

Modes of perceiving and Imagining.

Abstract.

We enjoy different modes of sensory imagining corresponding to our five modes of perception – seeing, touching, hearing, smelling and tasting. An account of what constitutes these different modes of perception needs also to explain what constitutes the corresponding modes of sensory imagination. In this paper I argue that we can explain what distinguishes the different modes of sensory imagination in terms of their characteristic experiences without supposing that we must distinguish the senses in terms of the kinds of experience involved. Thus the fact that we enjoy different modes of sensory imagining poses no threat to someone who thinks that the five senses are to be distinguished by appeal to the kinds of mechanism or psychological capacities their exercise involves, and not by appeal to experience.

Keywords.

Perception. Imagination. The five senses. Seeing. Touching. Hearing.

1. How might we explain the distinction that we all make between the five senses? Verbs like look, feel, taste, and smell “are very frequently used to refer to publicly observable operations by persons,” including ourselves (Coady 1974, p.112). We talk, for example, of someone smelling a rose, or looking at a picture, or listening to a piece of music, and so on. We need to explain on what basis and why we apply concepts of the senses to various activities that we and others engage in, and what makes these activities the activities they are. We also use the concepts of the senses to refer to the psychological effects of these activities, to various kinds of experience. We talk, for example, of things

looking red, or of the rose smelling fragrant, and so on, so we need to explain why we apply concepts of the senses to such experiences. Those who have directly addressed this question disagree about the answer. Some of them attempt to explain the distinction by appealing to various different kinds of ‘external’ factors involved in perceiving like, for example, the involvement of certain mechanisms or of particular sense organs. Others think that an explanation must appeal to the kinds of experiences involved in perceiving; to many people, that we should explain the senses in that way seems obvious; the difficulty has always been to show exactly how we might do so. But what reason is there for thinking that the senses must be constituted by differences in experience?

Amongst the variety of experiential episodes we enjoy are those of sensory imagining. These are the distinctive episodes of imagining analogous to perception; like perception, we can distinguish different modes of sensory imagining corresponding to our use of the distinct senses. We can, for example, imagine the view from the hotel looking out over the harbour; imagine hearing a favourite record; imagine the smell of hot coffee; and so on. It is a constraint on, or at least desirable, that an account of how we distinguish the senses be able to explain these different modes of sensory imagining.

The question that I want to ask is this. Does the fact that we can imagine seeing something, imagine touching something, and so on, give us any reason to think that an explanation of how we distinguish the senses must appeal solely to the kinds of experience involved, and so give us a reason to reject all those accounts which appeal to external factors? We might think that it does if the only possible explanation of these different modes of imagining was one that appealed to the character of the experiences involved in perceiving. We can see this question, then, as a challenge to someone who wants to defend an external account of the senses: can an account of the sense which distinguishes

them by appeal to external factors explain these different kinds of sensory imagining?

2. Episodes of imagining things to be a certain way can have both sensory and non-sensory aspects. You might imagine a ripe tomato by imagining the red colour of its skin; but you could visualise a ripe tomato without visualising its colour. In doing so you would still imagine something red. The difference between the two episodes of imagining is in the presence or absence of colour in the sensory content of what is imagined, but the object of imagination – a ripe tomato – is the same in both cases. The same sensory content can be put to different imaginary purposes. Martin has suggested that we think of the non-sensory aspects of an episode of sensory imagining as arising out of the wider cognitive project of which the imagining is a part (1999, p.27). In what follows I shall suppose that the difference between the different modes of sensory imagining is a difference in their sensory content. So that, for some cases at least, we can say what makes a visualising a visualising rather than some other kind of sensory imagining simply by appealing to some aspect of the sensory content of that episode of imagining; it is not necessary to appeal to the wider cognitive project of which that episode forms a part.

In chapter 7 of his recent book Robert Hopkins (1998) gives us an account of visualising – visual imagining – and its relation to vision which, if correct, suggests that we can distinguish the senses by appealing to the kinds of experience involved. I will begin examining his account.

