INTRODUCTION

Introduction: exploring the limits of imagination

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Published online: 5 April 2022
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Hume famously noted that nothing is more free than human imagination. On his view, imagination has “unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing” the ideas of the senses. Yet even as he celebrates the great liberty of imagination, Hume points to what he sees as an important limit on it, namely, that “it cannot exceed that original stock of ideas, furnished by the internal and external senses.” (Hume, 1777/1977, p. 31); see also (Hume, 1739/1978, p. 10).

We see a similar kind of push/pull in many discussions of imagination, with philosophers recognizing the freedom of imagination while simultaneously acknowledging various ways in which this freedom gets constrained. Some of these limits are seen as in principle insurmountable, applying to all imaginers in all situations. They arise due to the nature of imagination and, more generally, the nature of human cognition. For example, Thomas Nagel (1974) has famously argued that it is impossible for humans to imagine what it is like to be a bat. It has also often been thought that we are unable to imagine contradictions. Other limits might be in place only for certain imaginers in certain situations—perhaps because of their own limited experiential resources or perhaps because they are unskilled when it comes to imagination (Kind, 2020). Finally, some limits might arise not from without but instead be deliberately self-imposed by imaginers themselves (see Kind and Kung (2016) and Kind (2016)). This occurs especially in cases in which imagination is put to epistemic use, as in thought experimentation, planning, and decision-making (see Badura and Kind (2021)). In these epistemic contexts, imaginers often constrain their imaginings to ensure that they line up with certain facts about reality.

Though imagination was of great interest to many of the towering figures of Western philosophy, it fell out of favor in the first half of the 20th century, perhaps as a vestige of behaviorism. For much of that century, philosophical investigation into imagination

1 Though see Kind (2021) for some pushback on this idea.

2 In fact, Hume himself thought that imagination was constrained to matters of possible existence, such that we cannot imagine impossible states of affairs such as a mountain without a valley. (Hume, 1739/1978, p. 32).

3 For a nice discussion and taxonomy of imaginative constraints, see Salis (2020), esp. Section 5.

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was fairly limited. In the 1980s, however, philosophical interest in imagination was rekindled, and in the four decades since, work on the topic has blossomed. (To give just one measure of this interest, in 2018 and 2019, there were more than 20 philosophical conferences on imagination.4) Though this is not the place to try to develop a comprehensive explanation for the resurgent interest in imagination, I’ll here mention four important factors. First, as philosophers and cognitive scientists engaged in the so-called imagery debate of the 1970s and 80s, the increased focus on the experience of mental imagery in turn led to increased attention to imagination. Second, the publication of Saul Kripke’s Naming and Necessity (1980) generated renewed interest in the epistemology of modality and, correspondingly, in the role that imagination plays in that context. Third, on one side of the mindreading debate in the 1980s were theorists like Robert Gordon (1986), Jane Heal (1998), and Alvin Goldman (1995) who put forth the Simulation Theory, i.e., the view that our ability to predict and explain the behavior of others is exercised primarily by way of simulation of their mental states and not by the application of a theory. Given the prominent role that imagination played in the development of Simulation Theory, we have another reason that philosophers became invested in understanding imagination. Fourth, when in the 1990s Kendall Walton (1990) and Gregory Currie (1990) both assigned imagination a key role in their theories about the nature of fiction, this spurred a considerable amount of work in aesthetics relating to imagination.

As philosophers working in those contexts began to attend more closely to imagination and an increasing body of high-quality work on this topic was produced, philosophers in other contexts began to see imagination as having the potential to play an important explanatory role in a number of different debates. In addition to the role that imagination had been thought to play in fiction, mindreading, and the epistemology of modality, in the 21st century it has also been assigned a key explanatory role in theories of dreams (Ichikawa, 2009; Walton, 1990), memory (Michaelian, 2016), pretense (Nichols & Stich, 2000), implicit bias (Sullivan-Bissett, 2019; Welpinghus, 2020), the evaluation of conditionals (Williamson, 2007), and creativity (Nanay, 2014; Stokes, 2014). This list, long as it is, is by no means intended to be exhaustive.

