

On Imagining, Supposing and Conceiving

Magdalena Balcerak Jackson

(draft)

Abstract:

To explain how we achieve our cognitive goals when we make decisions about future actions, when we perform thought experiments, and when we engage in games of pretense, philosophers frequently invoke our ability to imagine, conceive and/or suppose various things. But what is the relationship between imaginings, conceivings and supposings? And what exactly are the epistemic roles they play in the cognitive projects in which they are involved? In this paper I provide answers to these questions by first bringing out a contrast between what we do when we imagine and what we do when we suppose, and then by showing how to fit conceivings into the emerging systematic picture of the ways we use different forms of hypothetical thinking to acquire knowledge.

1. Introduction

Sit down in your armchair, relax, shake off all thoughts about your favorite view of modal epistemology that might be running wild in your head as you start to read, and simply let me guide you through some mental exercises:

First,

...let me ask you to imagine this. You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own. The director of the hospital now tells you, "Look, we're sorry the Society of Music Lovers did this to you – we would never have permitted it if we had known. But still, they did it, and the violinist is now plugged into you. To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you."¹

* For valuable comments and suggestions on earlier presentations of this material, and in conversations about the issues discussed in this paper thanks to Brendan Balcerak Jackson, Paul Boghossian, Alex Byrne, Lars Dänzer, Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa, Amy Kind, Peter Kung.

¹ Thompson (1971).

Second, think about prime numbers – that is, those numbers that are only divisible by one and themselves – and now suppose that there are only finitely many of them.²

And finally, third, let me ask you whether you can “conceive of a zombie” in the following sense:

So let us consider my zombie twin. This creature is molecule for molecule identical to me, and identical in all the low-level properties postulated by a complete physics but he lacks conscious experience entirely. (...) To fix ideas we can assume that right now I am gazing out the window, experiencing some nice green sensations from seeing the trees outside, having pleasant taste experiences through munching on a chocolate bar, and feeling a dull aching sensation in my right shoulder. What is going on in my zombie twin? (...) He will certainly be identical to me functionally: he will be processing the same kind of information, reacting in a similar way to inputs, with his internal configurations being modified appropriately and with indistinguishable behavior resulting. (...) It is just that none of this functioning will be accompanied by any conscious experience. There will be no phenomenal feel. There is nothing it is like to be a zombie.³

What did you do in each of the three cases? Was it the same kind of mental activity? Was the difference between putting the three cases in front of your mind’s eye analogous to the difference between visually experiencing three different scenes spread out before your non-metaphorical eyes, or was it rather analogous to the difference between using three different sense modalities? And, how difficult is it for you to answer these questions?

In order to explain how we achieve our cognitive goals when we when we make decisions about future actions, when we perform thought experiments, and when we engage in games of pretense, philosophers frequently invoke our ability to imagine, conceive and/or suppose various things. But there seems to be no underlying agreement about whether these terms can or should be used interchangeably. And moreover, there is no systematic philosophical taxonomy that describes the differences between

² This is the beginning of several *reductio ad absurdum* arguments of this claim, the first of which can be found on Euclid’s work Elements (book XI). If you feel more comfortable with a non-mathematical example, here is one: Suppose that heavier bodies fall faster than lighter ones, as Galileo did in order to disprove the Aristotelian theory by contradiction.

³ Chalmers (1996), 92-93.

supposing, conceiving and imagining, or that explains the epistemological consequences of these differences. In this paper, my goal is to provide such a taxonomical framework, and to argue that it is epistemologically useful and important.

In the next section I begin by laying out a naïve picture of hypothetical attitudes as a unified kind. In the third section, I compare and contrast imagining and supposing with the goal of elucidating a thick conception of imagining as a kind of state that serves a distinctive epistemic purpose. In section four, I provide a model for understanding supposition as acceptance that accounts for the fact that supposition can be used in *reductio* reasoning. And in section five, I sketch an account of conceiving and its epistemic significance that shows why we should be more careful about relying on conceivings than on imaginings and supposings within our philosophical practice.

2. Hypothetical Attitudes: Common Nature, Voluntary Control and Epistemic Innocence

There are several ways to understand what it is that we aim to capture by discussing imagining, supposing and conceiving. Are we trying to capture what it is that we describe using the terms “imagine”, “suppose” and “conceive” in ordinary language? Are we trying to capture the nature of psychological kinds analogous to the visual or auditory perceptual processing systems? Or are we trying to capture epistemic or even philosophical practices of a sort? Each of these projects is worth pursuing in its own right. However, if our goal is to understand what happens when we fruitfully engage in exercises like the ones you were invited to join at the beginning of this paper, the answer is that we aren’t involved in any single one of these projects on its own, but to a certain extent in all of them simultaneously.

I take imagination, conceiving and supposing to be complex *cognitive capacities*. They are things that we as cognitive agents do for specific purposes, including epistemic purposes. So, I am interested in investigating the nature of psychologically real capacities that we actually have and use. But I am also interested in the possibility of putting these capacities to use in normatively good ways for the purposes of systematic enquiry such as philosophy. So, I am interested in what imagining, supposing and conceiving are or could

be as epistemically valuable practices. Correspondingly, the goal is not merely to describe whatever we naturally classify in language using “imagine”, “suppose” and “conceive,”⁴ but to develop a systematic picture of three distinct and independently useful cognitive capacities that captures core cases of imaginings, supposing and conceiving.