When we visualise something we imagine how it looks. (There is a similar relation between the other modes of sensory imagining and their corresponding senses.) This suggests that there is some kind of correspondence between the objects of vision and the objects of visualising; there are two different ways in which we might attempt to cash out this

correspondence. One is in terms of a correspondence between the objects of visual experience and visualising: the way I visualise things is the way that they would look if veridically perceived. The other way is by appealing to visual experience: so, we might say that to visualise some object is to imagine seeing – having a visual experience of – that object. The first claim is weaker than the second in that it sees the correspondence between visualising and vision as following from the fact that we can imagine the same things as we can perceive, but not that we imagine things by imagining perceiving them.

Hopkins' account explains visualising in the first kind of way. Whenever we visualise something, some of what is visualised is necessarily some of what could be seen in a possible visual experience; he suggests, therefore, that the contents of visualising match the contents of a possible visual experience. Given that our visualisings can be indeterminate in a way our visual experiences cannot be, this claim is too strong (we can, for example, visualise an object without visualising its colour, say, or without visualising it as either transparent or opaque; our visual experience cannot be indeterminate in that way). The strongest claim that we can make then, according to Hopkins, is that “[e]very visualising has some content which matches *part* of the content of a possible visual experience” (p.169). The idea here is simply that part of what is visualised is necessarily some of what, in a possible visual experience, could be seen. This, Hopkins says, “entails that visualising always ascribes a visual appearance to its objects, that it represents them as looking a certain way” (*ibid.*). He suggests, furthermore, that its doing so is what distinguishes visualising from the other modes of sensory imagination: to visualise something is to imagine it looking a certain way, to imagine touching something is to imagine it feeling a certain way, and so on.

If this suggestion is to be at all illuminating we need to say what it is to imagine something as looking a certain way and how that differs from imagining it as

feeling a certain way. In claiming that visualising is that class every member of which shares some content with visual experience, we are supposing that we have already distinguished episodes of imagining into classes – visual, tactual, and so on – given that we have done so, we can then identify the different classes in the way suggested. But we need to say something about how the various episodes of experiential imagination are to be divided into classes corresponding to each sense. What is it that all members of the class of, for example, visualisings have in common? Hopkins calls this “the classification problem” (p.170). The obvious solution to this problem, Hopkins suggests, is to identify the members of each class in the same way that we do the class itself. But there is a problem with doing this. There could be an episode of visualising with a content which matches that of some non-visual experience as well as that of some visual experience. If the account is to explain what makes this episode of imagining a case of visualising, it needs to exclude this possibility.

Now we find ourselves in a position similar to that of anyone who attempts to give an account of the senses. Just as here we want to explain what all episodes of visualising have in common in virtue of which they are visualisings, in giving an account of the senses we want to explain what all instances of visual experience have in common in virtue of which they are *visual* experiences, and so on for the other senses. It’s not at all easy to answer that question.

Hopkins thinks that we can explain what visualisings all have in common “by specifying certain aspects of the content which [visualising] and seeing necessarily share” (p.171). But merely appealing to the kinds of properties represented by the experiences of different senses and by different modes of imagination won’t work. There don’t appear to be any properties which are such that all and only visual experiences represent them and which are

necessarily represented by visualisings. So, rather than appeal to the sorts of properties represented, Hopkins suggests we should look instead to the way that vision and visualising represent those properties; in particular we should look to the fact that both represent properties in a way that is perspectival.

To claim that an experience represents things in a way that is perspectival is to claim that whatever is experienced is experienced as presented to a point, such that one experiences things as oriented relative to that point. Hopkins claims that vision and visualising are always perspectival in this way. We can always answer questions like ‘Which way round is it?’ about the things that we visualise, just as we can for the things that we see. We cannot appeal to this fact alone, however, in order to distinguish visualising from the other modes of sensory imagination because both touch and vision are perspectival. They “represent space, the objects which occupy it, and the spatial relations between those objects; but, more than this, they represent that space from a point within it” (p.172). So the content of visualisings share with both visual and tactual experience the property of being perspectival. There is, nonetheless, a difference in the way that vision and touch are perspectival. They differ, Hopkins claims, in how they represent objects in space and the relation of those objects to the point from which they are perceived. The difference arises as a consequence of the fact that we must bring some part of our body into contact with something in order to perceive it by touch. In touch we are aware of the spatial location of parts of our body, and of sensations of touch where parts of our body come into contact with the objects we perceive. One perceives an object tactually in virtue of being aware of a single place as both the location of the sensation of bodily contact, and as part of the object that is in contact with one. In touch, then, some part of the perceived object is always presented as in the same place as some part of one’s body.