Given this increased attention to, and reliance upon, imagination in such a wide variety of philosophical contexts, a better understanding of its contours—and more specifically, of its limits—becomes increasingly important. Helping to develop this understanding is the primary goal of this topical collection. In the 20 papers that follow, the contributors take up various issues relating to the limits of imagination. Some focus on one or more specific limits. Some take up more general questions about the nature of these limits, while some focus on the extent of these limits. Some explore whether (and, if so, how) these limits can be transcended. Some do all of these things. Several of the papers were presented at the conference Exploring the Mind’s Eye: An Interdisciplinary Conference on Imagination, where the idea for this topical collection was first conceived.5 The conference, which was held at Bilkent University

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4 Numbers drawn from PhilEvents, https://philevents.org/. I use 2018 and 2019 as they were the last two years for which there is data prior to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. Note that these 20 conferences all had “imagination” in the title. There may well have been additional conferences focused on imagination whose titles did not include that word and so escaped my search.

5 Thanks to Margot Strohminger for serving as a helpful sounding board in those discussions.
in Ankara in October 2019, was organized by my co-editor for this topical collection, Tufan Kiyzman.

Taking a big-picture view, I’d suggest that we can see the papers in this collection as falling into three broad groups, with each group itself encompassing a considerable diversity of issues:

1. The six papers in the first group explore general issues relating to limits on the nature of imagination. Some have to do with limits on the kind of activity imagining is, or the form that it can take, while others have to do with limits on the nature of imaginative content. Though in some cases an author argues that we must recognize certain limits on imagining, in other cases an author suggests that a limit commonly thought to apply to imagination should be rejected.

2. The seven papers in the second group explore limits on what can be imagined. These issues are quite varied, ranging from concerns about imagining the impossible, to concerns about the imaginative representation of the self, to concerns about the role that intentions play in imagining. As in the first group, some of the authors in this group take up the task of arguing in favor of the existence of certain limits, while others take up the task of arguing against the existence of one such limit or another.

3. Finally, the seven papers in the third group explore limits on imagination’s use. Many of these papers look at the employment of imagination in a specific context—be it the political sphere, our engagement with fiction, or our empathetic endeavors. Some look at the connection imagination has to other aspects of our mental life, such as memory or the will.

To be clear, this is by no means the only way that these papers could be naturally grouped, and I might instead have focused on different themes running through the contributions. To mention just one alternative grouping scheme, I might have focused on how limits on imagination come into play in imaginative engagement with fiction, in experiential or empathetic imagining, in the connection between imagination and modality, and so on. While I encourage readers of this topical collection to look for other kinds of natural connections among the papers, in the remainder of this introduction, I will focus my attention on the three-fold division just outlined and aim to show how the specific papers fit into these groupings.

1 Limits on the nature of imagination

Philosophers have long treated imagination as very closely analogous to perception. While this view derives much of its support from introspective evidence, it has also been thought to be confirmed by recent neuroscientific studies that suggest that imagination and perception share a common neural substrate, i.e., they are both subserved by processing in V1, the primary visual cortex. If the findings of these studies are correct, then even though imagination differs in various important ways from perception, the nature of imagination is shaped in various other important ways by the same kinds of neural mechanisms that constrain perception. Two of the papers in this collection take up issues relating to these neuroscientific considerations and, more broadly, to
the ways that the analogy between perception and imagination impacts our theorizing about the nature of imagination.

First, in “Untying the knot: Imagination, perception and their neural substrates,” Dan Cavedon-Taylor takes up a particularly strong version of the claim that imagination is analogous to perception, namely, the view that sees states of imagination as a proper subset of perception. Referring to this view as perceptualism, Cavedon-Taylor offers three kinds of arguments against it. The first argument derives from considerations concerning high-level content. The second argument derives from considerations concerning cognitive penetration. The third argument takes up the neuroscientific considerations about V1 just mentioned and aims to show that they do not unequivocally show what they are normally taken to show, i.e., they do not entail that imagination and perception share neural substrates. This argument proceeds on two fronts. First, he points to inconsistent findings within the neuroscientific literature. Second, he draws upon findings from clinical psychology regarding neuro-atypical individuals. In studies of brain-damaged patients, we find dissociations in vision/imagery functioning, i.e., we find instances of impaired imagery ability with fully functioning visual ability and also instances of impaired visual ability with fully functioning imagery ability. This should not be possible if imagination and vision share the same neural substrate. Cavedon-Taylor focuses much of his discussion here on aphantasia, a condition that is being widely researched by neuropsychologists and has recently started to attract considerable attention by philosophers. Aphantasics have a greatly diminished ability to generate mental imagery and in some cases lack the ability altogether. Though Cavedon-Taylor does not himself draw conclusions about how the rejection of perceptualism would affect our understanding of the nature of imagination, it is clear that there are important consequences. In particular, various constraints on our theorizing are removed once we loosen the analogy between imagination and perception.

