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SYMPOSIUM

Imaginative Phenomenology and Existential Status

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Abstract In this essay I explore the account of imaginative phenomenology developed by Uriah Kriegel in *The Varieties of Consciousness*. On his view, the difference between perceptual phenomenology and imaginative phenomenology arises from the way that they present the existential status of their object: While perceptual experience presents its object as existent, imaginative experience presents its object as non-existent. While I agree with Kriegel that it's likely that the difference between imaginative phenomenology and perceptual phenomenology is one not just of degree but of kind, I worry about the particular account that he has developed. I thus develop two lines of criticism. First, I question whether Kriegel is right that imagination presents its object as non-existent. Second, I question whether this account of imaginative phenomenology is consistent with other commonly-accepted facts about the nature of imagination.
KEYWORDS: Imagination; Perception; Phenomenology; J.-P. Sartre; Epistemic Value; Emotion

Riassunto *Fenomenologia dell'immaginazione e status esistenziale* – In questo articolo intendo indagare l'approccio alla descrizione della fenomenologia dell'immaginazione sviluppata da Uriah Kriegel in *The Varieties of Consciousness*. Dal suo punto di vista, la differenza tra fenomenologia della percezione e fenomenologia dell'immaginazione si mostra nel modo in cui queste presentano lo status esistenziale dei loro oggetti: se l'esperienza percettiva presenta il proprio oggetto come esistente, l'esperienza immaginativa lo presenta come non-esistente. Per un verso, concordo con Kriegel sulla probabilità che la differenza tra fenomenologia dell'immaginazione e fenomenologia della percezione non sia di grado ma di genere, mentre, per altro verso, non sono convinta della correttezza del suo approccio. Pertanto vorrei sollevare due criticità. In primo luogo, mi chiedo se Kriegel sia nel giusto quando ritiene che l'immaginazione presenti il proprio oggetto come non-esistente; in secondo luogo, mi chiedo se questa descrizione della fenomenologia dell'immaginazione sia coerente con altri fatti, comunemente accettati, circa la natura dell'immaginazione.
PAROLE CHIAVE: Immaginazione; Percezione; Fenomenologia; J.-P. Sartre; Valore epistemico; Emozione

IN *THE VARIETIES OF CONSCIOUSNESS*, Uriah Kriegel undertakes the ambitious project of cataloging our conscious experience. In particular, Kriegel is interested in determining how many distinctive types of phenomenal primitives must be posited in order to account adequately for the stream of conscious experience.

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By way of a discussion that is rich and thought-provoking throughout, Kriegel argues that there are six different types of phenomenology, i.e., six distinct phenomenal primitives, each of which is basic, *sui generis*, and irreducible to any of the others. Three of these phenomenal primitives – perceptual phenomenology, algedonic (pleasure/pain) phenomenology, and imaginative phenomenology – are sensory in nature. The remaining three – cognitive phenomenology, conative phenomenology, and entertaining phenomenology – are non-sensory in nature.

Since the existence of sensory phenomenology is relatively uncontroversial, and since there is general (if not universal) agreement that neither perceptual nor algedonic phenomenology can be reduced to one another, Kriegel focuses his attention on non-sensory phenomenology. The three chapters at the heart of the book are devoted to establishing the existence and primitiveness of cognitive, conative, and entertaining phenomenology – and, in each case, to developing at least a preliminary account of the relevant phenomenal character. There are also two chapters (plus an appendix) aiming to rule out other possible candidates for phenomenal primitiveness.

In particular, Kriegel explores moral phenomenology, emotional phenomenology, and the phenomenology of freedom, and he argues that they are not on the same par as the six phenomenal primitives identified. Either they are reducible to a combination of these primitives (as he thinks is likely the case with emotional phenomenology and perhaps also the phenomenology of freedom), or they are a lower-level subcategory of one or more of these primitives (as he thinks is likely the case with moral phenomenology).

Given the provocative nature of many of the claims just mentioned, it may come as something as a surprise that I will not take them up in my commentary on the book. Rather, I propose to focus on a very small part of the discussion – a short section that comes in the book's concluding chapter. Having spent the bulk of the book on non-sensory phenomenology, Kriegel returns at the end to sensory phenomenology and, in particular, to the one type of sensory phenomenology where there is considerably less consensus about its status as a phenomenal primitive: imaginative phenomenology.

