position, I should also imagine particularly trying experiences. I should imagine that, instead of waking up at 8:00 am this morning, I woke up much earlier to prepare my child for their school day. I then develop a belief about whether I would enjoy that aspect of parenthood.<sup>4</sup>

Athletes often make use of the very kind of process I'm describing. Why do athletes find it useful to imagine succeeding on the field of play? It is precisely because imagining will change them in important ways. The literature in sports psychology supports the notion that my imagining a particular skill or action can improve my physical performance of that skill.<sup>5</sup> When preparing for a soccer game, one may, for instance, want to induce in herself the belief that she can score from a particular angle. Of course, one way to come to that belief is to repeatedly practice scoring from that angle until she has a firm belief that she can do so, after which she can then exploit that belief in a game situation. Another way she can induce that belief is by repeatedly imagining herself scoring from that angle. Importantly, the soccer player does not simply imagine playing well on the field. She imagines specific successes, undergoing specific actions. E.g. "when the ball is at the top right corner of the penalty box I will strike it with the outside of my right foot," and she imagines the ball curling from left to right, and nestling in the top left corner.

Just as the athlete puts herself in a position to know that she can score from a particular angle through a long series of concerted, specific imaginings, we can put ourselves in a position

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<sup>4</sup> See Kind (2018). Her discussion of the ability to imagine under constraints seems akin to the type of process for which I'm advocating here

<sup>5</sup> See Driskell, Copper, & Moran (1994) and Feltz & Landers (1983) for meta-analytic reviews of studies supporting this notion.

to know that we will enjoy having a child if we put enough work into it. We don't get this by imagining vaguely what it would be like to have a child. We achieve this knowledge by imagining many specific situations and experiences, changing and developing beliefs on the basis of those imaginings, and then making a judgment on the basis of those new beliefs.

## **6. Objections and Replies**

Now, there are a couple things that Paul could say in response to what I have claimed thus far. First, she might object that my argument assumes that imaginative simulation will change my beliefs in the same or similar ways that an actual experience would. It is one thing to claim that imagination can affect our beliefs, she might say, but quite another to say that imagination will affect our beliefs in the same way that experience will. However, there are good reasons to hold that our imaginings affect our beliefs in ways that a corresponding experience would. A complete defense of this claim is beyond the scope of this paper; for now I will simply gesture at some reasons for holding to such a view. First, the Tversky and Kahneman discussion of the Availability Heuristic supports the view that when I imagine something it not only changes my beliefs, but it does so in much the same way that a corresponding perception would. My perception of a cardinal can cause in me the belief that my yard is full of cardinals. And, importantly, my imagining a cardinal can cause the very same belief. Even the literature on false beliefs supports this notion. In the Mazzoni and Memon study, imagining that you had a skin sample removed from your little finger by a nurse had the ability to produce in you the belief that you underwent that experience. And, importantly, this is a belief that would most likely develop had you actually underwent that procedure. The sports psychology literature further indicates that imagining an experience produces in us the same belief that would have arisen had we undergone that experience. The athlete who imagines scoring from the top right corner of the

penalty box forms the same belief that she would have had she actually scored from the top right corner of the penalty box.

Paul might also object that, although imagination can tell me about some of my beliefs post-transformative experience, it cannot inform me about all of them—or at least not enough to make a rational, informed decision. At this point I hope to have shown that imagination can affect our beliefs, and, importantly, that it can do so in much the same way that a corresponding perceptual experience would affect our beliefs. If it be granted, on these grounds, that imagination can be used to put us in a *better* epistemic position than we were before we took part in our imaginative act, then we have reason to think that with enough time, effort, and a suitable number of imaginative exercises, we can put ourselves in an epistemic position *good enough* to make a rational decision regarding a transformative experience.

Here it is again important to emphasize the incremental nature of process for which I'm advocating. My imagining trick or treating with a child produces in me only one specific belief about parenthood. If I want to make a properly informed decision, I ought to continue taking part in these specific simulations to slowly build up my stock of beliefs bit by bit. We don't place ourselves in the proper epistemic position in one fell swoop; we do so by taking part in specific, concerted imaginings, which can then slowly and incrementally put us in a position to make an informed decision about how we would react to a transformative experience.

## **7. Conclusion**

I hope to have cast doubt on Paul's contention that imagination—in the name of “perspective shifting”—cannot put us in a position to make an informed decision about whether or not to undergo a transformative experience. Imagination has the ability to alter our current

beliefs and to induce in us entirely new beliefs. Importantly, we have firm evidence that imagining undergoing an experience changes my beliefs in much the same way that a corresponding perceptual experience would. The Availability Heuristic, the literature on false beliefs, and even sport psychology all support this idea. Through the use of specific, concerted imaginings we can incrementally enrich and indeed alter our stock of beliefs in order to put ourselves in an epistemic situation where we can make an informed decision about how we will react to a transformative experience.

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