This contrasts with vision. In vision, things are always presented as spatially separate from the point to which they are presented, the point of view. Whatever is seen is seen as occupying a place separate from but related to one's point of view; touch never involves this sort of perspective, so we can explain what is distinctive of visualising by appealing to this feature of the way things are represented. Exhibiting the perspectival character of vision is necessary for an episode of imagining to be a visualising and sufficient for its not being an episode of tactual imagining.

If Hopkins is right then we can explain what is characteristic of visualising in terms of a perspectival feature of its content it shares with the content of visual experiences. But in giving an account of visualising he has also given us an account of what makes an experience a visual experience as distinct from a tactual experience. What about the other senses? Can the same feature be used to distinguish the experiences associated with the other sensory modalities?

Hopkins suggests that hearing is perspectival in the same way that vision is, with the following difference. The objects of hearing, unlike those of vision, may not be presented as spatially separate from the point to which they are presented. He is not sure how to describe the categorical basis of this modal difference, but he nonetheless remains convinced that we can distinguish the experiences involved in this way. We cannot extend the account to smell and taste (pp.181 ff.), but it's more plausible to appeal, in these cases, to the features represented by the experiences.

3. I began by saying that many people think it obvious that we should explain the distinctions that we make between the different senses by appealing to the experiences involved in perception. They think that we can explain, for

example, what it is to see something by appealing to the distinctive kind of experience – visual experience – involved.

Whatever the merits of his explanation of sensory imagining, Hopkins' account of what makes an experience visual or tactual can't explain the way that we distinguish the senses. It can't do so because in certain cases it cannot explain what makes our awareness of the feature of an object a visual rather than a tactual awareness of that feature.

A tactual experience might be thought to be capable of representing some part of an object, presented as occupying the same place as part of one's body, as a point on the rim of a glass, or as part of the surface of a cubic object, or as a place on a flat surface. In claiming that tactual experience always represents some part of the perceived object as in the same place as part of the subject's body Hopkins is not committed to denying this. He doesn't claim – and surely he is right not to – that the content of a tactual experience is exhausted by the representation of such points of contact. We are tactually aware of objects and their features in virtue of touching only some part of them. His claim, then, is not that, for any part of an object, if that part is to be represented by a tactual experience, then it must be represented as in the same place as a part of the subject's body in contact with it. But rather, that if a tactual experience is to represent some object, then it must represent some part of that object as in the same place as some point of contact. Given this, he claims that even the most generous account of the content of tactual experiences could be squared with his account of the perspectival character of such experiences (p.178).

Consider how, then, on Hopkins' account, we might explain what it is to feel the shape of some object that we perceive. It is to have an experience which represents the shape of an object some part of which is represented as in contact with some part of one's body. This contrasts with vision. To see the

shape of an object is to have an experience which represents the shape of an object which is represented as spatially separate from one's point of view.

Suppose, though, that you see, but don't feel, the shape of an object that you both see and feel. How might we explain, on Hopkins' account, in virtue of what your awareness of the object's shape is a visual awareness of that shape. Appealing to the content of your experience doesn't seem sufficient: you have an experience which represents the shape of an object which is represented as spatially separate from your point of view and part of which is represented as in contact with a part of your body. From this description of the content we can conclude that you are both seeing and touching the object, but there is nothing in the description to tell us whether you see the shape of the object or feel it.

It is a general constraint on an experiential account of the distinction between the senses that it is able to explain what is distinctive of our awareness of particular properties of objects. It needs to be able to explain what makes our awareness of, say, the shape of something, a visual awareness of that shape; and it needs to do this in those cases in which we both see and feel the object whose shape we see.

Hopkins describes his account as an account of the different ways that properties are represented in vision and touch, but really the only difference in the way that properties are represented is a difference in the way that the objects which have those properties are represented. This is clear in the case of touch. His claim is that some part of every object one touches is represented as in the same place as a part of one's body. That makes the representation of that object a tactual representation. We cannot explain what makes a representation of a property tactual in this way: one doesn't touch parts of properties, but parts of objects that have properties. So one's

experience of a property must be tactual in virtue of its being represented as a property of an object one touches.