There are obvious commonalities between imagining, supposing and conceiving. They are all ways of thinking about hypothetical objects and scenarios.⁵ In all three of the cases above you were asked to consider a situation that you know not to obtain, or that you at least have good reason to believe does not actually obtain. In the first case you represented yourself as waking up hooked up to a famous unconscious violinist in need of life support. In the second case, you represented there being only finitely many primes. And in the third case, you represented my fully functional but phenomenally ‘dead’ zombie twin. Or at least, in each of these cases you attempted to represent the non-actual situation described. Given this fundamental commonality between imagining, supposing and conceiving, let us call the thesis that they are all instances of the same basic cognitive capacity the *Common Nature Thesis*.⁶

The Common Nature Thesis is naturally paired with a thesis that ascribes a common epistemic status to our hypothetical attitudes. According to the *Epistemic Innocence Thesis*, imaginings, conceivings and supposings do not provide justification for belief. That is, being in one of these states is never by itself sufficient to make it epistemically appropriate to believe anything. It is important to emphasize that the Epistemic Innocence Thesis does not entail that imagination, conceiving or supposition have no role at all to play in the acquisition of knowledge. Scientists often stress that imagination is a precondition of their success. However, on the orthodox view, the role of imagination is restricted to the context of discovery, rather than the context of justification. Imagining something can lead to the formation of a hypothesis, but it cannot evidentially support the hypothesis.

⁴ Kind (2013) convincingly demonstrates that what falls under our concept ‘imagine’ is too heterogeneous to form one natural mental kind.

⁵ Thinking is to be understood here very liberally, as any form of conscious consideration of a specific mental content.

⁶ See Ichikawa and Jarvis (2013) for an implicit endorsement of the Common Nature Thesis.

The assumption that imagination, specifically, is epistemically innocent is encouraged by focusing on the creative use of our ability to imagine non-actual objects and scenarios in the context of creating works of art, or in the context of simply having intellectual fun. But the main reason for the widespread philosophical skepticism about the epistemic value of imagination, supposition and conceiving has to do with what many believe to be another commonality between core instances of the three mental acts: the fact that they are under our voluntary control. Setting aside cases of spontaneous daydreaming and the like, what we imagine, what we suppose, and what we conceive are under our voluntary control in two respects: we form these attitudes at will, and we decide what it is that we imagine, suppose or conceive of. To put it in a slogan: imagining, supposing and conceiving are up to us.⁷ Let us call this the *Voluntary Control Thesis*. Elsewhere, I explain in detail how the voluntary nature of imagination – the fact that imagination is up to us – can seem to be in tension with the possibility of imagination providing justification. But here is the idea *in nuce*: if we control the occurrence and the content of our imaginings, then they are not constrained by the way things actually are, and therefore they cannot teach us anything about how things actually are. And more dramatically, if there are no limits to what we can imagine, then the fact that we imagine P does not rule out or speak against any hypothesis about how things are.⁸ Analogous arguments could be provided for our other hypothetical attitudes, supposing and conceiving. So, just as the epistemic value of perception – the paradigmatic basic source of justification – springs from the specific nature of perceptual experiences and their causal relations to the external environment, the alleged epistemic innocence of hypothetical attitudes springs from the fact that these attitudes – or at least core instances of them – are characterized by their shared voluntary nature.

But are the Common Nature Thesis, the Voluntary Control Thesis and the Epistemic Innocence Thesis really true of imaginings, supposings and/or conceivings? In what follows I present reasons to think that the Common Nature Thesis is false with respect to imagining and supposing. More importantly, I show that differences between imagining and supposing include a significant difference in the extent to which they are under our voluntary control, which renders the Voluntary Control Thesis only

⁷ Scepticism along these lines can be found in Sartre (1972), Wittgenstein (1981) and White (1990) to name just a few.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of what I call the Up To Us Challenge, see Balcerak Jackson (forthcoming).

unqualifiedly true for supposings but not for imaginings. And I explain how the nature of imagination forces us to revise the Epistemic Innocence Thesis. After discussing imagining and supposing, I turn to the question of how to fit conceiving into the developing picture.

