

The content of imaginings and the multiple use thesis

Many authors endorse (implicitly or explicitly) the so-called *Multiple Use Thesis* of imagination (MULT). MULT claims that the same mental image can serve different imaginative projects (Burge 2005, Peacocke 1985, Martin 2002, Noordhof 2002). The same mental image can be used to imagine a red apple and to imagine a perfect wax replica of a red apple (Martin 2002, 403) and the same image can serve to imagine a suitcase and a suitcase with a cat totally obscured by it (Peacocke 1985, 19). MULT is used to argue in favour of disjunctivism (Martin 2002) and additionally plays an essential role in defining the content of imaginings. In general at least two conclusions are drawn from MULT. The first is a negative claim which says that the mental image is not enough to settle the content of an imagining. The second is the positive claim that mental images are enriched or accompanied by some other, supposition-like mental states which fix the overall imaginative content (Peacocke 1985, 25; Noordhof 2002, 429). This suppositional element allows to distinguish different imaginings from each other.

But MULT has been criticized recently. Kathleen Stock remarks that MULT raises several questions, e.g.: If the same mental image can be used in different imaginative projects, what is the intrinsic content of the “neutral” mental image (Stock 2010)? Based on Stock’s criticism I will reconsider MULT in this paper and offer an alternative account to construe imaginative content. I will argue that an actively produced visual imagining intrinsically settles all imaginative content. So there are no “neutral” mental images, which can be used for different purposes. Additionally, I will suggest that MULT is based on a misguided analogy to perception.

Regarding the intrinsic content of the neutral mental image which is put to different uses, the following explanatory difficulty arises. On the one hand, the image’s content must be specific enough to contribute essentially to the determination of the content of an imaginative project. Otherwise it would be hard to explain what the mental image would contribute if all the work is done by the suppositions. On the other hand, its content must be sufficiently flexible or neutral so that it can be used in different imaginative projects. So it is difficult to see how the content of such mental images is to be construed. Most authors seem to suggest that there is some kind of non-conceptual content, which can then be conceptually “labelled” differently (Martin 2002) or which is conceptually grasped by additional suppositions (Peacocke 1985, Noordhof 2002). If differently conceptualised in one of the described ways, the image can be put to variable uses.

This view seems to be motivated by an analogy to visual perception. In visual perception, the external world fixes the perceptual, non-conceptual content, which is more fine-grained than our conceptual capacities (Tye 1995). This non-conceptual content can then be brought under different concepts. But this picture does not hold for visual imaginings. MULT seems to be intended as holding for actively and intentionally produced visual imaginings that serve some purpose or other (e.g. “imagine a suitcase”, “imagine a suitcase obscuring a cat”). The content of such actively produced imaginings is fixed by the subject’s conceptual imaginative intention and is not afterwards brought under some concepts. So the subject’s intention *determines* what the imagining is an imagining of (Dorsch 2010, McGinn 2004, Peacocke 1985). If this is right, then the content of the thus produced mental image cannot be purely non-conceptual since it is always already conceptualised by the imaginative intention. This marks an essential difference to perceptions and perceptual content. But then there is of course no room for neutral images. And absent a clear account of the neutral image MULT seems difficult to sustain.

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