So the relation between one's tactual awareness of the shape of an object and one's awareness of the points of contact with that object is that one is aware of the shape of an object that one touches. That is not sufficient to explain why the awareness is tactual when it is also an object that one sees.

We want to say something like: one is aware of the shape of the object in virtue of touching it, or in virtue of being aware of part of it that one touches. That will then contrast with vision, in which you are aware of the shape of the object in virtue of something else. But whatever 'in virtue of' means here needs elucidation; and that is a non-trivial task.

It may be possible to amend or augment Hopkins' account in such a way as to overcome this problem, and so use it to give an account of what distinguishes the senses. Notice, though, that even if we cannot do so, that doesn't necessarily mean that it is inadequate as an account of what distinguishes the different modes of sensory imagination. Whether or not it is so is a further question. (One might think that it is not a constraint on an account of sensory imagination that it explain our awareness of features: we don't imagine seeing and touching something in the way we can both see and touch something.) Rather than pursue that question directly, I want to ask a slightly different question: Does the fact that we experience these different modes of sensory imagination imply that there must be different kinds of experience associated with each of the senses, and hence that an account of what distinguishes the senses need appeal only to the experiences involved and not to any external factors?

4. How might an argument for that conclusion go? One might argue something like this. An explanation of how we distinguish episodes of sensory imagination into different modes can appeal only to features of their sensory content, features shared with perceptual experiences; if these features are, as they must be, sufficient to explain how we distinguish modes of imagination, then they must be sufficient to explain how we distinguish perceptual experiences into kinds corresponding to the senses. If features of sensory content are sufficient to explain how we distinguish perceptual experiences into such kinds, then nothing else is necessary; in particular, no external factors are necessary.

It is undeniable that there are different modes of sensory imagination corresponding to our different modes of sensory perception – visualising, imaginary touching, imaginary hearing, and so on. I said, furthermore, that I am going to suppose that these modes of imagining are (or, at least, can be) different in virtue of differences in their sensory content alone. That means that we can say what makes an episode of imagining a visualising rather than, say, an episode of tactual imagining, simply by appealing to its sensory content. It is not necessary to appeal to the wider cognitive project of which that episode forms a part.

Given that supposition, there must be something about the sensory content of an episode of sensory imagining in virtue of which it is an episode of, say, visualising rather than some other mode. There must be some feature of all members of the class of visualisings which determine them as members of that class; if the only difference between an episode of visualising and an episode of tactual imagining is a difference in its sensory content, then what unites all members of visualising must be some feature of that sensory content, some experiential feature. In general, there must be some feature of the sensory

content of episodes of sensory imagination sufficient to determine them as episodes of a particular mode of sensory imagining.

Not only are the differences between modes of imagination sensory differences, but we think there is a correspondence between these different modes and our modes of sensory awareness; this correspondence is a correspondence in some feature of the sensory content of the states. It seems plausible that whatever feature of the sensory content of an episode of imagining determines it as of a particular mode would be sufficient to determine a sensory experience as an experience of that mode. If there is a feature of the sensory content of an experience sufficient to determine it as an experience of a particular sense, then nothing else, in particular no external factor, is necessary to so determine it. If the difference between episodes of imagining is a sensory difference then the difference between modes of sensory experience must be a sensory difference too.

If that's right, we should conclude that there is some feature, shared by both sensory experiences and episodes of sensory imagination which determine them as episodes of a particular mode – vision and visualising, and so on. So, even if Hopkins is wrong in his characterisation of the feature in question, there must be some feature of experience that will distinguish the different modes of sensory imagining and sensory experiences; we just have to find the right one. We should conclude, too, that we can explain the way we distinguish different senses by appealing to the experiences involved. There is some feature of the sensory content of all visual experiences in virtue of which they are visual experiences and which is sufficient to explain what makes a perception of something an instance of seeing that thing.

5. It looks like the fact that we have different modes of imagination which must be explained in terms of some difference in their sensory content implies

that external factors play no role in an explanation of what distinguishes the senses. That's a conclusion that I want to resist. I think that external factors do have a role to play in explaining that distinction. For such a claim to be plausible I need to show how it is consistent with an explanation of the different modes of sensory imagining; in particular I need to show that the existence of such distinct modes of imagining doesn't imply that there are distinct kinds of experience associated with each of our modes of sensory awareness sufficient to distinguish them. I don't deny either that there are different modes of sensory imagining, or that the difference between different modes is solely a difference in their sensory content; but I want to suggest that that is consistent with denying that we distinguish the senses by reference to the kinds of experience experiences involved in perception.

