

IMAGINING EXPERIENCES CORRECTLY¹

by Phil Joyce

ABSTRACT According to Mellor,² we know what an experience is like if we can imagine it correctly, and we will do so if we recognise the experience as it is imagined. This paper identifies a constraint on adequate accounts of how we ordinarily imagine experiences correctly: the capacities to imagine and to recognise the experience must be jointly operative at the point of forming an intention to imagine the experience. The paper develops an account of imagining experiences correctly that meets this constraint in terms of the subject's possession of a concept of the experience. The account implies that the imagination is active in conscious perception.

I

Knowing what an experience is like is typically analysed by so-called know-how accounts in terms of being able to imagine and to recognise the experience.³ Mellor, for example, argues that imagination by itself is not sufficient, for we may imagine experiences wrongly. However, if we can also recognise them then we have the resources to imagine them correctly and thereby to know what they're like. He concludes:

To know what experiences of a certain kind are like I must, when I imagine them, imagine them correctly, i.e. in a way that makes me recognise them when I have them.⁴

Without further development, however, Mellor's account faces what I shall call the *disassociation problem*. For his theory is consistent with subjects who, in order to imagine a particular experience, must begin to imagine, in turn, each of the experiences with which they are familiar until their recognitional skill detects that the correct experience is being imagined. For example, in order to imagine what it's like to see the colour blue, such a subject may have to imagine each of the colours of the rainbow, in sequence, until their recognitional skill detects the correct colour.

1. Thanks are due to Jonathan Dancy, John Preston and Galen Strawson for comments on earlier drafts.

2. Mellor (1993).

3. See for example Lewis (1988), Nemirow (1990) and Mellor (1993).

4. Mellor (1993), p. 4.

The disassociation problem poses no direct threat to the know-how theory, for I think we should say that, even in these anomalous cases, the subject knows what the experience is like. Rather, it highlights the thought that our imaginative and recognitional capacities ordinarily operate together at the point of forming an intention to imagine an experience. The problem therefore challenges the know-how theory to explain how possession of a recognitional and imaginative abilities connects, appropriately, with a subject's intentions.

I shall offer a solution to the problem, congenial to the know-how theory, in terms of the subject's possession of a concept of the experience's type. My strategy is to distinguish, within Mellor's brief sketch of recognising an experience, two kinds of recognition. Token-to-type recognition involves drawing a token occurrent experience under its correct type. Type-to-token recognition involves forming expectations towards the phenomenal character of a forthcoming token experience. I argue that a subject who can recognise experiences in both of Mellor's senses possesses a concept of the experience, where possession is partially constituted by the abilities to imagine and to type-identify the experience. When such a concept features as a compositional constituent of the subject's intention to imagine the experience, the disassociation problem does not arise, for simply to form the intention will be sufficient to dispose the subject to recognise the experience as it is imagined.

Mellor construes recognising an experience as a cluster of three recognitional abilities. In the next section I consider the first two, which I treat as kinds of token-to-type recognition. In Section III I discuss his third capacity, which I treat as a kind of type-to-token recognition.

II

Mellor introduces the first recognitional ability by saying that if I can recognise the taste of sugar, for example, then I can 'recognise that what I am tasting is sugar'.⁵ What subjects who exercise this first ability are doing, I suggest, is type-identifying token experiences. Indeed, this accords with those uses of the word 'recognition' that imply some kind of identification.

5. *Ibid.*

Now one thing we might do, when type-identifying an experience, is explicitly form a thought about the experience's identity. In Mellor's case, for example, we might consciously think 'I am tasting sugar.' However, it's implausible to suggest that every occasion of successfully type-identifying an experience is accompanied by such explicit conscious thoughts asserting the experience's type. For example, my identification of the experience might simply consist in deliberating whether to continue to taste it because I have a sweet tooth, or to desist from tasting it for health reasons.

Type-identifying an experience may be manifest in our mental lives by a myriad of possible responses. To say anything more, in general, about what Mellor's first recognitional ability entails we might therefore look to aspects of the subject's mental life that are systematically invoked during such responses. In doing so we can, I think, generalise Mellor's first ability to say that type-identifying an experience always involves the subject drawing a token experience under a correct concept of the experience's type. In Mellor's case, for example, a subject with this first ability deploys a concept of the experience of tasting sugar to identify, correctly, token sugar tasting experiences.

Mellor sketches his second recognitional ability, by saying 'If I taste sugar without knowing what it is, I will recognise the taste even if I fail to recognise what it's the taste of.'⁶ In Mellor's example case we can imagine a subject deploying the second ability and saying something like: 'I know this taste, I've tasted it before, I just can't place it.' I suggest that this minimum sense of recognition consists in being disposed to find the phenomenal character of the experience familiar.

