Comments on Bence Nanay, *Perceptual Content and the Content of Mental Imagery*

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In *Perceptual Content and the Content of Mental Imagery*, Bence Nanay makes a case for a certain account of the structure of imagination. According to him, imagination and perception have similarly structured content, and this explains the phenomenal similarities between the two. I agree that similarity of content seems to be a plausible explanation of phenomenal similarities between experiences. Most of my comments concern points on which further clarification and explanation of the view proposed seems desirable. I'll address three elements of the paper: the way in which mental imagery is characterised, the notion of imaginative (and perceptual) content involved, and the account of imagination's structure suggested by the appeal to attention.

1 Characterising mental imagery

In his section II, Nanay describes the phenomenon with which he's concerned. But it is not clear to me what the phenomenon is. The 'paradigmatic case of visualising' offered is one of seeing in the mind's eye. It is asserted that 'hallucinations are... normally interpreted as examples of mental imagery' (p.2). And there is a quotation from Richardson referring to 'quasi-perceptual experiences' (p.1), and later a claim that when we represent unseen parts of objects, 'we attribute properties quasi-perceptually' to them (p.2). These cases, and the others Nanay adduces, don't seem to give us a well-defined target of explanation.

Though the paradigm case offered is of visualising, it is clear enough that this is not Nanay's concern. He is interested in a wider class of mental imagery. Now, he may not think there is any significant difference between visualising and other sorts of imagery like hallucination, but many people do; see, *inter alia*, (Sartre 1940/2004, part 1; §621 Jaspers 1946/1963, pp. 69-70; Wittgenstein 2007; McGinn 2004, pp. 15; 117; 116). So grouping hallucination and visualisation together indicates that we are concerned here with a broad class of imagery, under which different sub-classes fall, those sub-classes presumably having features which distinguish them from each other. One worry about taking this broad class as an explanandum is that the dependency thesis, as Martin introduces it, is specifically concerned with visualising, and moreover with certain cases of visualising. So it's not apparent that the dependency thesis is meant even to account for all of imagining, let alone all mental imagery (Martin 2002, p. 404). So dialectically, if Nanay's concern is with mental imagery broadly construed, it is not clear that the dependency thesis is really a view directly opposed to his; the two have different explananda.

In any case, if the concern is with a broad class of mental imagery, we should like to know what the characteristics of mental imagery in general are, and thus what is being explained by the account proposed. But I didn't find the cases or references to 'quasi-perception' helpful here, and ended up not sure what the phenomenon in question is. The word 'imagery' and the phrase 'quasi-perception' seem to suggest that we are dealing with something image-like or perception-like. Richardson, who Nanay quotes, distinguishes quasi-perceptual experiences from merely quasi-sensory ones, such as after-images, phosphenes, and perhaps hypnogogic imagery (Richardson 1969, ch.2). But the focus of the paper on sensible properties makes it unclear whether Nanay endorses that distinction. And the mention of representing occluded parts of objects muddies the waters further. However parts of occluded objects figure in perceptual experience, it is surely not (normally) in a sensory manner. So if such representation falls into the class of mental imagery, and can be described as quasi-perceptual, I am just not sure any longer what it means for something to be a mental image, or what it means for a mental state to be quasi-perceptual. Is the concern of the paper just with sensory experience in the absence of external stimuli, or with some more narrow class of perception-like or imagistic experiences? If the latter, what is distinctive about those experiences? I would find clarification of the explanandum useful in assessing the proposed explanation.

For the rest of these comments, I will talk in terms of the 'paradigm case' of visualising something in the mind's eye, since I have a good grasp of what this is, and since if the view doesn't work for its paradigm cases, it certainly won't work for the rest.

2 What is imaginative (and perceptual) content?

Nanay's proposal, according to the abstract, is that the 'structure of the content' is the same in perception and imagination. But in the body of the paper he says that 'the content of mental imagery is exactly the same as the content of perceptual states' (p.6). So it is not just the structure of the contents which are similar; it is the nature of the contents. Indeed, Nanay explicitly demurs from saying how perceptual content is structured (p.5), so the structure does not seem to be his real focus.

