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Book Review


For Colin McGinn, the mind is substantially an imaginative engine. The last paragraph of his vivacious and clearly written book, *Mindsight*, begins this way:

What I hope has become clear is that the imagination is a ubiquitous and central feature of mental life. It pervades nearly every mental operation. ...It plays a constitutive role in memory, perception (seeing-as), dreaming, believing, meaning—as well as high-level creativity (163).

Little has been written about imagination (McGinn lists among his precursors Hume, Wittgenstein and Sartre), so this book is welcome. To put my own cards on the table, I doubt that imagination is as important to mental life as McGinn makes out. Also I find many of his arguments unpersuasive. The body of this review will concentrate on the book's central arguments.

According to David Hume, the difference between impressions and ideas is a matter of degree. Ideas are very weak impressions. He writes in the Treatise: “The difference betwixt these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness.” McGinn argues that this is a “fundamental mistake; there are a number of important respects in which images differ from percepts” (11). The difference between “percepts” (McGinn's term for “impressions”) and images is a difference in kind. He lists seven such differences.

1. Images are subject to the will in a way percepts are not. I can, by a basic action, form an image of the Eiffel Tower; I cannot, by a basic action, form of percept of it. As McGinn notes, dreams are an obvious counterexample, for they are not voluntarily chosen: “we seem passive before their onslaught” (17). Yet dreams, McGinn insists, are made of images—typically we are not hallucinating when we dream.

I agree that dreams are made of images. Let me support this with two arguments. First, on grounds of parsimony it's sensible to identify dreams and daydreams: both are self-generating fantasies. That we mistake dreams for sense experiences is readily explained by the fact that, fast asleep, we are entirely absorbed in them and have no conscious access to sense experiences with which to compare them. Second, sometimes people start dreaming while they are falling asleep. Also we sometimes wake up while we're still dreaming. So it's possible to observe dreams while we're awake—they are fantasies, not hallucinations. McGinn postpones discussion of the critical
Another immediate difficulty for McGinn is the “process-product” distinction. Hume is talking about the products (or outputs) of different faculties, perception and imagination. There may be essential differences between these processes, but it hardly follows their products are essentially different. The same sort of product might be produced by different processes. That hallucinations are produced by a radically different process (brain damage, say) from veridical sense impressions doesn't entail that hallucinations and veridical experiences differ in kind. That images, not percepts, are voluntarily chosen doesn't entail they are basically different, either.

2. Perceptions involve observation and informational flow from the object of perception in a way images do not. They are continuously updated by the object; they purport to tell us something about the world; they invite, indeed, they warrant, belief (20-21). None of this holds for images.

As McGinn recognizes, dreams are a counter-example, for they are belief inviting and contain various surprises. Also, memory images invite beliefs about how the world was, anyhow; they warrant beliefs about extra-mental matters. Finally, the process-product fallacy is at work. Suppose percepts are continuously updated by the object and so involve information flow from the object in a way images do not. It doesn't follow that images and percepts are basically different–only that we can typically tell them apart.

3. According to McGinn “the visual field of the body's eye is deeply connected to the facts of sensory anatomy and physics, but the image is under no such constraints” (23). Perceived objects are arrayed before the eyes in a spatial manifold; the inner eye does not do this. If I imagine the Eiffel Tower, I do not represent it within my visual field.

Once again, dreams are an apparent counter-example. Also if, sitting outside, I gaze at the trees and the hills, then shut my eyes and visualize what I just saw, the image occupies my visual field as the perception did. Finally many images are of tastes, sensations, sounds. The memory of the pain in my thumb is indeed represented in my thumb. McGinn focuses on visual imagery, but features merely local to it are not differences in kind for images in general.

4. Percepts are “saturated.” McGinn writes that “every point of the visual field is such that some quality is manifest there...” (25). Images are “gappy,” “impoverished,” having only the features I give them. However people can train themselves to have “saturated” images (of the room they just saw, for instance). Memories are often richly detailed. Images of tastes, smells, pains are often as saturated as percepts. So are some dreams.

5. The day-dreaming truck driver may be unaware of his visual experiences, but he still has them. Images, by contrast, are “attention-dependent.” That is, we must attend to the intentional object of the image if the image is to exist. Hence there are no aspects of an image that I fail to notice; images have only the aspects we give them. None of this holds for percepts. McGinn writes: “We might say the image is created by the act of attention, while the percept is generated by an outside stimulus” (28). However memory images can have aspects that I fail to notice. So can my visualization of the landscape I was just now gazing at.