It might be thought that this second sense of recognition, capturing as it does our familiarity with the experience's phenomenal character, offers a quick and simple analysis of knowing what an experience is like. For there seems to be a relationship of mutual entailment between finding the phenomenal character of an experience familiar, and knowing what that experience is like. For example, suppose a subject claims to know what sugar tastes like, but on tasting an unexceptional sample of sugar finds the taste utterly unfamiliar. We should expect the subject to rescind

6. *Ibid.*

the prior knowledge claim—they didn't, after all, know the taste of sugar. Similarly, if a subject claims not to know what sugar tastes like, but on tasting a sample finds its taste familiar, then, equivalently, the prior claim to ignorance ought to be rescinded.

Now if we accept this quick analysis then it seems that Mellor's first ability—being able to type-identify the experience—is surplus to an analysis of knowing what an experience is like. And this in turn implies that the subject's possession of a concept of the experience is similarly redundant to the analysis. But I think, though, we must respect a Kantian insight that in so far as a mental state qualifies as an experience at all we must find its phenomenal character minimally intelligible; and to do so we must draw the experience under some minimal conceptual resources. For without some degree of identification the state would be, in Kant's words, 'merely a blind play of representations, less even than a dream'.⁷ In Mellor's case for example, if we insist that subjects find the phenomenal character of the taste of sugar familiar, then we must surely suppose that they identify the experience, at the very least, to be one of tasting; even if they fail to identify what it's the taste of.

The advocate of the quick analysis, who wishes to drop Mellor's first ability from the know-how account, believes that we can have the second ability without possessing a concept of the experience. And they are drawn to this belief by the observation that we can find the phenomenal character of the experience of tasting sugar familiar, for example, whilst failing to identify the experience as one of tasting sugar. However, this ignores the fact that a correct type-identification of a particular experience can be given by drawing the experience under one of a number of possible concepts, offering varying degrees of discrimination. In Mellor's example, this spectrum of correct type-identifications might range through simply identifying the experience as one of tasting, identifying it as tasting something sweet, identifying the taste of sugar, or perhaps identifying the taste of unrefined cane sugar from a particular plantation. Each of these examples of recognition would offer a correct identification, they would differ only in the degree of discrimination provided.

The Kantian picture of token-to-type recognition that emerges is that the ability to find the phenomenal character of an experience familiar must be located somewhere within a spectrum of

7. Kant (1929), A112.

possible conceptual resources. On this view, it is the *combination* of our ability to find the phenomenal character familiar, and the conceptual resources in which the ability is embedded, that is essential to knowing what the experience is like. Mellor's first ability is therefore not, after all, redundant in an account of knowing what an experience is like. On the contrary, possession of the second ability presupposes possession of the first, and therefore possession of a concept of the experience.

Now on a Wittgensteinian view of concept possession, developed for example by Geach⁸ and endorsed by Evans,⁹ to possess a concept is to possess a collection of related abilities and capacities. By adopting this view we may first suppose that, in the case of a concept of an experience, the abilities comprising the concept possession will include precisely those underwriting the subject's capacity to type-identify the experience. This then allows us to satisfy the Kantian constraint on the intelligibility of experience by incorporating the second ability, to find its phenomenal character familiar, amongst the cluster of related abilities that comprise the subject's possession of the concept. On this proposal, it is possession of the concept, construed along Wittgensteinian lines, that therefore underwrites *both* of Mellor's first two recognitional abilities, and therefore the entire notion of token-to-type recognition.¹⁰

We may therefore generalise Mellor's first two recognitional abilities to say that token-to-type recognition of experiences requires subjects to possess a concept of the experience's type. And possession of this concept requires possession of the capacities to type-identify the experience, at least to some minimum degree of discrimination and to find its phenomenal character familiar.

III

There is a mirroring of type-identification in Mellor's third recognitional ability which he describes by saying 'If I do know what I am tasting is sugar, its taste will not surprise me: I will think

8. Geach (1957).

9. Evans (1982).

10. This Wittgensteinian view owes us an account of what it is for two or more abilities to be 'related' such that their possession constitutes possession of a concept. (See also footnote 13.)

that it tastes much as I expected it to taste.¹¹ Instead of experiencing the phenomenological familiarity of a token experience and identifying its type, the subject begins with a belief about the type-identity of a forthcoming experience and anticipates correctly its phenomenal character. Then, on undergoing the experience there are, as Mellor says, 'no surprises', rather there is a corresponding occasion with a familiar phenomenology.