Interestingly, however, loosening this analogy can also allow for the imposition of certain constraints on imagining, constraints that do not apply to perception. One consequence that might be thought to follow from a tight analogy between imagination and perception concerns the question of whether imagination can occur unconsciously. And, indeed, several philosophers have used the neuroscientific findings about V1 as a partial basis for an argument on this issue: If imagination and perception share a neural substrate, and perception can occur unconsciously, then it looks like imagination should also be able to occur unconsciously. Several other arguments have also been recently offered for this same conclusion, arguments that purport to offer cases where we cannot explain the behavior and/or mental states of an agent unless we accept the existence of unconscious imagination. In my own contribution to this volume, “Can imagination be unconscious?” I explore three of these case-based arguments, as well as the argument based on neuroscientific considerations (and, more particularly, on facts about action guidance). As I suggest, none of these arguments is successful. All of the alleged phenomena in need of explanation can be explained in terms of an interplay between conscious imagining, occurrent beliefs, and nonoccurrent beliefs. Thus, we have no reason to accept the existence of unconscious imagining. If my discussion is accepted, then we should see imagination as limited in an important respect, namely, it is essentially a conscious phenomenon, unable to occur unconsciously.
Two additional contributions also take up issues relating to the analogy between perception and imagination. In line with Hume, who often differentiated perception and imagining from one another in terms of concepts like force and vivacity, philosophers often take vividness to be a property that is applicable to both perceiving and imagining, e.g., we can talk of the vividness of one’s perception of the Hollywood sign and the vividness of one’s imagining of the Hollywood sign. One can also talk of variations in the vividness of imaginings, e.g., your imagining of the Hollywood sign might be less vivid than your imagining of the Golden Gate Bridge. But how should we understand vividness? In “Vividness as a natural kind,” Uku Tooming and Kengo Miyazono argue that we can use natural kind methodology to capture the nature of this property and, in particular, that it should be seen as forming a homeostatic property cluster involving properties such as level of detail, clarity, and intensity. Their discussion then goes on to bring to the fore some architectural constraints on imagination; in their view, vividness is best understood by way of an architectural explanation, one that calls upon the availability of stored sensory information.

Yet a different issue that arises from thinking about the analogy between perception and imagination concerns the nature of imaginative content. Generally speaking, philosophers see imagination as falling into two distinct categories—perception-like imagining and belief-like imagining. While belief-like imagining is taken to be propositional in nature (one imagines that such-and-such is the case), perception-like imagining is not taken to be propositional. While this is often taken to imply that perception-like imagining is not conceptual in nature, Margherita Arcangeli disagrees. In her contribution, “The conceptual nature of imaginative content,” she argues that all imagining is conceptual in nature. Importantly, Arcangeli maintains that this conclusion holds even if we accept that perceptual content itself is fully non-conceptual in nature. To cast this claim in terms of our overall theme concerning the limits of imagination, we might note that Arcangeli suggests that the constraints on perceptual content are different from the constraints on imaginative content. The view that all imaginative content is conceptual might seem to leave Arcangeli without a way to differentiate belief-like imagining from perception-like imagining, but in the final part of her paper, she develops a way to make this distinction. Though all imaginings have conceptual contents, perception-like imagination is different from belief-like imagination in that it must involve observational concepts.