Dreams are plausible counter-examples to McGinn's larger claim that images, unlike percepts,
cannot exist entirely unnoticed. We dream during REM period sleep. REM sleep happens regularly, starting about an hour after we fall asleep and continuing at roughly hourly intervals. The initial intervals are very brief, they grow longer as the night goes on. It has been hypothesized since the 50s that REM sleep is the result of some physical condition, a chemical, perhaps, building up in the brain during sleep and discharging at regular intervals, these growing longer as sleep continues. Dreams and REM sleep are an epiphenomenon of that process, which stimulates a part of the brain that produces images. It is unlikely that we are introspectively aware of all of these dreams, many of which are a few seconds long.

In fact, much dream research is done on dogs, cats and rabbits, which have REM sleep, too. Many of us have seen dogs dreaming they're running. Probably the dog's dream contains imagery. As dogs, cats and rabbits likely have introspective powers far inferior to our own, it's implausible that they are introspectively aware of all their dreams. Therefore it's likely the world contains a good deal of unconscious imaging, both human and animal.

In sum: Images arise out of physical processes in the brain, and it's probable those processes, even if they are usually controlled by will, can be stimulated to produce images whether we attend to them or not. As many of our dreams last only a few seconds, and as our cognitive and sensory powers are drastically diminished in sleep, it is unlikely we are introspectively aware of all our dreams. Even supposing we are always aware of them, there is no good reason to believe their existence depends on it.

6. McGinn writes that “perception presupposes an embodied consciousness in a way that imagination does not” (30). The image, by contrast, posits its object in a way that is neutral to the subject's body; perceptions place their object in a definite relation to it.

Dreams are an apparent counterexample, as are images and memories of pains, sounds, smells and tastes. This is one of the reasons we can mistake imagined pain for pain. McGinn is focusing on a certain sort of intentional visualization—I intentionally visualize my mother's face in the abstract, not her reaching toward me to pat my shoulder. In many cases of imagining, however, my body is part of what I imagine. The same goes for many memories.

7. I cannot misidentify the object of my imagining, but I can misidentify the object of my perception. McGinn writes that “the identity of the imagined object is fixed by my imaginative intentions, to which I have special access...” (31). Hence no act of recognition is required in the imagination case. “I know that the image is of my mother because I intended it to be...” (31).

Again McGinn is focusing on intentional visualizations. But visualizations aren't always the product of intentions. Suppose I go to a place I haven't visited for decades and the memory image of a young woman spontaneously arises. But I don't remember who she is. I can misidentify her, certainly. The identity of the object of my memory is fixed by the external world, that is, the past. Later I go through my class year-book and, on the basis of the photos, recognize the person in my image. Or I might dream I'm talking to a man but not know who he is. Later, remembering the dream, I recognize him as someone I met and talked to briefly the day before.

8. I can stare at the ocean and think of my beloved. The percept doesn't require my full attention. As images are attention-dependent, however, I cannot form an image of X and simultaneously think
of Y. The wandering mind obliterates the image. McGinn concludes this is “another respect in which images and percepts differ in basic nature: percepts allow thought to range freely but images constrain thought” (42).

This argument commits a process-product fallacy. If images are indeed attention-dependent, probably it is because they are produced voluntarily and intentionally. The wandering mind cuts the causal process that produces the image. Attention-dependence would mark the fact that images are the product of a different process from perceptions—even if it's attention itself. As different processes can produce the same sort of product, however, it doesn't follow that images and percepts differ in basic nature. Also I doubt that I cannot image X and simultaneously think of Y. Opium produces long, self-generating fantasies that do not seem to be attention-dependent. I see no principled reason why the opium dreamer can't think of something else, even visualize it, while her dream continues to spin itself out on the periphery of her consciousness. The same goes for dreams—except that in sleep we're badly positioned to think at all.

9. I can have images while I have percepts; McGinn observes that “image and percept happily coexist” (33). Images are “non-occlusive.” Percepts do occlude percepts, however. At the least a percept like an after-image will alter the phenomenal character of my visual percepts. So images are basically different from percepts.

The conclusion doesn't follow. Might not very weak percepts happily coexist with vivacious percepts simply because they are very weak? McGinn objects that “weak percepts are occlusive, like after images...” (33). But images would be weaker still. His inference requires an additional premise, one he neither mentions nor defends: There is no degree of weakness (short of non-existence) such that the percept/image no longer occludes robust percepts.