Though the discussion comprises only about 10 pages, it is jam-packed with original and important theses about the nature of imaginative experience. Since I couldn't in any case have done justice to a book of this breadth in a brief commentary, I hope I will be forgiven for focusing my discussion in this narrow way on a part of the book which is of particular interest to me personally. And ultimately, though my focus will be narrow, I hope that closer attention to what Kriegel has to say about imaginative phenomenology will also help to shed some light on his project as a whole.

Kriegel's view

When discussing imaginative phenomenology, philosophers tend to proceed by situating it with respect to perceptual phenomenology, and here Kriegel is no different. His discussion is structured around three possible views we might take toward the relation between these two types of phenomenology. As we explore these three views and how they differ from one another, it might help to have an example before us, so take a moment and imagine a Steinway grand piano.

Now take another moment and reflect upon your imaginative experience. In particular – assuming you've at some point had a perceptual experience of a Steinway grand piano – take a moment to compare your imagining to that perceptual experience. Presumably, your imaginative experience seems in some ways similar to it and in some ways different from it. How exactly we are to capture these similarities and differences is precisely what's at stake in deciding among the three views that Kriegel discusses.

According to what Kriegel calls the *No Difference view* (ND), there is no intrinsic difference with respect to phenomenology between

imagining and perceiving. Phenomenologically, imagining a piano and perceiving a piano are the same. Insofar as the experiences seem different to us, that difference is not present in the phenomenology itself but rather derives from our accompanying beliefs – our beliefs, say, about whether we are imagining a piano or seeing a piano, or about how well our experience coheres with other experiences.

In contrast to ND, the other two views that Kriegel considers both posit a phenomenological difference between imagining and perceiving. According to what Kriegel calls the *Difference in Degree view* (DD), the difference is best understood as one of degree; according to what he calls *the Difference in Kind view* (KD), the difference is best understood as one of kind.

Drawing inspiration from Sartre's views on imagination, Kriegel defends a version of KD. His case for KD, and against ND and DD, rests heavily on epistemological considerations. In particular, Kriegel relies upon one key assumption: a subject undergoing a perceptual or imaginative experience

> can have a *distinctively first-personal* knowledge of what state she is in; not infallible or even otherwise privileged knowledge, but just *distinctive* knowledge.[1]

When we add one further assumption about the content of perception and imagination – namely that imaginative experience and perceptual experience can share the exact same content – Kriegel thinks that we are naturally led to the kind of account that he offers.

The argument, in (very) brief, runs as follows. A subject can typically know whether she's in an imaginative or a perceptual state, and moreover, this knowledge typically has a certain epistemic character: A subject can achieve it immediately, effortlessly, and with a warranted feeling of certainty.[2] If determining whether we're perceiving or imagining required us to (say) compare our present experience to others and assess how well it coheres, then our knowledge would not have the epistemic character it does. So there must be some phenomenological difference to ground our knowledge and account for its epistemic character.

But whatever this phenomenological difference, there seems to be no principled way to account adequately for it in terms of degree.[3] Nor can it be accounted for in terms of content. While it's true that in many cases, and even in many cases involving the same object, the content of perception and imagination will differ (e.g., my Steinway imagining might be less detailed than the analogous perception), there are nonetheless other cases where there is no difference in content between perception and imagination. Yet even in these cases, there is still a phenomenal difference – what Kriegel calls a "deep difference" – between the two. Thus, there must be a difference in kind between imaginative phenomenology and perceptual phenomenology.

But what does this difference in kind amount to? In answer, Kriegel proposes that we look to the attitudinal nature of the experiences in question.

Perceptual experience and imaginative experience take different attitudes towards their objects, and in particular, these experiences present their objects differently with respect to what we might call their *existential status* (this is my term, not Kriegel's). When you perceive a Steinway piano, your experience presents the piano to you as existing there before you in way that your imaginative experience of a Steinway piano does not. Perceptual experience presents its object as existent while imaginative experience presents its object as non-existent – and it's this difference that, for Kriegel, grounds the phenomenological difference between these two types of experience.