3. Imagining as Experiential Perspective-Taking

Remember imagining waking up hooked up to a famous violinist and being told that you needed to accept your fate in order to save his life. Had I asked you instead to *suppose* that this scenario obtained, would you have done anything different? Presumably, when you imagined the scenario described, you put yourself in the shoes of the person waking up in the hospital. You imagined sensing the IV-needle in your arm, hearing the medical machinery in the background, and feeling surprise and anxiety. Intuitively, unless you vividly represent the scenario from the perspective of the experiencing subject, you do not really follow my invitation to *imagine* it, in the core sense of the term. But had I asked you to suppose that you were in the situation of the unlucky life saver, it would have been perfectly in accordance with my request for you simply to take the situation as obtaining, without representing it as being experienced from the first person perspective. While imagination involves a phenomenology – and often, mental imagery – familiar to us from mental states such as perceptual experiences and emotions, supposition intuitively does not require such phenomenology, even though supposing something might initiate a subsequent act of imagining.⁹

There is closely related linguistic evidence that supposings and imaginings do not belong to the same mental kind. Some ascriptions of imagining and supposing – in particular, those cases involving propositional reports – seem merely to be two ways of describing the same mental act:

- (1) Alice imagines that she has an IV-needle in her arm.
- (2) Alice supposes that she has an IV-needle in her arm.

⁹ Amy Kind provides detailed arguments for a claim along these lines in Kind (2001).

Substituting ‘imagines’ in (1) with ‘supposes’, as in (2), results in a sentence that is roughly equivalent. However, in other cases – particularly in objectual and eventive reports – ‘supposes’ cannot be substituted for ‘imagines’:

- (3) Alice imagines having an IV-needle in her arm.
- (4) * Alice supposes having an IV-needle in her arm.

Substituting ‘supposes’ for ‘imagines’ in (3) results in the ungrammatical (4). The difference between the (1) and (2) on one hand and (3) on the other hand is that for (1) and (2) to be true there does not need to be any specific way for Alice to represent that there is an IV-needle in her arm. However (3) is intuitively true only if Alice puts herself in the position of the relevant person in her imagination. Thus the truth-conditions of objectual or eventive imagining ascriptions are more demanding or restrictive than the truth-conditions of supposing ascriptions. This is a reflection of the observation above, that objectual and eventive imaginings involve capacities related to perspective-taking and phenomenal experience, and hence that they make use of cognitive resources that go beyond those needed merely to entertain a certain mental content. As competent users of English we all understand that supposing that you have an IV-needle in your arm is one thing, while imagining having an IV-needle in your arm is something entirely different. The phenomenon that is captured by objectual and eventive imagining ascriptions is distinctive, and I suggest that we should limit our talk of imagination in the core sense to instances of this phenomenon.

There are other differences between core instances of imagining and core instances of supposing some of which have been noted before:

First, while there is a realistic risk of failure when engaging in an imaginative exercise, that risk is not present, or is at least significantly reduced, when merely supposing things to be thus and so.¹⁰ If I have never had any serious medical procedure involving injections, I might have difficulties imagining having an IV-needle in my arm. I might simply fail to represent the adequate phenomenal feel of this situation. But I would still be able to suppose that the situation obtains. To put it in a blunt and slightly oversimplified way: deciding to suppose that P guarantees success in doing so.

¹⁰ See also White (1990), 261.

Second, as Tamar Gendler points out, the phenomenon of imaginative resistance has no counterpart in the realm of supposition. Imaginative resistance occurs when a subject is asked to imagine a particular situation, but is either unable or unwilling to do so.¹¹ Most convincing examples of imaginative resistance involve requests to imagine situations where morally highly deviant behaviors and attitudes are endorsed. Even though we have no trouble supposing that the following scenario obtains, we have difficulties imagining it:

Alice took her newborn baby, put it into a cotton bag, closed the bag tightly with a rope and threw it into the lake. And this was good. After all, the baby was a girl.

Imaginative resistance has also been postulated with respect to conceptually deviant scenarios. Andy Egan and Tyler Doggett write: “Though we think it is hard to imagine that Robert Stalnaker is the smallest prime number, we have no trouble supposing that he is.”¹²

Third, unlike imagining, which we often engage in for its own sake, supposing always happens for a purpose. Because imagining involves a certain – often vivid and immediate – phenomenology, and because this phenomenology can give us an approximation of what it would feel like to be in new, interesting and desired circumstances, it holds an appeal of its own. Mere supposition does not exhibit this immediate phenomenal self-involvement. There is little appeal in merely letting different propositions pass through one’s mind in thinking. Thus it is unsurprising that we need a reason to do so. And the paradigmatic, or perhaps even constitutive reason for engaging in supposition is the one described by Alan White: “To say ‘suppose that P’ invites or introduces a statement of the consequences or implications that P.”¹³

¹¹ See Gendler (2000).

¹² Doggett/Egan (2007), 1.

¹³ White (1990). Obviously, this is not an observation about the psychological underpinnings of supposition, but about the practices that constitute the relevant cognitive capacity.