As we've seen, McGinn's treatment of images as different in kind from percepts is threatened by counterexamples concerning dreaming. Many claims McGinn makes in the chapter “What Are Dreams?” can be construed as responses to some of the dream-based objections McGinn and I have raised above.

The alleged attention-dependence of dreams explains why we are enthralled by dreams, the “single-mindedness of the dream state,” McGinn observes. Why doesn't the dreaming mind go off looking for more interesting material? Because that would destroy the dream. McGinn writes: “It can never be hard to attend to one's dreams simply because they have no existence independently of the attention” (79). However the monopoly of dreams on the attention is just as well explained by the sleeping brain's lacking the cognitive ability to mount another stream of imagery--or even to wander. The audience is captive because it is disabled, not because the show cannot go on without it. Note too that plenty of attention-dependent imagery, e.g. my present visualization of the checker at the supermarket, is not at all enthralling. How then can the enthralling quality of dreams be explained by the hypothesis that they are attention-dependent?

I argued above that we can indeed misidentify the object of an image, either in memory or a dream. I wrote: “I might dream I'm talking to a man but not know who he is. Later, remembering the dream, I recognize him as someone I met and talked to briefly the day before.” McGinn would respond that this is an exception: “We almost invariably know who and what we are dreaming about” (82). This isn't recognition, he says. We typically just know who is in our dreams. As I
imagine whom I intend to imagine, there is no inference to that individual's identity. I stipulate who it is. This is why we can infallibly know the identity of a dream object even when her appearance is distorted. I know the large individual with the black beard is Sally because I have decided to form an image of Sally that distorts her image in this way.

As I maintain dreams are often not the product of intentions and are always made of very weak perceptions (that is, images), I must deny that we typically know who is who in our dreams on account of our intentions. But surely McGinn is right: this knowledge isn't usually the result of some inferential act like recognition. If the knowledge is neither the result of intentions nor recognition, how can it exist? I submit there is no such knowledge. I do not know the large individual with the black beard is Sally, I merely dream it is Sally. If part of the dream is that I know it is Sally (I say to myself in the dream “I know who that bearded individual really is!”), then I dream I know it’s Sally. Just as running in the dream is merely dreaming I run, knowing it’s Sally in the dream is merely dreaming I know. As I didn't meet Sally last night, I never knew I did. When I wake up, I know I dreamed I knew it was Sally, not that I knew it was. There is, therefore, no infallible knowledge that must be explained by appeal to our direct access to our intentions. So McGinn’s argument that dreams are the result of intentions evaporates.

According to McGinn, dreams typically have a narrative structure, a beginning, a middle and an end. Often they express a concern from waking life. As they exhibit design, there is some sort of internal dream designer (84). If so, dreams are generally the result of intentions--contrary to my hypothesis.

As I mentioned earlier REM sleep begins about an hour into sleep and continues more or less on the hour. The first installments are often only a few seconds long. They become progressively longer as the night continues. As most dreams are brief, they lack a narrative structure. As McGinn acknowledges, dreams are often “baffling, chaotic and pointless” (84). Some dreams appear to have a definite narrative structure, certainly. The most this warrants, however, is that some dreams are causally affected by intentions. That doesn't get us an “internal dream designer.” As many dreams appear to be random junk bubbling up from the sleeping brain, by parity of reasoning, they probably are not designed. In addition it is hard to believe the dreams of dogs, cats and rabbits have a “beginning, a middle and an end.” These creatures give no indication of being story tellers, they appear to lack the cognitive resources, and it is particularly unlikely they are designing narratives in their sleep. Therefore the hypothesis of the widespread design of dreams is unmotivated.

As we saw earlier, one of the essential differences between images and percepts, according to McGinn, is that images are subject to the will in a way that percepts are not. I can, by a basic action, form an image of the Eiffel Tower. As McGinn notes, dreams are an obvious counterexample, for they are not voluntarily chosen and we are powerless to alter their course. Yet McGinn insists dreams are images. His response is to postulate “a ‘psychic split’ in the dreaming mind, a division of the self” (89). The dream producer is unconscious relative to the dream audience: “In short, dream images are the product of an unconscious will” (90). All images are willed, but as the dream consumer is passive and unaware of the will, it appears that dreams are not voluntarily chosen.