Since the proposal is that the content is the same in both experiences, we can ask two things. First, what is this content like? Second, is just this sort of content a good candidate for playing a role in imagination (assuming it's a good candidate to do so in perception)?

Taking the first question first: Nanay characterises content with regard to perception, and claims that his characterisation is 'simple and not particularly controversial' (p.6). I have some doubts. We are told that perceptual content is non-propositional, and 'constituted by the properties that are perceptually attributed to the perceived scene' (p.5). It does not seem uncontroversial to say that perceptual content is either of these things. Plenty of people think that perceptual content is propositional. See, for examples and discussion, (Schellenberg 2010; Pautz 2010; Siegel 2011) Further, to say that content is constituted by properties is implicitly to take a stand on the question explicitly deferred, viz. how that content is structured. If content is constituted by properties, sensible properties in particular, this suggests some sort of Russellian account

of the structure of content, on which properties figure in contents, as opposed to a Fregean view (For discussion of those two options with regard to perceptual content, see Chalmers 2006, pp.50-61).

On the second question: saying that content thus characterised plays a role in imagination brings with it apparent commitments which again tell against the claim of non-controversy. The key here is the claim about properties constituting content. Taken literally, this seems to commit Nanay to the actual presence of sensible properties in imaginative experience. This seems peculiar, though not indefensible. A defence, however, would have to address another question which Nanay defers (p.6): what is the nature of sensible properties, such that they can be constitutive parts of imaginative content without the presence of ordinary instantiating objects? There are ways to make this defence; for example, one might appeal to Mark Johnston's view of hallucination, according to which the experience involves awareness of uninstantiated (genuine) sensible properties (Johnston 2004). Or perhaps Nanay has in mind a notion of constitution distinct from the one I am saddling him with. Whatever the case, the notion of content here seems to demand more explanation, and I don't think the explanation will be uncontroversial.

3 The structure of imagination

Finally, I'd like to address the notion of attention, and what Nanay's use of it implies about the structure of imagination. The implications I draw are quite plausibly not those intended, and so the comments here should be taken as an invitation to explain where I have gone wrong in interpreting the view.

When Nanay talks about visualising, he talks about shifting one's attention to different aspects of the visualised scene, and about attention making 'the attended property more determinate' (p.6). This way of talking seems to me unfortunate, because it suggests something like the following model of visualising: to visualise is to attend to some sort of mental image. Attention sounds like a relation between a subject and attended objects or properties. So it sounds as if the view is committed to the existence of things – be they properties, or images, or objects bearing properties – which are separate from the subject and attended to by them.

Such a view is not especially attractive. Nanay quite rightly points out that it is undesirable to posit 'special pictures' as a feature of imagination's structure (p.3). Other candidates for the objects of attention are available, but I don't suppose that Nanay would like any of them. These include sense-data (Robinson 1994), Meinongian objects (Mackie 1975; Harman 1990; Levine 2008), and Johnston's sensible profiles (Johnston 2004. There is also the view of imagination, which I don't understand too well, suggested by Peacocke, on which images are supplemented by some sort of extra-sensory content (Peacocke 1985). Ontological worries aside, it is difficult to see how these views might escape the fundamental problems of pictorial views of imagination, which is that imagining is just not much like attending to an object separate from oneself (Sartre 1940/2004, Part 1 ch.1; Tye 1991, ch.1; Hopkins 1999, ch.7.1-3; McGinn 2004, ch.5). I take it also that Nanay doesn't mean that the content of imagination is what is attended to; on the standard conception of intentionality, content is that by which we attend to intentional objects, not the thing to which we attend

(Crane 2009).

But I'm not sure how the notion of imagination (and mental imagery more generally) involving attention can be explained without positing some sort of object of attention. Again, this is not so much an argument against Nanay's view as a request for more explanation: how can it be that imagining involves attention, if we are going to avoid positing objects enjoying that attention?

To sum up, then: the idea of explaining the phenomenal similarities between perception and imagination by saying they have similar content seems promising. But in the paper at hand, I'm not sure quite what the phenomenon being explained is; I'm not sure that the view of content is as uncontroversial as Nanay supposes; and I'm not sure how the implied model of imagination, relying on the notion of attention, can be explained without dubious reference to objects of attention. No doubt all these difficulties can be met, and I look forward to hearing how.

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