Fourth, imagining has the potential to motivate action, while supposition typically only motivates deliberation. When one imagines being a doctor in a game of make-believe, one experiences genuine motivation for certain actions towards the other players. When another participant in the game is lying on the ground, holding her belly and wincing, one does not merely entertain the thought that one should approach her with one's (toy) doctor's kit for an examination, one feels a genuine pull towards acting in that way. Such motivation is absent during an exercise of supposing that one is a doctor.¹⁴

These differences between core instances of imagining and core instances of supposing give us plenty of reasons to reject the Common Nature Thesis. What is more important, though, is that this short analysis suggests that imagining is more demanding than supposing: imagining requires us not merely to represent a non-actual scenario in some way or other, but to represent it by taking a specific experiential perspective. This characteristic experiential perspectivity is hinted at in many philosopher's statements about the imagination. "To imagine is always at least to imagine, from the inside, being in some conscious mental state"¹⁵ writes Christopher Peacocke. Tamar Gendler observes that imaginative engagement is "in a difficult to pin-down way self-involving."¹⁶ And Zeno Vendler describes it as follows:

(T)he necessary condition for imagining performing certain actions, or being in certain conditions, is the existence of an experiential content attached to these things. It must make sense, in other words, to ask the question: what would it be like doing such a thing or being in such a state.¹⁷

The view that recognizes and best captures this feature of imagination is the recreativist or simulationist view. On the recreativist or simulationist view, imagination is the capacity to put oneself in the perspective of another actual or merely possible subject, by recreating or simulating the experience that the subject has or would have. When I imagine seeing an apple, I don't imagine a mental process of seeing, but I simulate or recreate undergoing such a process. I put myself in the position of somebody who actually perceptually experiences an apple. In their book-length treatment of the

¹⁴ For more discussion on participation resulting from the activity of imagining being in a certain position, see ch. 6-7 in Walton (1990).

¹⁵ Peacocke (1985).

¹⁶ Gendler (2006). A more careful analysis of the perspectival nature of imagination is the project of another paper.

¹⁷ Vendler (1979), 166.

imagination as a “recreative” capacity Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft describe their view as follows:

So what is the recreative imagination? Here is our central hypothesis. Imaginative projection involves the capacity to have, and in good measure to control the having of, states that are not perceptions or beliefs or decisions or experiences of movements of one’s body but which are in various ways like those states – like them in ways that enable the states possessed through imagination to mimic and, relative to certain purposes to substitute for perceptions, beliefs, decisions, and experiences of movements.¹⁸

Similarly, Alvin Goldman identifies a simulationist capacity that he calls “Enactment-imagination” or E-imagination for short:

Enactment-imagination is a matter of creating or trying to create in one’s own mind a selected mental state, or at least a rough facsimile of such a state, though the faculty of the imagination. Prime examples of E-imagination include sensory forms of imagination, where one creates, through imagination, perception-like states.¹⁹

What is common to recreativist or simulationist views is that they postulate an asymmetrical mimicry relationship between imaginings on the one hand, and specific mental states of other types, such as perceptual experiences, emotions or bodily sensations on the other hand. Imaginings, by their very nature, take up, or at least attempt to take up the phenomenal character and the representational content of corresponding experiences. Just as perceptual experience aims at capturing the external world, imagination aims at capturing the character of possible experiences.²⁰

I argue that the recreativist or simulationist framework provides a good model for the distinctive features of imagining by virtue of which it contrasts with supposing. However, recreativists or simulationists typically understand supposition as belonging to the same mental kind as imagination. Both imaginings and supposings are understood as simulations, with imaginings treated as simulations of perceptual experiences and

¹⁸ Currie/Ravenscroft (2002), 11.

¹⁹ Goldman (2006), 42.

²⁰ For further elaboration of the recreativist picture sketched here, see Balcerak Jackson (forthcoming).

supposings treated as simulations of belief.²¹ For reasons that I explain in the following section, I believe that it is a mistake to treat supposings as simulations of belief. But this in no way impugns the recreativist or simulationist picture of imaginings.

I cannot defend the recreativist view in the context of this paper, but it is worth pointing out that it is not only phenomenologically compelling, but also more widely accepted in the philosophical literature than it might initially seem. Both Timothy Williamson and Stephen Yablo echo the basic recreativist conception when they refer to our employment of our imaginative capacity as an “offline”-use of our perceptual capacities.²²

Accepting that imagination is by its very nature recreative perspective-taking has significant consequences. It reveals that Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s claim that “The world of reality is limited; the world of imagination is boundless” is a grave exaggeration at best. If imagination, by its very nature, aims to create simulations that take up the phenomenal character and content of corresponding (possible) experiences, then the character of our imaginings is constrained by the properties exhibited by these corresponding experiences. To take a simple example: even though we can easily suppose that there is a wholly red and wholly green circle in front of us, we have trouble imagining seeing one. What we can imagine is not wholly under our voluntary control, or wholly up to us, but is instead constrained by what we could perceptually, emotionally or bodily experience. In Zeno Vendler’s words: “The limits of imagination are the limits of experience.”²³

The realization that imagination – unlike supposition – is systematically constrained forces us to revise the Epistemic Innocence Thesis. Within this comparative study I can only provide a sketch of the epistemic role of imagination; I provide a more detailed account elsewhere.²⁴ The main idea is as follows: when Alice imagines seeing a red apple, then in core respects her imagining aims at things looking the same way to her – visually seeming the same way from a first-person perspective – as they would if she had a perceptual experience as of a red apple. The imagining state represents to her a

²¹ Currie/Ravenscroft (2002) treat supposition explicitly as a kind of imagination which in turn is a specific type of mental simulation.

²² See Williamson (2008) and Yablo (2002).