Two other contributions also take up issues relating to imaginative content. In “Vendler’s puzzle about imagination,” Justin D’Ambrosio and Daniel Stoljar consider a puzzle owing to Zeno Vendler relating to two different imaginative acts: (a) your imagining swimming in the water, on the one hand, and (b) your imagining yourself swimming in the water. On the one hand, these sentences seem to have the same meaning. Setting aside superficial differences, they are syntactically the same, and so it looks like they should be semantically the same as well. But on the other hand, it looks like (a) requires you to imagine the given scenario from an internal perspective (or “from the inside”), whereas (b) seems to allow imagining from either an internal or an external perspective (“from the outside”). So that would suggest that the sentences have different meanings. To dissolve the puzzle, D’Ambrosio and Stoljar suggest that we need to attend to a kind of imagining they call imagining-wh. When you imagine where you will be eating dinner tonight, or what you will be eating for dinner
tonight, or how you will be getting to dinner tonight, you are engaged in this kind of imagining. Though this kind of imagining is a familiar one, D’Ambrosio and Stoljar argue that it can be usefully employed to solve Vendler’s puzzle. In particular, we should see imagining from the inside as one kind of imagining-wh, imagining how it feels, whereas imagining from the outside is a different kind of imagining-wh, imagining how it looks. By developing a semantics of imagining-wh, they show why Vendler’s two examples (a) and (b) are not really syntactically the same after all, thereby dissipating the puzzle.

Like D’Ambrosio and Stoljar, Alon Chasid also takes up issues that arise from limits on imaginative content. In “Imaginative immersion, regulation, and doxastic mediation,” he focuses on an imaginer’s regulation of their imaginative content. Developing a view within the Waltonian framework that sees imagining as aiming at fictional truth in the same way that belief aims at truth (Walton, 1990), Chasid argues that imaginative content is regulated by what’s being presented as fictionally true. As such, his discussion nicely connects with the overall theme of this topical collection in that these regulations place various limits on imaginative content. With this regulative picture in place, Chasid goes on to show how it can provide us with an explanation of imaginative immersion, i.e., the phenomenon that occurs when an imaginer becomes “lost” in their imagining. The explanation derives from the fact that rule-following varies in its directness. Consider the difference between novice drivers and experienced drivers. Someone who is inexperienced behind the wheel might need to rehearse various rules to themselves when they are about to change lanes on the freeway: Now I put on my turn signal, now I check my mirrors, now I look over my shoulder to check my blindspot, etc. An experienced driver follows all the same rules, but they do so without all of the mediating beliefs. On Chasid’s view, the more an imaginer’s beliefs about the rules regulating their imagining are unconscious, the more they fail to play a mediating role in the following of those rules, the more immersed the imagining will be.

2 Limits on what can be imagined

In many respects, there is not a sharp distinction between the seven papers in this grouping and many of the papers in the previous grouping. In particular, just as the final three papers in our first grouping (those by Arcangeli, D’Ambrosio and Stoljar, and Chasid) took up issues relating to imaginative content, most of the papers in this grouping take up these kinds of issues as well. However, while the papers in the first section were concerned with more general principles governing (and hence limiting) imaginative content, the papers in this section take up more specific issues about the extent and reach of that content.

The claim that imagination cannot extend beyond what’s possible enjoys a strong philosophical consensus. As we saw above, for example, given that it is impossible for a mountain to exist without a valley, Hume deemed this state of affairs to be unimaginable. That said, however, many philosophers working on fiction have departed from this consensus (for some representative examples, see Walton (1990) and Stock (2017). Take Alice in Wonderland, for example, where the Cheshire Cat is said to disappear while its smile remains. When we engage with the text, say these
philosophers, we propositionally imagine the impossible situation that Lewis Carroll describes. In “Imagining fictional contradictions,” Michel-Antoine Xhignesse argues that these philosophers are mistaken: impossibility “is a hard limit on our ability to imagine both in and out of storyworlds” (this issue). Though we may think we’re imagining impossibilities in cases of fictional engagement with impossible claims, we’re really doing something else. Sometimes we’re engaged in a meta-imagining in which we merely imagine that we’ve imagined the relevant claim, and sometimes we simply stipulate that the described impossibility is true without actually imagining it. In other cases, we may do something else in the same general vicinity. But in none of these cases do we actually manage to imagine the impossible.