An account of how we distinguish the senses needs to say what all visual experiences have in common in virtue of which they are visual experiences. If it cannot do that then it will not be able to explain why all visual experiences are the experiences of a single sense modality. The argument that I have been considering claims that there must be some feature of the sensory content of these experiences in virtue of which we can group them together as experiences of the same sense, that experiences associated with each sense form an experiential kind.

The argument depends on the assumption that whatever feature of the sensory content of a visualising which is necessary to explain why it is a visualising would be sufficient to explain what is it that makes a visual experience visual. And in general, whatever feature of the sensory content of a sensory imagining is necessary to determine it as the mode of imagining it is, would be sufficient to determine the corresponding mode of sensory experience.

Could we deny that assumption and, if so, why? Every episode of visualising must have some feature which relates it to vision and distinguishes it from touch and the other senses. For both sensory imagination and perceptual experience we need to explain why we make distinctions between different senses; we need to explain why we distinguish episodes of imagination and perceptual experiences as we do. But we have different materials available for an explanation in each case. Given that we distinguish the senses as we do, the problem with explaining imagination would seem to be that of explaining why we distinguish episodes of imagination into modes *corresponding* to the senses; but we needn't suppose that we could distinguish episodes of imagination as we do independently of an explanation of the way that we distinguish the senses. So we needn't suppose that all visualisings, say, have anything in common except their relation to visual experience. So although every episode of visualising must have some feature which relates it to vision and distinguishes it from touch and the other senses; it's not the case that there must be some one feature that every visualising has which relates it to visual experience. That means that visualisings don't necessarily form a kind; hence that they don't necessarily form a kind in virtue of some feature of their sensory content.

If visualisings don't necessarily form an experiential kind, then the fact that we distinguish different modes of sensory imagination gives us no reason to suppose that there is some sensory feature common to all visual experiences in virtue of which they form an experiential kind. If visual experiences do not form an experiential kind then we will not be able to explain why all visual experiences are the experiences of a single sense by appealing to the kind of experience involved.

My suggestion is, then, that what unites members of the class of visualisings need not be intrinsic to the content of visualisings. But if there is nothing

common to the sensory content of all visualisings then how do we explain visualising: how do we explain what distinguishes visualising from the other modes of sensory imagination?

We can say what is constitutive of the different modes of sensory imagination just in case we can say why we relate them to the corresponding modes of perceptual experience in the way that we do. We can do that without supposing that all the episodes of a particular mode of imagination have something intrinsically in common. We might say, for example, that an episode of imagining is a visualising if it shares some feature or group of features with visual experiences which it doesn't share with tactual experiences, or because it lacks some feature which tactual experiences necessarily have. Since all we have to explain is a correspondence between imagination and perceptual experience, we needn't suppose that whatever features explain that correspondence would be sufficient to explain the way that we distinguish different senses.

I am denying that there is anything common to all visualisings, and have suggested that we can, consistently with that, still give some account of what distinguishes visualising from tactual imagination. Is there any reason to think that visualisings must form a kind independent of their relation to perceptual experiences? Perhaps there are. You might think, for example, that when you visualise something there's just a single kind of thing that you do; or you might think that there is some underlying mechanism responsible for all visualisings and in virtue of which they form a kind. Even if true that wouldn't show that visualisings form kinds in virtue of their sensory content, and so would give us no reason to think that perceptual experiences form experiential kinds corresponding to the different senses. The fact, then, that we distinguish different modes of sensory imagination corresponding to the five senses

doesn't imply that we can explain the way we distinguish the senses by appealing to the experiences involved.

Bibliography.

Coady, C.A.J. 1974. The Senses of Martians. *The Philosophical Review* 83 (1):107-125.

Hopkins, Robert. 1998. *Picture, image and experience: a philosophical inquiry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Martin, M.G.F. 1999. The Transparency of Experience. Unpublished.

Matthew Nudds
School of Philosophy
Birkbeck College
London WC1E 7HX
UK

Email m.nudds@bbk.ac.uk