²³ Vendler (1979), 166.

²⁴ See Balcerak Jackson (forthcoming).

distinctive way of looking, just as the perceptual state does. After all, this is what visual imagination is by its very nature, a capacity that is dependent on our perceptual capacity. But in virtue of this recreative character, Alice's imagining provides her with direct epistemic access to possibilities of a sort: it provides her with justification for beliefs about how things could possibly look. On the basis of her imagination, Alice can be justified in believing, for example, that a hexagon can be formed out of four triangles, or that something can be blue and elephant-shaped. Obviously, the justification provided in these cases is defeasible. We have no more reason to believe in the infallibility of our imaginative capacities than we have to believe in the infallibility of our perceptual or reasoning capacities.

Even though this sketch allows us to carve out a justificatory role for imagination, one might worry that this role does not allow for imaginatively-based justification for any beliefs that are not about our experience. Dispelling this worry would require its own paper, but let me suggest a tempting line of thought. Let us suppose that imagining provides us with justification for believing that P is a way things could look. But if I have reason to believe that P is a way things could look, then I have reason to believe that P is a way things could veridically look. But then a fortiori, I have reason to believe that P is a way things could be. At least for the typical properties that enter into the phenomenal contents of perceptual experience, such as surface properties, the inference from *things could look that way* to *things could veridically look that way* seems promising. If this line of thought can be supported, then we have not only an argument for the claim that imaginings provide us with justification of some sort, but an argument for the claim that imaginings provide us with justification for beliefs about not merely experiential, but also metaphysical possibilities.

4. Supposition as Acceptance

The contrast between imagining and supposing has helped us to develop a rich notion of imagination, a notion according to which it is epistemically valuable. But where does this leave supposition? To say that supposition is under our voluntary control in a strong sense, and that it is thereby epistemically innocent, does not yet tell us much about what kind of cognitive capacity it is, and it does not explain how and why we use it in

cognitive projects all the time. When I asked you to suppose that there are finitely many prime numbers, I was – as you might have been aware – inviting you to take the first step in a reasoning procedure that ultimately justifies the belief that there are not finitely many prime numbers. Our practices seem to suggest that even though supposition is epistemically innocent, it is not epistemically vacuous.

We can better understand the nature and the epistemic value of supposition with the help of Robert Stalnaker's technical notion of acceptance. Stalnaker introduces the notion of acceptance in *Inquiry* as a label for those mental states that are primarily involved in the acts of deliberation and inquiry of intelligent subjects. In subsequent work, he also uses the notion to account for the common ground necessary for successful communication between intelligent subjects, that is for the “mutually recognized shared information in a situation in which an act of trying to communicate takes place. (...) information that must be available in order that the act of uttering certain noises reasonably be taken as an act of trying to get somebody to acquire certain information.”²⁵ As Stalnaker rightly points out, not all speaker presuppositions that guide or emerge from a communicative act can be correctly described as (shared) beliefs. Rather, acceptance is, according to Stalnaker, “a category of propositional attitudes and methodological stances towards a proposition”²⁶ that includes belief, but also many other mental attitudes very much unlike beliefs: “To accept a proposition is to treat it as true for some reason. One ignores, at least temporarily and perhaps in a limited context, the possibility that it is false.”²⁷

This characterization includes all the ingredients that make acceptance a valuable model for supposition:

First, to accept a proposition is not merely to treat it as true as a matter of coincidence, or because one has been struck by lightning. It is to treat it as true *for a purpose*. Thus far supposings have been characterized by their hypothetical nature and by the fact that they

²⁵ Stalnaker (1984), 77ff and Stalnaker (2002), 704.

²⁶ Interestingly, Stalnaker's description of acceptance as a conglomerate of a category of propositional attitude and methodological stance fits nicely with my description of imaginings, supposings and conceivings as similar conglomerate of psychological kinds and cognitive practices.

²⁷ Stalnaker (2002), 716. This also distinguishes acceptances from so called pro attitudes that include wishes or desires.

obey the Voluntary Control Thesis. So it might look as if supposing is an ‘anything goes’ mental state, that when we suppose something we are simply related to some content or other. But then what distinguishes supposing that P from merely considering P or thinking of P? And what explains the obvious methodological value of supposings? The answer has two parts. First, unlike considering P or entertaining the thought that P, supposing P has a quasi-assertive nature. It is part of the nature of supposition that we do not merely think of P, but also think of P as true, that is accept P. And second, unlike considering that P or entertaining the thought that P, supposing that P always serves a purpose. As we have seen, the purpose is typically to reason through the consequences of whatever is supposed. To suppose something for no reason whatsoever, or without consequently thinking through its implications is akin to stopping in mid-action. To consider or entertain P we might need a reason to bring it up, but to suppose P we need a reason to treat it as true.

Second, it is consistent with accepting a proposition that a person accepts it only *temporarily*, and even only for a very limited time frame. The only condition on the duration of our supposition is whatever is needed to think through the consequences relevant in the context at hand. As soon as this purpose is served, the subject does not necessarily retain any credence in the proposition supposed.