Kriegel doesn't name his view, but for ease of exposition I'll call it the *existential status view*. In the remainder of this comments, I'll explore the plausibility of this view.

Existential Status

As Hume famously noted in his treatment

of imagination, nowhere than in imagination are we more free. Along similar lines, discussions of imagination typically make note of its very wide range – we can as easily imagine three-headed purple dragons and cantaloupes the size of the moon as we can imagine Shetland ponies and ordinary-sized cantaloupes. But of course, as this very point suggests, we can indeed imagine ponies and cantaloupes, that is, we can imagine mundane existing things. And this fact seems to suggest an obvious objection to the existential status view.

Given that I can imagine the cantaloupe that I bought at the store yesterday, a thing that I know exists, how can my imaginative experience of that cantaloupe differ from my perceptual experience of that cantaloupe with respect to the presentation of the cantaloupe's existential status?

Aware of this objection, Kriegel is not very troubled by it. In answer, he suggests that even in cases where we imagine things that we know don't exist, such things are nonetheless presented differently with respect to their existential status than they are when we are perceiving them. So, for example, even when I imagine Barack Obama, a man I know exists,

> it is plausible that my imaginative experience itself presents-as-nonexistent Obama; it is just accompanied by an overriding belief that the imagined object in fact exists.[4]

But here I think Kriegel's answer may be a bit too quick. I have two reasons for concern, both of which are intended to undercut the suggestion that a presentation of nonexistence is built into the phenomenology of imagining. In particular, I'll try to show that this suggestion runs counter to some other deep-seated intuitions that we have about imagination.

First, compare imagining something that we know exists with imagining something that we know does not exist. Right now I'm imagining a Steinway grand piano – and indeed, I'm imagining a particular Steinway grand piano that I know to exist, the one that's in the living room of my mother-in-law's house. Next, having imagined the Steinway, something I know to exist, I'll imagine something I know not to exist. In particular, I'm now imagining a cat piano – a piano which, instead of strings, contains a number of cats who are arranged according to the pitch of their voices and whose tails are inserted into narrow openings; when the pianist hits a key, a sharp hammer descends on the corresponding cat tail.[5]

If you did not engage in these two imaginings along with me, then take a moment and engage in two of your own – first imagine something that you know to exist, then next imagine something you know not to exist, and then finally compare the two. In my own case, I find it plausible to say that there is a difference in the imaginative phenomenology with respect to the presentation of their existential status. While the cat piano is indeed presented-as-non-existent – while this seems built into the imaginative phenomenology – this does not seem true of my mother in law's Steinway.

As we've seen, Kriegel wants to account for the felt difference between the Steinway piano imagining and the cat piano imagining in terms of accompanying beliefs. On his view, both experiences have objects presented-as-non-existent, but the first is accompanied by the overriding belief that the Steinway piano exists, while the second is accompanied by the overriding belief that the cat piano does not. In other words, Kriegel denies that there is a difference intrinsic to the phenomenology that can account for the difference in existential status between the two imaginings.

Note that this puts him in a somewhat delicate dialectical position – while he insists that the difference in existential status between imagining and perceiving is intrinsic to the phenomenology, he also insists that the difference in existential status among different imaginings is not intrinsic to the phenomenology. But aside from the delicacy of

his dialectical position, there is a deeper problem for his view. For if we suppose that there is no difference in the existential status of the two imaginings – if we suppose that the Steinway piano imagining presents it as non-existent in just the same way that the cat piano presents it as non-existent, that it presents the Steinway piano on an *existential par* with the cat piano – then the Steinway piano imagining would be importantly *misleading*.

But while there may well be imaginings that are misleading in various ways, it does not seem that an imagining automatically becomes misleading solely in virtue of the fact that it is an imagining of something that actually exists. Thus, by building a presentation-as-non-existent into the phenomenology of imagination, Kriegel commits himself to a problematic picture of what we might call the *epistemic value* of imagining.