The suggestion that one can imagine the impossible seems to imply that we have considerable freedom in what we imagine. It also seems to suggest that imaginative content can be wholly determined simply by the intentions of an imaginer: All that an imaginer needs to do to imagine a free-standing smile is to form the relevant imaginative intention. In rejecting the claim that we can imagine the impossible, then, Xhignesse seems committed to the rejection of this way of determining imaginative content. Though they do not directly discuss issues of imagining impossibilities, Daniel Munro and Margot Strohminger take up precisely this issue in their contribution, “Are we free to imagine what we choose?,” and their discussion can thus be seen as in many ways complementary to Xhignesse’s. Drawing on examples involving misleading introductions and memories, they suggest that an imaginer’s intentions cannot alone settle imaginative content and, relatedly, that imaginers can be mistaken about what they are imagining. Suppose you were mistakenly introduced to the Brooklyn Bridge as the Williamsburg Bridge, i.e., a friend told you that a given bridge was the Brooklyn Bridge when in fact she was pointing at the Williamsburg Bridge. Or suppose that you misremembered the relative location of the two bridges on the map, so when you actually happened upon the Williamsburg Bridge you took it to be the Brooklyn Bridge. In either case, when you subsequently set yourself the intention to imagine the Brooklyn Bridge, you will not be able to do what you intended to do. Your imagining will not be an imagining of the Brooklyn Bridge but rather an imagining of the Williamsburg Bridge. At the end of their paper, Munro and Strohminger go on to sketch the beginning of a positive view on how imaginative content is determined. In brief, they suggest that imaginative content is constrained by the causal history of one’s mental imagery.

A very different kind of limitation on imaginative content is explored in the paper by Nathanael Stein in “Imagination, expectation, and ‘thoughts entangled in metaphors.’” Stein’s interest concerns the way that our imagination becomes limited when we are under the sway of metaphorical thinking—when, to use a description employed by George Eliot, our thoughts become “entangled in metaphors.” To see this, we need to attend to what Stein calls imaginative expectations. These expectations are a special kind of imaginative representation about the future, analogous in some ways to latent memories. While there are various kinds of norms that guide the formation of these expectations, Stein suggests that metaphorical thinking can lead to the violation of these norms. By way of a case study of Reverend Casaubon, one of the characters in Eliot’s Middlemarch, Stein attends to some aspects of the relationship between imagination and metaphor that have not previously been well understood or even
discussed. By way of this attention, he brings to light some new ways in which our imaginative activity is subject to rational scrutiny and, at times, rational criticism. As he argues, in order for us to achieve an adequate understanding of the role of imagination in practical rationality, we need to attend to the way that imagination is distinctively affected by (and indeed limited by) metaphor.

Yet another limitation on imaginative content is discussed by Bence Nanay in his contribution, “Imagining one experience to be another.” Nanay starts with ordinary cases of imagining where we imagine one thing to be something else, as when a child imagines a banana to be a phone. But his primary interest concerns not the imaginative substitution of one object for another but rather the imaginative substitution of one experience for another. Consider a case in which one is drinking sour milk and tries to imagine this experience to be an experience of drinking fresh milk instead.

Can one succeed in doing this? In Nanay’s view, the answer is no. His argument for this conclusion proceeds by way of both intuitive and empirical considerations. The intuitive considerations take the form of a dilemma. In the case under discussion, I am trying to imagine drinking a glass of fresh milk. Either I succeed, and thus have a fresh-milk experience, or I fail, and hence have the sour-milk experience. But on the first option, my original experience (the bad taste experience) is not part of the imaginative episode the way the banana is part of the child’s imaginative episode. So, I haven’t imagined that bad-taste experience to be another experience, because I haven’t imagined that experience at all. On the second option, in contrast, my original experience is still part of the imaginative episode, but it hasn’t been in any way transformed. So, I haven’t imagined that experience to be some other experience, because I haven’t imagined some other (good-taste) experience at all. The empirical considerations that Nanay goes on to discuss provide additional support for this claim. Consider the case of imagining one visual experience to be another. In brief, since each visual experience would require activation in one’s primary visual cortex, but these cortical areas cannot be used for both these tasks at once, we will have the same kind of problem as suggested by the intuitive considerations: either we imagine the original visual experience, but it is not imagined to be something else, or we imagine a different visual experience, so the original visual experience drops out of the imaginative exercise.