And third, a person might accept something *in a limited context* only, while rejecting it or suspending judgment in other contexts. This “compartmentalization” is actually typical of acceptance states that are not also beliefs. For supposition to serve its job it is crucial that supposing something that we know not to be true, for the purpose of reasoning through its consequences, is encapsulated from numerous of our other, well-supported beliefs.

The suggestion, then, is that we should understand supposition as the cognitive capacity to enter into states that meet the minimal requirements on states of acceptance. Given the characterization provided above, this entails that we can suppose conceptual or a priori falsehoods. One might worry that this casts the net too wide. Shouldn’t we be interested in a notion of supposition that has a closer connection to rationality and possibility? The short answer is: no. Often our best way to figure out what is impossible is via *reductio*. One reason to suppose that there are finitely many prime numbers is to

show that this supposition leads to a contradiction. For this reasoning to be available to us, it is important that we have the cognitive capacity to treat as true – at least in the temporarily limited, compartmentalized way – propositions that are necessarily false, and even propositions that it would be highly irrational to believe.

We are now in a position to see why supposition should not be understood as simulated belief. Believing that P – even simulating believing that P – demands more of a subject than merely that she take P as true. It requires one to be rationally committed to P. Such rational commitment depends on the use of basic cognitive capacities that are constitutive of us as believers, such as our grasp of the relevant concepts, certain fundamental logical capacities, and so on. This places limits on the propositions to which we can be rationally committed, consistent with our status as believers. For example, we cannot be rationally committed to the proposition that Stalnaker is the smallest prime number, not just because there is evidence against it, but because it violates simple conceptual principles. Because of this, we also have difficulties simulating being rationally committed to it. But of course we have no trouble supposing that Stalnaker is the smallest prime number, and as we have seen our ability to do so is crucial for our ability to engage in *reductio* reasoning.

The example of *reductio* reasoning shows, moreover, that even though supposing does not play a justifying role, it would also be wrong to say that its role is in the context of discovery. Supposing that there are finitely many prime numbers was not the inspiration to consider the hypothesis that the number of primes is not finite. Rather, supposing that there are finitely many prime numbers serves an *enabling* role in the acquisition of knowledge of a modal claim. Our ability to treat the relevant proposition as true is necessary for us to be able to engage in the relevant inference form that justifies our final belief. By enabling us to reason through consequences, supposings provide us with indirect access to possibility and necessity.

5. Conceiving as Rational Perspective-Taking

I have argued that imagination is best understood as recreative perspective-taking that takes up the distinctive first-personal phenomenal character of experience, and that justifies us in beliefs about possibilities. And I have argued that supposition is best

understood as a minimal form of acceptance that allows us to take propositions as true for a limited time and in a limited context, and that enables us to reason through their implications. Is there still a place, at this point, for a distinctive cognitive capacity of conceiving? A deflationary attitude towards conceivings is especially tempting given that talk of conceiving is not nearly as natural as talk about imagining and supposing. So, perhaps conceiving is merely a fancy word invented by philosophers to talk about either imagination or supposition.

Think again about me extending David Chalmers' invitation for you attempt to conceive of my (or his) zombie twin. If you think you succeeded in conceiving the zombie, what did you do? And more specifically, can what you did be adequately characterized either as imagination or as supposition, as these are now understood?

The answer seems to be no. Chalmers intends his thought experiment to provide evidence against physicalism as a necessary claim about the relation of the mental to the physical. For this to be the case, it must be that successfully conceiving of the zombie provides evidence for the existence of a possibility of some sort. Therefore, we cannot treat the question of whether we can conceive of a zombie as the question of whether we can suppose that a zombie exists. Surely we can suppose this, but as we have seen this is compatible with it being necessarily or even conceptually false. But it is also difficult to understand the invitation as an invitation to imagine a zombie. For what is the first-person perspective that we are supposed to occupy, and whose experiences we are supposed to recreate? It cannot be the perspective of the zombie, because the zombie is stipulated not to have experiences, and so not to have a perspective to occupy. Perhaps we are meant to occupy the perspective of the zombie by recreating experiences of absences. But it is, at the very least, not clear that such an invitation makes sense. On the other hand, if it is the perspective of an external observer of the zombie that we are supposed to occupy, then this observer will not experience any of those properties that distinguish a zombie from a conscious being. For her the experience as of seeing the zombie is indistinguishable from the experience as of seeing an ordinary conscious being.

The more plausible explanation is that Chalmers's thought experiment asks us to use a cognitive capacity that is distinct from both imagining and supposing. In a later paper, he describes the intended target as follows:

One can place the varieties of positive conceivability under the broad rubric of imagination: to positively conceive of a situation is to in some sense imagine a specific configuration of objects and properties. It is common to imagine situations in considerable detail, and this imagination is often accompanied by interpretation and reasoning. When one imagines a situation and reasons about it, the object of one's imagination is often revealed as a situation in which S is this case, for some S . When this is the case, we can say that the imagined situation verifies S , and that one has imagined that S .²⁸

The following clarifications make it clear that the notion of imagination he has in mind is significantly different from ours:

There is a sense in which we can imagine situations that do not seem to be potential contents of perceptual experiences. One can imagine situations beyond the scale of perception: e.g. molecules of H_2O , or Germany winning the Second World War. One can imagine situations that are unperceivable in principle: e.g. the existence of an invisible being that leaves no trace on perception. And one can imagine pairs of situations that are perceptually indistinguishable: e.g. the situations postulated by two scientific hypotheses that make the same empirical predictions, or arguably the existence of a conscious being and its zombie twin (an unconscious physically identical duplicate).

