

Imagination and Memory: a New Content Account

The sensory-like experiences we undergo through imagination and memory are very similar. In both cases they are faded and lack the feeling of presence involved in genuine perceptual experiences. This raises the question of how we can distinguish our imaginings and memories. In the literature, three accounts of the markers of imagination and memory have been put forward: (1) the mental image account (imagination and memory involve different types of mental images), (2) the content account (imagination and memory involve different types of content), and (3) the epistemological account (imagination and memory differ as to the conditions of their warranted self-ascriptions).

In the first part of my paper, I shall review the three approaches. According to (1) imagination-images differ from memory-images in terms of their vividness or the nature of the feelings involved. In his *Treatise on Human Nature*, Hume puts forward the mental image account and discusses also the issue of the difference between imagination-images and memory-images. He appeals to the relative vivacity of the image and claims that memory-images are fainter than impressions (i.e. perceptual experiences) but more vivacious and forceful than imagination-images.

In *The Analysis of Mind* Russell endorses the mental image account and suggests that although both memory and imagination entail an image of an event e , only the former also demands the belief that “ e existed”, which should be grounded on the fact that we are aware of the image of e . Moreover, why only memory-images are conducive to such type of belief is explained by the fact that they are accompanied by two feelings, namely that of familiarity and that of “pastness”. I will show that several objections can be raised against both versions of the mental image account: neither the vividness nor the nature of the feelings involved can really capture the difference between imagination and memory.

Leaving aside the mental image account, one might suggest that the distinction between memory and imagination can be explained at the level of the content. On this suggestion, memory involves features that cannot be imagined. What can they be? Following Russell’s insight, we may answer the temporal information. Indeed, the fact that an event occurred in the (real) past is a datum, which can be part of the content of memory. Recently, Byrne has criticized the content account, endorsing instead the epistemological account. According to him the notion of content can explain the similarities between imagination and memory, but it is useless in order to distinguish them. In contrast, he claims that the epistemology of perception, sketched in the spirit of Evans’ procedure for self-ascription of belief, may give a clue for grasping the markers of memory and imagination. Against Byrne, I argue that there is more to the content account.

In the second part of my paper I shall first claim that Byrne’s point depends on the adoption of

an unclear notion of content. If one takes into account a broad notion of content, the content account is still a valuable alternative. Moreover, once we have acknowledged the complexity of the relevant notion of content, the epistemological account can be seen as a natural development of the content account.

Following some insights from situation theory and in particular its interpretation by Recanati, I will argue that there are two notions of mental content: the first corresponding to what is explicitly represented (i.e. the *lekton*), the second further including the appropriate *circumstance of evaluation* (CE) for the relevant explicit content (i.e. the Austinian proposition, AP). In order to familiarize with the distinction let us take an example. Let's assume that today John is in NY and believes that *it is raining*. The *lekton* of his belief can be expressed by "*it is raining*", but he tacitly refers to a circumstance, and conceives the *lekton* as true of that circumstance. The time and place of the raining event are aspects of the circumstance concerned by John's belief, not an aspect of its *lekton*. In other words, in this case the time and place are expressed by the AP and more precisely specified by the CE.

I will show that memory involves a specific circumstance of evaluation for its *lekta*. On the contrary, a case can be made for the claim that our imaginings do have *lekta*, but cannot be evaluated as true or false, since there may be no circumstance relevant for their evaluation. Putting things this way would suffice for showing how the content dimension can underline how memory and imagination differ. Nonetheless, I will sketch how also imagination can have a circumstance of evaluation for its contents. From this alternative perspective, I will show that although imagination and memory may share the same explicit content, they necessarily involve different kinds of situations of evaluation. *Pace* Byrne, the content is still a valuable dimension in order to carve memory and imagination at their joints.

Finally, I shall explore a version of the epistemological account which in fact is congenial to my broad construal of the content account. Once we have the two notions of content on board, the conditions on the warranted self-ascriptions of our imaginings and memories can be better understood, for they can be linked to the circumstance of evaluation. Thus, (2) can be seen to encompass (3). We are then left with just two accounts of the markers of imagination and memory, namely the mental image account and the content account, and the second is the most promising.