

Research Statement

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I am pursuing research in two areas: imagination, and aesthetics. On imagination, I've published a paper in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, and have two others under review or in revision for resubmission. I'm principally concerned with articulating and defending the *lens theory* of imagination. According to this theory, imagination is a matter of isolating elements, properties, or aspects of other experiences, and concentrating on or refining them. To imagine seeing a toucan, for example, is to isolate the toucan-ish elements of prior perceptual experiences, and to focus on those. The lens theory is an alternative to the *imitation theory*, according to which imaginative experiences are imitations of counterpart experiences. Sensory imagination simulates perception, imaginative emotions imitate the real thing, and so on.

The lens theory has a fine historical pedigree. It is arguably Hume's view, and perhaps Kant's; it is forcefully articulated by R.G. Collingwood. However, the view has lately fallen into desuetude. Meanwhile, the imitation theory is paradigmatic; versions of it abound in recent philosophy, and lie behind much work on imagination's applications. Philosophers have argued that imagination is a matter of pretence (Ryle, Langland-Hassan); unasserted thought (Scruton); entertainment of counterfactuals (Russow); or representation as possible (McGinn). These are all forms of imitation. The view that imagination is imitation explicitly supports the simulationist approach to mind-reading (Heal, Currie); forms the background to recent debates concerning the relation of imagination to beliefs and desires (Schellenberg, Sinhababu); and underpins work on aesthetic appreciation (Walton).

However, I hold that the lens theory is superior to the imitation theory. While the latter is intuitively appealing, and has explanatory promise in a variety of fields, the view fails to account satisfactorily for the nature of imagination and the range of applications proposed for it. Because the theory makes imagination dependent on other mental states, it struggles to explain what is distinctive about imagination, and this leads to frustration when we try to apply the theory. Consider, for example, empathy. This plausibly involves imagination; but if imagination is imitation, we empathise by imitating other people's mental states. This raises a sceptical worry: can we ever accurately simulate another's mind? It also raises a practical worry: if we know enough to perform the imitation, what further knowledge do we gain by doing so?

The lens theory better identifies what is distinctive about imagining, and in turn can be more fruitfully applied to problems such as empathic identification. If imagination is a matter of focussing, clarifying, and refining the elements of other experiences, we can develop an account of imagination without making its nature dependent on those experiences. The lens theory neatly unites and explains fundamental observations about the nature of imagination: its dependence on attention, its active nature, its link with creativity. It can plausibly explain what unites the disparate forms and functions of imagination. And it can forge ahead where the imitation theory founders. To return to empathy: suppose that, in empathising, we imagine what it is like to be another person by clarifying and refining our impressions of

their experience. What emerges is a focussed, sharpened understanding of that experience. We don't need complete knowledge of their interior life to undertake the exercise, and we gain understanding by doing so.

My paper "Imagination as a Lens" (second revise and resubmit, *Philosophical Review*) sets out reasons for preferring the lens theory at a high level of abstraction and generality. My aim now is to develop a detailed version of the theory, and to apply it. The details include exploring the limits of imagination: whether we can imagine being embodied otherwise, as people of different races or genders, or even as bats. The question of imagination's limits also bears on recent work on transformative experiences (Paul). One way of characterising such experiences is to say that you can't imagine before having them how things will be for you afterwards. Why is this so? What limit of the imaginable is being reached? And is the implicit idea of imagination's limits predicated on an imitation theory of imagination? If so, how do things look on the lens theory? If the theory can deliver a good, principled explanation of why we can imagine some experiences and not others, we have an indication that it can be more widely applied: questions about imagination's limits bear on modal epistemology, for example.

Questions about imagination also matter in aesthetics, and indeed Collingwood argues for his version of the lens theory in the course of a book principally concerned with the nature and creation of art. I have co-authored a Routledge Handbook article on imagination and art, and am pursuing research on several linked questions; for example, that of whether the proper objects of aesthetic experience are imaginary, as Collingwood, Sartre, and Dufrenne suggest. I have a paper under review on Collingwood's expression theory of art, which is intimately connected to his view of imagination.

Besides questions involving imagination, I'm pursuing research on several other topics in aesthetics. I've recently published a pair of survey articles on the aesthetics of electronic dance music in *Philosophy Compass*. These pose a set of questions concerning, among other things, genre, dancing, repetition, the relation between taste and personal identity, and issues in philosophy of music. These are all new areas of inquiry in analytic aesthetics, and I aim to fill out the answers I sketched in future work. For example, it has been argued that rock music requires a different ontology than those applied to classical music, because rock music is made to be recorded, not performed (Gracyk). In my articles, I lay the groundwork for a similar argument regarding dance music: the unique relations between recording, producing, and performing it involves mean that dance music needs its own ontology.

I also have interests in natural, environmental, and bodily aesthetics. I have a paper in progress on the question of how theories of natural aesthetics and theories of human beauty interact. People writing about how we should appreciate nature are curiously reticent about applying their ideas to humans, who are after all natural entities. I explore the reasons for this reticence, which are primarily to do with a reasonable wish to avoid making morally questionable aesthetic judgements. I argue that we can have a morally sound framework for the judgement of human beauty, and that this framework can also be applied to other natural entities.

This work intersects with my interests in feminist philosophy, and philosophy of race and gender. Besides relations between questions of aesthetics and questions of race, I also work occasionally on other topics in this area. For example, I have under review an article on the ethics of sexual consent.