In these cases, we do not form a perceptual image that represents S . Nevertheless, we do more than merely suppose that S , or entertain the hypothesis that S . Our relation to S has a mediated objectual character that is analogous to that found in the case of perceptual imaginability. In this case, we have an intuition of (or as of) a world in which S , or at least of (or as of) a situation in which S , where a situation is (roughly) a configuration of objects and properties within a world. We might say that in these cases, one can modally imagine that P . One modally imagines that P if one modally imagines a world that verifies P , or a situation that verifies P . Modal imagination goes beyond perceptual imagination, for the reasons above, but it shares with perceptual imagination its mediated objectual character. (...) This notion is our core notion of positive conceivability: I will henceforth say that S is positively conceivable when it is coherently modally imaginable.²⁹

The main question is whether we actually have this cognitive capacity of conceiving as “coherent modal imagination.” While there are numerous examples of using supposition and imagination, in our sense, in everyday reasoning, conceiving in this sense would only

²⁸ Chalmers (2002).

²⁹ Ibid.

be of limited philosophical or other highly technical use. What are our options? One option is to abandon the discussion of conceivability as an epistemically useful cognitive capacity. The other option is to try to reconstruct the basic idea behind conceivability while relying on other notions that are more familiar to us than the notion of modal imagination used by Chalmers. What follows is a sketch of such a reconstruction.

When one conceives of P, one does engage in an exercise of perspective-taking. But one does not take the perspective of the subject as the subject of phenomenal experiences, but rather as the subject of rational belief. Just as when we imagine seeing a red apple, we put ourselves into the position of a possible subject who actually has a perceptual experience as of a red apple, when we conceive of zombies, we put ourselves in the position of a possible subject who is rationally committed to zombies. So, while I have argued that supposing should not be understood as simulating belief, I suggest that conceiving – at least as it is used in philosophy – should be so understood.

Simulated perspective-taking in imagination is easy to understand because the subjects whose perspectives we are taking are ordinary perceivers like us. But the perspectives we take in conceiving, I want to suggest, are those of ideally rational believers with unlimited reasoning capacities. This makes the perspective-taking in conceiving harder to understand. When one tries to conceive of zombies, one holds fixed one's basic rational capacities – first and foremost, one's conceptual and logical capacities – and tries to adopt the perspective of a subject who use of these capacities is infallible and unimpaired by limitations of memory, attention and so on, and who believes that there are zombies in the circumstances described. In fact, one can distinguish two perspective-taking exercises, corresponding to the two experiential perspectives that one might take on zombies noted above. The first exercise calls on one merely to simulate ideally rational belief that there are zombies, while the second calls on one to simulate ideally rational belief that one is oneself a zombie. (There is no *prima facie* reason to think that the latter exercise is any less coherent than the former, unless it turns out that belief is partly constituted by certain phenomenal properties.)

What is the epistemic significance of conceiving, on this understanding? If we can successfully conceive of zombies, then this answers for us the question of whether an ideally rational subject could be rationally committed to the existence of zombies. In

other words, asking whether zombies are conceivable is, first and foremost, a way of trying to determine whether it is possible to have an ideally rational belief in zombies. Given the constraints on simulating ideally rational belief, the fact that one is able to successfully conceive in a particular case arguably gives one *prima facie* reason to believe that what one conceives of is possible in at least one sense: it is evidence that what one conceives is not ruled out by ideal application of one's basic conceptual and logical capacities. Or in our terminology: Given the ways in which what we can conceive is not under our voluntary control, conceiving is not epistemically innocent but justifies claims about what is possible. Whether this has any further implications for what is *metaphysically* possible remains an open question, and so it remains an open question whether or not Chalmers's zombie argument is ultimately successful if we understand conceiving along these lines. (This would be the project of another paper.) The suggestion here is simply that understanding conceiving as simulated ideally rational belief gives us a good way to make sense of the cognitive capacity Chalmers and others gesture towards when speaking of conceiving.