This response is costly. First, if dreams are produced by an unconscious mechanism, they are not “attention-dependent.” As the mechanism is sufficient to produce dreams, unconscious dreams
require only that it operate while the audience is “switched off.” Second, it is terribly hard to believe a psychic split exists in dogs, cats, and rabbits. As they dream, there still are unwilled dreams; so the counterexample survives. Finally the postulate is ad hoc. If there is no psychic split in other dreaming mammals, why think we have one? And why is there a psychic split? McGinn responds: “For some reason we have a need to believe during a dream, and this requires the illusion of passivity” (91). The reader will decide for herself whether this explanation is persuasive.

Much of the second half of Mindsight is concerned with “imagining that.” It's one thing to imagine the Eiffel Tower, another to imagine that I'm in Paris. To imagine the latter is to entertain a thought. This need not involve imagery. “X imagines that Y” expresses a propositional attitude. McGinn calls it “cognitive imagination” (128). He maintains that sensory and cognitive imagination work on “different elements” but involve the same faculty. Cognitive imagination combines conceptual elements, much as thinking does, to create propositional contents. In both cases “the imagination” denotes the same “creative combinatorial faculty” (129). As imagining that p is an action, subject to the will, it is not belief. Also I can imagine that p when I do not believe p. Nonetheless McGinn holds that imagination partly constitutes belief. Belief “is imagination plus something else.” He writes, “When I believe that p, I (1) contemplate the possibility that p and (2) take this possibility to be actual” (136). Cognitive imagination is more fundamental than believing, therefore; the latter presupposes the former, not vice versa.

Perceptual beliefs are a counter-example. When I see a truck bearing down on me, I do not contemplate the possibility that this is happening. I see, hence simply believe, that a truck is bearing down on me. Or you tell me John said hello. I simply believe he said hello, without contemplating the possibility that he did.

According to McGinn, “Negation enters out thoughts not by means of perception, but by means of imagination” (140). There is no such thing as having an experience of negation. He concludes that the occurrence of negation in belief formation is always a sign of the working of the imagination—the entertaining of thoughts, not the perception of facts (141). This seems wrong. Suppose I believe, because she told me she would be there, that Sally is in the living room. As I wish to see her, I go to the living room. I see that she is not there. That's an experience of things not being a certain way, that is, of negation. False belief plays the role McGinn reserves for imagination. Such experiences are sufficient to ground the concept of negation.

McGinn maintains that belief is selecting among imagined possibilities; accepting one proposition is rejecting its negation, which therefore must be entertained (141). “In believing that p you imagine that p and also imagine that not-p.” So imagination is the sine qua non of belief (142). McGinn owns perceptual belief is a counter-example: sometimes we believe what strikes the senses without considering alternatives. It is rational, reflective belief that is selection among imagined alternatives, he explains. This may well be true, but what remains of his claims about the central role of imagination in belief?

Finally, according to McGinn, imagination is the faculty that creates linguistic understanding. We can understand a potential infinity of sentences—understanding each one of them depends upon an act of imaginative. He writes: “Understanding is memory plus imagination—memory of what words conventionally mean, and imagination of what possibility the sentence represents” (148). Imagination underlies the creativity manifest in language use.
McGinn has things backwards, I believe. Of course we can cognitively imagine an indefinite number of states of affairs that new sentences represent. We combine meaningful words by syntactic rules that produce new sentences, each of which represents a new state of affairs. But my suggestion is that this combinatorial process is the means by which we imagine these new states of affairs—we read the state of affairs off the words combined by syntactic rules we understand. That's how we do the imagining. In short, we owe our imaginative powers largely to the creativity manifest in language use, not vice versa.

Consider. If you were designing a linguistic creature like us out of some earlier primate without much imagination, would you pump up its imaginative powers to some extraordinary level so that it could understand the product of its syntactic crunchings of meaningful words? How would you create this extra-linguistic combinatorial capacity? Or would you increase its imaginative capacity by introducing a syntactic engine that combines meaningful semantic bits so that the animal, who understands the syntactic rules, can “read off” the new possibilities from the resulting sentences? The latter strategy eliminates the duplication of combinatorial capacities and explains the imaginative power by the less mysterious syntactic engine we already know is there.

Mindsight covers a number of issues I haven't discussed, including imaginative seeing (seeing as), the space of imagery, madness, and the imagination of children. My counterpoint to some of McGinn's main themes is meant to highlight, not diminish, the importance and interest of this book.

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