Like Nanay, Ying-Tung Lin and Vilius Dranseika are also focused on experiential imagination in their contribution to this collection, “The variety and limits of self-experience and identification in imagination,” but their interest is in a different aspect of the content of these imaginings, namely, the representation of self. Recall an example we encountered in our earlier discussion of D’Ambrosio and Stoljar: Imagining yourself swimming in the ocean from the outside. In this case, your point of view (say, from a position on the shore) is dissociated from the location of your simulated body (in the ocean). It’s this kind of case that interests Lin and Dranseika, and their discussion rests on several empirical studies that they conducted to explore how the self is represented in these instances of observer-perspective imagination. As they note, there are four possibilities for self-identification: One might identify with the viewpoint in the observer perspective (e.g., the observer on the shore), identify with the viewpoint if...
of the simulated protagonist (e.g., the protagonist swimming in the ocean), identify with both viewpoints simultaneously, or identify with both viewpoints sequentially, switching back and forth between them. Their findings are rich and complex but, in brief, it seems that while self-identification might or might not dissociate from the imagined body, it typically does not dissociate from the first-person perspective. There thus seem to be various limits on the way that the self can be represented in imagination.

The last two papers that I include in this grouping relate to the use of imagination in coming to know modal claims. Both see imagination as being limited in this domain. In “Beyond the limits of imagination: abductive inferences from imagined phenomena,” Michael Traynor starts by discussing the well-known cases where imagination seems unable to provide us with modal knowledge. As he notes, these failures arise from limitations in imaginative content: Some contents cannot be sensorily imagined, and although one can try to remedy this by way of stipulations, the stipulated content cannot carry the evidentiary weight it would need in order for us to make judgements of possibility. But Traynor does not take this to mean that we should be skeptics about the possibility of modal knowledge, nor that imagination has no role to play in helping us to reach that knowledge. Instead, he proposes an alternative imaginative route to modal knowledge. His proposal rests on an analogy to the role of perception in justifying scientific conclusions: Though perception cannot provide us with direct evidence of unobservable phenomena, scientists can nonetheless reach conclusions by way of ampliative inferences. As he argues, “Just as a scientific realist will draw inferences to claims about unobservables, similar patterns of reasoning can allow us to reach beyond sensory imagination, and beyond the dialectical limits of stipulation, to justify possibility claims about the unimaginable.” The justificatory process proceeds by way of an inference to the best explanation and, one in which imagined scenarios play a crucial role.

Like Traynor, Jill Cumby also worries about the limitations of imagination in helping us to reach modal conclusions. But also like Traynor, she does not think we should be skeptics about modal knowledge. In Cumby’s view, as put forth in her paper “Thinking beyond imagining,” the need to move beyond imagination comes from certain limitations relating to imaginative content. Consider the zombie scenario, that is, a scenario involving microphysical duplicates of human beings that entirely lack phenomenal consciousness. As Cumby notes, however, this scenario is not something that can be imagined first-personally, from the inside, and in her view that’s how it would need to be imagined in order for it to have modal import. Likewise for other scenarios like Block’s China Nation Case (Block, 1978) or Davidson’s example of Swampman (Davidson, 1987). The problem in these cases is that we cannot imaginatively simulate the perspective of the being in question, or at least, not in any straightforward and unproblematic way. So how do we come to have justification for our modal beliefs? To answer this question, Cumby calls upon conceiving, a kind of modal thinking that she sees as distinct from imagining. Though imagination’s use in modal epistemology is governed by experiential constraints, conceiving’s use is instead governed by rational constraints. Much of the discussion of the paper is then devoted to providing an account of the relevant constraints. In brief, the constraints should be specified by way
of a process of idealization, i.e., by taking up the perspective of an idealized, rational agent.

3 Limits on imagination’s use

The seven papers in this third grouping all take up issues relating to limitations on the use to which imagination can be put. These limitations arise in a vast array of contexts. The first two papers I include in this grouping focus on moral and political contexts. In “Empathy with vicious perspectives: A puzzle about the moral limits of empathetic imagination,” Olivia Bailey explores whether there are limits to what it is morally acceptable to imagine. More specifically, she is interested in imaginative perspective-taking: Are there limits on what imaginative perspectives a virtuous person may adopt? Bailey offers two different arguments to suggest that virtuousness at least sometimes requires one to engage empathetically with vicious perspectives. This conclusion presents us with something of a puzzle, as one might expect that virtuousness would be incompatible with vicious empathy. To dissolve the puzzle, Bailey explores two inter-related suggestions. First, the virtuous might be able to temporarily depart from the main sensibility they use in navigating the world and adopt other first-personal sensibilities on a trial basis. Second, we should accept that there’s a division of moral labor. The virtuous may not be able fully to meet the moral needs of everyone, in particular, they may not be able fully to meet the moral needs of the vicious; rather, that’s moral work that the less virtuous among us may need to do. As she acknowledges, both of these suggestions run counter in various ways to the general philosophical understanding of what virtue requires. But, on her view, this may well be necessary. If we want to achieve a full understanding of the moral limits of empathy with vicious perspectives, she argues, it is likely that we’ll need to reconsider our intuitive sense of the relationship between virtue and imagination.

