

Imagination and the epistemology of transformative experience: Gatyas on “Imagination and Perspective Shifting”

According to L.A. Paul, it would be irrational for a subject, deciding whether to undergo a potentially *transformative* experience (like having a child), to make her decision on the basis of whatever “decision theoretic” resources are available to her. In this interesting paper, Gatyas maintains that Paul’s argument underestimates the power of imagination.

One question I think deserves a little more clarity is whether Gatyas means to suggest that the decision theory Paul is criticizing has, unamended, more resources than she allows; or whether instead he means to argue that there is a more attractive approach to practical deliberation than the decision theory Paul criticizes and her alternative. I’ll come back to this at the end: I think his conclusion *ought* at least to be that we need to attend carefully to the nature of practical deliberation.

In the meantime, I want to register three concerns I have with Gatyas’s argument. I’ll use these concerns to help bring into focus an important and interesting idea, which, while I think it is animating Gatyas’s paper, is almost wholly obscured by an argument that does not do it justice.

1. Potency and Competence

To begin with, the phrase I used to summarize Gatyas’s argument, “the power of imagination,” is ambiguous. To consider the *potency* of imaginings is to consider, in a basically content neutral way, the causal upshot of imagination. This is the question Gatyas is primarily concerned with. The first half of the paper adduces evidence that imaginings can play a causal role in belief formation akin to that of experience. But, I want to suggest, Paul can take this in stride. For her concern about the power of imagination has less to do with a claim of impotence than a claim of *incompetence*: she maintains that there are certain imaginative exercises, like that of having undergone a transformative experience, that

subjects simply cannot engage in. She compares her point, for instance, to Frank Jackson's famous knowledge argument: his Mary, raised in a colorless room, cannot (inter alia) imagine redness. So the question ultimately will be whether Gatyas has an argument about the competence of imaginers to imagine what Paul says they cannot.

Gatyas concedes that his discussion in the first half of the paper is somewhat misleading, in that it does not show that imagination can *improve* a subject's belief formation. But the point I am making is different: it assumes precisely what Paul is disputing to take for granted that subjects can imagine correctly. That isn't to say that Paul is right, and indeed, I think Gatyas provides the resources for challenging her. But bringing that challenge into focus requires turning away from potency to competence.

2. The epistemic potency of imagination

The concern Gatyas does raise could be put by asking about the relationship between psychological and epistemic potency: even if he showed that imagination is psychologically potent, can change a subject's beliefs, he has not shown that it is epistemically potent, can figure in making beliefs justified. He responds to this concern by introducing the familiar evidence about visualization in sports: in his example, the soccer player can come to justifiably believe she can score from the top of the box, because she visualizes it *and becomes better at kicking the ball*. If I understand correctly, the epistemic significance of the case is mediated by a practical significance: it is *because* visualization improves, say, athletic achievement that it also provides the subject justification to believe that she will improve. If this is right, there are two obvious questions about its relevance to Paul's argument.

First, one wonders about the analogy. Presumably, the potency of visualization is going to be explained by appeal to issues in motor control. Is the idea that visualizing 4AM diaper changes (or even going trick-or-treating) going to make me *better* at doing these things? Or take Gatyas's example: if I am considering taking a job, and I visualize not having access to Indian food late at night, what follows? On the strict analogy, what ought to follow is that

I will be *better* at not having Indian food late at night. Perhaps I will be prepared for the disappointment? I take it that isn't his idea, but it is what a strict analogy would predict and the idea that the sports psychology evidence supports it is, to say the least, strained.

But as that makes clear, this is not the right sort of epistemic potency anyway. Visualization does not show *whether* she ought to take the shot. Would visualizing *missing* make it more likely that I miss? Our cases are supposed to be someone making a decision: but presumably we don't want to say that if the subject visualizes making a decision she'll be better at it. We can put it this way: if the softness of the analogy could be overcome, it would suggest that visualization exercises would be good for the anxious expectant parent. But Paul's concern is with someone deciding whether to have a child. And it is just not clear how the visualization evidence relates to that.

3. Practical deliberation

My final concern stems from what I called the mediated epistemic significance of the visualization evidence. The question is: why are we doing epistemology at all? Undoubtedly given a claim like "X is the best thing for S to do" we can raise questions about epistemic justification ("what is your evidence?"). But we *were* talking not about the justification of a belief, but a difficult *decision*, and on a line of thought I at least find quite congenial, practical deliberation is not necessarily reducible to its theoretical counterpart.

Bernard Williams, for instance, once observed that reflecting on the means to an end is a piece of theoretical, not practical, deliberation. In context, Williams was explaining his more capacious understanding of internal reasons, en route to arguing that all reasons a subject has are internal in the sense that they are accessible to her via practical deliberation from her "subjective motivational set." In this terminology, I think Paul's thesis can be put this way: the decisive considerations relevant to decisions about transformative experiences are *not* accessible, via practical deliberation from the subject's subjective motivational set.

Williams concludes the discussion I am referencing with a comment on the power of

imagination: a subjective motivational set is not “statically given” in the sense that one upshot of practical deliberation is the alteration of one’s motivational set. Imagination can undermine some putative reason by providing a “more concrete sense of what would be involved” in pursuing that line, or (“positively”) it can “create new possibilities and new desires” (*Moral Luck*, 105). Williams’s point in this discussion is to undermine one ground for externalism, namely a too narrow conception of practical deliberation. And he offers imagination as a means of opening up practical deliberation so as to make more considerations that seem “external” actually turn out to be internal.

Consider the question of competency from this Williams-inspired perspective. A deliberating subject can imagine *herself*, e.g., taking the job, or having a baby. As Gatyas notes, it is important to recognize that we need to do this in *some detail*. But Paul’s point is that, however much detail we might add to our imaginative exercise, it is simply the wrong exercise. The subject needs to imagine someone else, her future self suitably changed by the experience, taking the job or having the baby. One way of putting the point, then, is that Paul assumes that our subjective motivational set, if not “statically given” is at least not sufficiently dynamic to accommodate transformative experience.

Thus, when Gatyas says—intriguingly, only in the introduction to the paper—that imagining can “begin the transformation” Paul is concerned about, hence providing the epistemic vantage she forecloses, we can see him as stressing a Williams-style point. He is urging that one way imagination can be relevant to distinctly practical deliberation is by allowing subjects to reflect from the vantage of different possible “motivational sets.” The idea could well be that Paul starts from a too “epistemological” standpoint, and so fails to recognize the distinctly practical, transformative power of imagination. If this is the point, then I think it is an important one. But I don’t see (yet) how the evidence he adduces speaks to it.