Is conceiving, so understood, a cognitive capacity that we actually have? The answer to this question is important, because even if there is an entailment from conceivability to possibility, this only yields justification for beliefs about what is possible if we actually can successfully conceive. In general, I am skeptical about whether we can occupy cognitive perspectives of subjects whose mental capacities are so radically different from our own. In imagination we surely can occupy perspectives of subjects who happen to have very different courses of experiences in their lifetimes. But it is doubtful that we can imaginatively occupy the perspective of somebody who does not have any of our perceptual capacities, but some other form of conscious experience instead; call it *schmerception*. If it is indeed a fact that in imagination we use some of the same cognitive mechanisms that were developed for perception – as some empirical research suggests – then those mechanisms are probably not capable of recreating a *schmerceptual* experience. This analogy might not be completely appropriate, because conceiving does not require us to simulate mental capacities that we do not have at all, but rather to simulate highly idealized versions of capacities that we actually possess. So, the question is whether – and if so, how reliably – non-ideal reasoners like us can put themselves in the shoes of ideal reasoners when trying to decide whether P is genuinely conceivable. I am skeptical, but the present point is just to emphasize that the

understanding of conceiving that I have developed here brings out a challenge here for those who would defend the epistemic value of conceiving in philosophical (or other) enquiry.

Conclusions

Talk about imagination, supposition and conceivability is so ubiquitous in contemporary analytic philosophy that it is tempting to assume that we philosophers all understand quite well what kind of activity we are asking each other to engage in when we ask each other to imagine waking up in a hospital hooked up to a famous unconscious violinist, to suppose that there are finitely many prime numbers, or to conceive of our zombie twin. Call this activity whatever you prefer, it is just what we do when we represent hypothetical scenarios and objects. Such an attitude might be especially tempting if one takes it for granted that hypothetical attitudes have a merely enabling or heuristic role to play within philosophical enquiry. However, even when the epistemic role of hypothetical attitudes is under discussion – as in debates about whether conceivability is a good epistemic guide to possibility – the nature of conceiving in relation to imagining and supposing is often left rather vague.

In this paper I have argued for a systematic picture of imaginings, supposings and conceivings as the products of three distinctive cognitive capacities. Such a picture is supported by the salient differences between core cases of the three types of hypothetical attitudes – most importantly by the ways in which what we imagine, suppose or conceive is and is not under our voluntary control. Imagination is the cognitive capacity to take perspectives of other possible subjects of experience and simulate the experiences they would have in various situations. Conceiving is the cognitive capacity to take perspectives of other possible reasoners and to simulate what they would be rationally committed to in their given circumstances. And supposition is the cognitive capacity merely to accept a proposition for the purpose of reasoning through its implications. While supposition is under our voluntary control in the strong sense, the extent of the subjective control we have over imaginings and conceivings is limited by their recreative nature.

Aside from an analysis of the nature of core cases, I have also tried to bring out which epistemic role imaginings, supposings and conceivings do and should play. While imagination – and possibly also conceiving – can give us *prima facie* justification for specific claims about what is possible, supposition does not; it merely enables us to reason through the implications of accepted propositions. If the relevant cognitive capacities are not merely a theoretician’s dream, but something we imperfect subjects actually possess, then each of these capacities has a place within philosophical enquiry. I am confident that we are reasonably competent imaginers and supposers. Conceivers? I don’t know.

Bibliography

- Balcerak Jackson (forthcoming): Justification by Imagination, in: Macpherson, Fiona / Dorsch, Fabian, *Perceptual Memory and Perceptual Imagination*, OUP.
- Chalmers, David (1996): *The Conscious Mind*, OUP.
- Chalmers, David (2002): Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?, in: Gendler, Tamar Szabo / Hawthorne, John (eds.), *Conceivability and Possibility*, OUP.
- Currie, Gregory / Ravenscroft, Ian (2002): *Recreative Minds*, OUP.
- Doggett, Tyler / Egan, Andy (2007): Wanting Things You Don’t Want, in: *Philosopher’s Imprint*.
- Gendler, Tamar Szabo (2000): The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance, in: *Journal of Philosophy* 97, 2: 55-81.
- Goldman, Alvin (2006): *Simulating Minds. The Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience of Mindreading*, OUP.
- Ichikawa, Jonathan Jenkins / Jarvis, Ben (2013): *The Rules of Thought*, OUP.
- Kind, Amy (2001): Putting the Image back in Imagination, in: *Philosophy and Psychological Research* LXII, 1: 85-109.
- Kind, Amy (2013): The Heterogeneity of Imagination, in: *Erkenntnis* 78, 1: 141-159.
- Peacocke, Christopher (1985): Imagination, Possibility and Experience, in: Foster, J. / Robinson, H. (eds.), *Essays on Berkeley*, OUP.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul (1972): *The Psychology of Imagination*, Routledge.
- Stalnaker, Robert (1984): *Inquiry*, Bradford Books.
- Stalnaker, Robert (2002): Common Ground, in: *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25, 5-6: 701-721.

- Thompson, Judith Jarvis (1971): A Defense of Abortion, in: Philosophy and Public Affairs, 1, 1.
- Vendler, Zeno (1979): Vicarious Experience, in: Revue de Metaphysique et de Morale 2: 161-173.
- Walton, Kendall (1990): Mimesis as Make-Believe, HUP.
- White, Alan (1990): The Language of Imagination, Blackwell.
- Williamson, Timothy (2008): The Philosophy of Philosophy, OUP.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1981): Zettel, 2nd edition, Blackwell.
- Yablo, Stephen (2001): Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda, in: Gendler, Tamar Szabo / Hawthorne, John (eds.), Conceivability and Possibility, OUP.