Moving from the moral sphere to the political sphere, Avshalom Schwartz aims to develop a comprehensive account of the role assigned to imagination by social and political theory in his contribution “Political imagination and its limits.” As he notes, imagination has often been implicated in seemingly contradictory phenomena. On the one hand, it is thought to be responsible for socio-political innovation and creativity; on the other hand, it is thought to play a critical role in maintaining the stability of the socio-political order. To understand and explicate this tension, Schwartz offers a tripartite account of political imagination that sees it as having constitutive, creative, and critical elements. While the constitutive imagination helps societies to maintain stable identities over time, the creative and critical imaginations challenge the established order. As Schwartz explicates, it’s due in large part to the interplay among these different elements of imagination that limits on political imagination arise. On the one hand, the constitutive imagination imposes limits on what’s imaginable for any given society, while the creative and constructive imagination try to push past these limits. In doing so, they in turn can be seen as limiting the impact and force of the constitutive imagination. Importantly, on Schwartz’s view all three elements of imagination are necessary for a well-functioning society, one that achieves a healthy balance between chaos and stagnation.
In “Beliefs, make-beliefs, and making believe that beliefs are not make-beliefs,” Alberto Voltolini considers the use of imagination in our engagement with fiction. The discussion operates within a framework developed by Kendall Walton (1990) that fiction can be understood as offering its readers an invitation to imagine. Though Voltolini agrees with Walton that a specific kind of imagination, what we might call make-believe, is necessary and sufficient for fictionality, he departs from Walton in how this imaginative state is to be cashed out. For Voltolini, it’s only a very specific and limited kind of imagination that distinctively constitutes fiction. Namely, the relevant kind of imagination is “the specific metarepresentation that a representation addressed to the actual world is contextually different from a representation addressed to another world” (this volume). In explicating the nature of this kind of metarepresentation, Voltolini argues that it is about two different first-order states—a real belief about the actual world and an “unreal belief” about an unreal world. Unreal beliefs, on his view, share exactly the same inferential role as real beliefs, but when they become embedded in the relevant metarepresentation, they are taken offline and thus do not lead to the same thoughts and actions they otherwise would. Voltolini thus suggests that we can see the metarepresentation along the lines of a kind of inner voice that whispers to the subject that their (unreal) belief is only make-believe.

The last decade has seen an increasing interest among philosophers in the epistemic use of imagination. In “Making imagination even more embodied: imagination, constraint, and epistemic relevance,” Zuzanna Rucińska and Shaun Gallagher show how the embodied aspects of imagination impose constraints that contribute to the epistemic relevance of imagination. Their specific focus concerns the way that imaginative processes can be seen to be strongly embodied: Imaginative processes should be understood as involving the body in a way that cannot be uncoupled from the environment. Consider, for example, what they call rooted bodily processes, i.e., processes that include both implicit body-schematic processes and sensorimotor processes. When a parent is making a decision about a possible furniture arrangement in their nursery, the parent’s imagining might not feature their own body in any explicit way, but even so, the body is nonetheless centrally involved. In virtue of imagining how they might move around the room with the furniture placed one way rather than another, the parent employs reenacted perceptions and sensorimotor schemas that are imprinted with their actual bodily shape and capacities. Once we recognize this, once we understand that what we imagine is thus defined in part by what’s possible for our own bodies, we can strengthen arguments for the epistemic relevance of imagination. Rucińska and Gallagher’s discussion thus shows how some limits on imagination’s use should be seen as an advantage rather than a disadvantage. When it comes to the epistemic use of imagination, the strong embodiment of imagination—and the limits that it brings—should be seen as value-added.