Now the conceptual apparatus that we have developed in our account of token-to-token recognition can contribute to an explanation of type-to-token recognition in two ways. We might argue that in entertaining thoughts about forthcoming experiences the subject deploys their concept of the experience's type as a compositional constituent of those anticipatory thoughts. And when the expected experience subsequently arises, the subject again deploys the same concept to recognise that it is of the correct type. This explanation, however, does not accord type-to-token recognition an interestingly distinct role in an account of knowing what an experience is like. For, according to the explanation, the subject merely thinks about a forthcoming experience and then deploys their token-to-type recognitional capacity when the experience arises. All of the recognitional work is done by the token-to-type ability.

We can however enrich the explanation to develop an account of type-to-token recognition that pulls its own weight in an analysis of knowing what an experience is like. The problem with the explanation, as it stands, is that the phenomenal character of the experience's type does not feature appropriately in the subject's expectations. Yet there is a way in which we can think about, and form expectations towards, the phenomenal character of absent but familiar experiences, in the way presupposed by Mellor's third ability. We may simply imagine them.

Imagining forthcoming experiences, though, is not sufficient for type-to-token recognition, for we may imagine experiences incorrectly, and as Mellor notes, for type-to-token recognition there must be no surprises when the occurrent experience arises. We must, therefore, imagine the experience correctly. This of course confronts us with precisely the question that our investigation of Mellor's sketch of recognition was supposed to answer.

11. Mellor (1993), p. 4.

We are now, though, with our conceptual apparatus, in a position to say more fully what comprises imagining an experience correctly. For we have said that in forming the anticipatory thoughts the subject deploys their concept of an experience. And we have construed possession of a concept, along Wittgensteinian lines, as possession of a cluster of related abilities. I therefore suggest the subject will imagine the experience correctly if the cluster of related abilities that constitutes their possession of a concept of the experience's type includes the ability to imagine the experience. On this proposal, deploying the concept in thought will dispose the related abilities to be exercised which will dispose the subject simultaneously both to imagine the experience and to recognise it, just as Mellor's account of imagining experiences correctly requires.

This account of imagining experiences correctly meets the constraint imposed by the disassociational problem. That is, how do our imaginative and recognitional abilities combine to ensure that we imagine experiences correctly without sequentially imagining a series of experiences until we happen to recognise the correct one? Our account would say that in forming the intention subjects deploy their concept of the experience as a compositional constituent of the intention's propositional content. But deployment of the concept disposes the imaginative and recognitional abilities, which comprise possession of the concept, to be exercised simultaneously. The disassociation problem will not therefore arise for simply to form the intention will be sufficient to dispose the subject to recognise the experience as it is imagined. Which, according to Mellor's know-how theory, is to imagine the experience correctly.

IV

The concept possession proposal is therefore complementary to the know-how theory. I shall not, though, discuss whether the ability to imagine an experience correctly, as provided by a concept of the experience, is necessary or sufficient for knowing what an experience is like.¹² I will, however, conclude with some brief

12. McCulloch (1988, 1993) has developed an account of knowing what an experience is like in terms of possessing a concept of an experience. He drew his conclusions, though, from consideration of the phenomenology of the project of radical interpretation, and explicitly not from a commitment to the know-how account.

comments on the light the proposal may cast on the ancient question of the relationship between imagination and perception.

The account of imagining experiences correctly trades on the idea that deploying a concept disposes the related abilities that comprise possession of the concept to be exercised simultaneously.¹³ In particular, the account requires that the subject's recognitional skills are disposed to be exercised when a subject imagines an experience. This therefore raises the interesting question of whether, conversely, the imaginative capacity is active when the recognitional abilities are exercised in the identification of occurrent experiences.

Well the suggestion that the imagination is implicated in our sensory engagement with the world is not new. Aristotle's notion of *phantasia*, although a complex concept, and one not directly translatable into our concept of imagination, includes the notion of an interpretative capacity that is invoked during perception of some concrete particular. It is *phantasia*, according to Aristotle, that allows us to perceive particulars *as* something.¹⁴ Kant claimed 'Psychologists have hitherto failed to realise that imagination is a necessary ingredient of perception itself',¹⁵ and argued that the imagination is implicated in our interpretative faculties by helping us to draw the particulars we encounter in perception under general concepts. And more recently Strawson too has similarly argued for a role for the imagination in perception.¹⁶ A concept of an experience, of the kind described here, may therefore contribute not only to an analysis of knowing what it's like, but also, relatedly, to an account of the content of conscious perceptual experience.

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13. On pain of circularity, what it is for two or more abilities comprising possession of a concept to be 'related' cannot therefore simply be that they are disposed to be exercised simultaneously.

14. See Nussbaum (1985), for example, for a discussion of perception and Aristotle's *phantasia*.

15. Kant (1929), A120n.

16. Strawson (1974).

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