Perhaps there is an adjustment that Kriegel could make to his view to accommodate this worry. For example, perhaps perceptual objects are presented-as-before-the-eyes (or before-the-senses) whereas imaginative objects are presented-as-not-before-the-eyes (or not-before-the-senses). Since neither the Steinway piano being imagined nor the cat piano is before the eyes, this suggestion might avoid the charge of misleadingness that I just raised. Granted, this sort of view runs into problems of its own, for even assuming that it could be spelled out in a non-question-begging way, a different kind of misleadingness will arise when we imagine objects that are indeed right before us. But even if this charge can be avoided, or even if there is some other parallel suggestion in the general vicinity, the second worry I want to raises poses a more general threat to views of this type.

Consider a group of young children playing a typical game of make-believe: They pretend they are being chased by a terrible monster. After a lot of running around, the game ends when the children successfully "trap" the monster in the basement, slamming the door behind him. That night at bedtime, Heylin finds herself again imagining the monster down in the basement. She then imagines the monster escaping from the basement and finding its way upstairs. These imaginings terrify her, and she pulls the covers over her head in fear. Heylin's situation is not an unusual one. Children with active imaginations often scared by what they find themselves imagining.

Indeed, this power of imagination is not limited to children, and it is not limited to fear. Just as our imaginings can scare us, they can also make us cry, make us laugh, make us squeamish, and so on. (Just think about our imaginative engagement with fiction). On Kriegel's view, however, this power of imagination becomes especially difficult to understand. If the monster is phenomenologically presented-as-non-existent, then it would seem that it would be considerably harder for the fear to take hold, or for it to take hold as intensely as it does.

For a proponent of ND or DD, since the non-existence of the monster isn't built into the phenomenology, the accompanying fear and its intensity are more easily explained. Such proponents likely see imaginings as accompanied by beliefs about the existence or non-existence of their objects, and there are all sorts of reasons that could be invoked to explain why in certain imaginative contexts the non-existence beliefs lack saliency.

Importantly, my worry here should not be seen to collapse into the paradox of fiction. This paradox arises from what seem to be an inconsistent triad of plausible claims: (1) Someone can have a genuine and rational emotional response to an event only if she believes that the event has actually occurred; (2) We have genuine emotional responses to works of fiction; and (3) We do not generally believe that the events presented by the works of fiction have actually occurred. But however we answer the paradox of fiction – and this is going to be difficult for any theorist of imagination – the proponent of a Kriegel-style KD faces a further problem: Once we build the presentation of existential status into the phenomenology of imagining,

i.e., once we claim that imaginative phenomenology by its nature presents its objects as non-existent, not only is it hard to see how our emotional responses to fiction could be both rational and genuine, but it is also hard to see how such emotional responses would even get generated in the first place.

Conclusion

The discussion of the previous section aimed to show two things. First, Kriegel's view leaves us unable to explain the epistemic value of imagination. Rather, on his view, imagination becomes inherently misleading. Second, Kriegel's view leaves us unable to explain imagination's power to produce emotional response. Rather, on his view, it remains something of a mystery how things that are phenomenologically presented-as-non-existent could produce strong emotional reactions in imaginers.

While I think that these worries about Kriegel's view deserve to be taken seriously, it's also important not to exaggerate their scope. My discussion here does highlight the difficulty in assessing when exactly something belongs to the phenomenology of an experience, and when it can be attributed to accompanying beliefs – a difficulty that has more general ramifications for Kriegel's project as a whole. And I do take the worries to suggest that imaginative and perceptual phenomenology cannot be differentiated from one another by means of their presentation of existential status. But nothing I have said here rules out there being some other means of differentiation, i.e., the truth of KD remains an open question. Indeed, given the elegance of Kriegel's overall account of the varieties of consciousness and the structural symmetry of his six proposed phenomenal primitives – something I haven't been able to touch on in this brief commentary – this impressive book offers us reason to believe that imaginative phenomenology is one such primitive even absent a compelling account of its distinctive nature.

Notes

[1] U. KRIEGEL, *The Varieties of Consciousness*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, p. 194.
[2] *Ivi*, p. 187.
[3] See *ivi*, pp. 189-191 for these arguments, which I regretfully can't review here.
[4] *Ivi*, p. 192.
[5] For a fuller description of the cat piano, see *The Museum of Imaginary Instruments* at the following URL: <http://imaginaryinstruments.org/the-cat-piano-katzenklavier-piano-de-chats/>