Like Rucińska and Gallagher, Stephanie Rennick is an optimist about imagination’s epistemic usefulness. In “Trope analysis and folk intuitions,” she proposes a novel way to leverage the power of imagination to help us identify folk intuitions. Often, this identification has tended to proceed either by way of armchair intuiting or by way of experimental philosophy. But Rennick suggests that we can better understand what theories and ideas the folk find intuitive by supplementing these two traditional methods with a third, new method, namely, a consideration of the tropes that appear
in fiction. In conducting this kind of trope analysis, we focus on a kind of collective imagination, i.e., we don’t just look at what individual folk imagine but rather what the folk *en masse* imagine. All three of these methods involve imagination, and they all involve it in a dual way. Not only is imagination responsible for the creation of the thought experiments or fictions to be considered, but it also is used in the contemplation of the created scenarios. But who is doing the imagining? In armchair analysis, it is typically an individual or a very small group of individuals in both the creation and contemplation stages. In experimental philosophy, it is again typically an individual or a very small group of individuals in the creation stage, though it is a larger group (a group of the folk) in the contemplation stage. What’s thus distinctive about trope analysis is that the folk are involved at both stages. Insofar as the imaginative capacity of any given individual might be idiosyncratic, there are certain limitations inherent in relying on only the imagination of the few. Thus, when we add this new kind of tool to our stock of philosophical methods, and we instead focus on the imagination of the many, we are able to transcend any such limitations.

The last two contributions that I include in this grouping take up imagination in connection with other mental states and activities, in particular, memory (in Kourken Michaelian’s paper) and the will (in Paulius Rimkevičius’s paper). In recent debates about the relationship between memory and imagination, two different views have become prominent: causal theories and simulationism. For the causal theorists, there is an important discontinuity between memory and imagination, and this can be defended by focusing on the intuitive difference between successfully remembering something that happened versus merely imagining that it happened. For the simulationists, there is an important continuity between memory and imagination, and this can be defended by way of empirical studies that highlight similarities between remembering the past and imagining the future. In his paper, “Imagining the past reliably and unreliably: towards a virtue theory of memory,” Michaelian takes up a challenge that the causal theorists often raise against the simulationists, namely, that their theory is unable to properly distinguish between successful remembering, unsuccessful remembering, and imagining. To meet this challenge, Michaelian develops a version of simulationism that relies on virtue reliability epistemology. Just as virtue epistemology makes use of the role of epistemic luck in distinguishing cases of successful knowing from unsuccessful knowing, a virtue theory of memory can make use of the role of mnemonic luck in distinguishing cases of successful remembering from unsuccessful remembering. Importantly, on the virtue theory of memory, memory is conceptualized as an achievement where remembering is seen as a kind of imagining constrained by aptness (where aptness is unpacked in terms of accuracy owing to reliable functioning).

We now come finally to the last contribution in this grouping. In “Mental imagery and the illusion of conscious will,” Rimkevičius defends the view that conscious willing is an illusion. On this view, people are often misled into thinking they have made a conscious decision by their misjudgment of observed, external behavior. This gives rise to an obvious challenge: What shall we say in cases where there is no such external behavior to be observed? In answer, Rimkevičius proposes to draw on internal behavior. This is where imagination comes in. On his view, internal behavior is best seen as an imaginative simulation of external behavior. For example, just as we make utterances aloud, we also make utterances in inner speech, and such utterances involve
conscious mental imagery of the words being (silently) uttered. In defending this view, Rimkevičius suggests that it is well supported by existing neurological evidence, and he also suggests ways that it could be fruitfully tested by future empirical study. Importantly, some of these studies would rely on individual differences in imagining. It is well-known that some people are more limited in their mental imagery capacities than others. For Rimkevičius’s hypothesis to be correct, one would expect that those individuals with less imagistic facility would issue fewer reports of conscious decision-making in cases where there was no external behavior to observe. Whether this proves to be the case awaits future study. But as this brief discussion suggests, Rimkevičius’s discussion paves the way for future investigation into the relationship between imagination and the will, and he shows that there is a more expansive role for imagination to play in the context of debates about volition than has been previously recognized.7

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7 Thanks to the contributors to this topical collection for their helpful feedback on this introduction. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Tufan Kiyamaz for his editorial partnership on all aspects of this topical collection. We are also both grateful to Otávio Bueno for his editorial guidance throughout the process.
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