



Thought and Experience

The relationship between imagination and creativity

Mike Beaney

In May 2004 Berys Gaut and I met in London to record a dialogue we had scripted exploring the relationship between creativity and imagination. Berys Gaut is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of St Andrews and has written widely and edited a number of books on aesthetics.

Berys, could we begin with your characterisations of creativity and imagination, taking imagination first? In section two of your Paper you distinguish four uses of imagine but suggest that, from what you call its core sense, imagining means thinking of something without a leafic or existential commitment, that is without commitment to its truth or falsity, existence or non-existence. To take your own example to imagine a wet cat on this conception is to think of a wet cat without holding either that such a cat exists or that such a cat does not exist. And in the propositional case to imagine that say “my cat Emmanuel is wet” is to think that Emmanuel is wet without holding either that this proposition “Emmanuel is wet” is true or that it is false. Now I wonder to what extent this might be regarded as the core sense of imagining. Take the case of Macbeth imagining, as we would say, that there is a dagger in front of him at the beginning of Act 2 of Shakespeare’s play. At the point in his fevered soliloquy to which he first reaches out to grab the dagger, he believes, in this case falsely, that there is a dagger before him. So here we have a case of imagining that does involve a leafic and existential commitment. Macbeth is committed to the truth of “there is a dagger before me” and to the existence of the dagger he imagines.

Berys Gaut

Well I didn’t mean by core sense the sense that is common to all uses of imagining that is I wasn’t trying to give a definition of imagination in general. I was trying to pick out just one use of the term. This use is however an important one and is one which is central to my aim of exploring the connections between imagination and creativity. I suggested that there are several other uses for imagining which don’t fit the sense I identified. One is that in which to imagine something is to falsely believe it such as when I imagine a coat rack to be an intruder. That use of imagine is the one in which Macbeth imagines a dagger in front of him. There are other uses too of course such as that in which to imagine is to form an image of something. It’s in this sense that you imagine your daughter’s face when you talk to her on the phone. In this latter sense it is perfectly possible to imagine something while believing it exists but it is not the sense I was after in trying to find a connection between imagination and creativity.

Mike Beaney

Right. And you presumably want to say something similar in the case of imagining something while believing that it doesn’t exist such as in reading or writing a novel.

Berys Gaut

Yes. I notice that you wonder whether it makes sense from my view to talk about imagining fictional characters since we believe that they don’t exist. Well I think it’s perfectly possible to both imagine something and to believe that it doesn’t exist since we can have two distinct propositional attitudes to the same content. I can believe that something exists and *quai* believing it I am committed to its existence. I can also have the distinct attitude of imagining that it exists and *quai* imagining it I am not committed to its existence. Having two or more distinct propositional attitudes to the same content is of course very common so I think the sense of imagining I identified is legitimate though it doesn’t I agree capture all of the different senses in which we talk of imagining things.

Mike Beaney

OK. So in this particular case if I can press you here however, it is not that there is a different sense of imagining which admits believing truly in the falsity or non-existence of something

that it to say while you accept that imagine can sometimes mean believe falsely, as in the case of Macbeth, you don't accept that imagine can sometimes mean believe truly in the falsity or non-existence of something. Rather when I imagine a fictional character say Harry Potter, I both think of him without commitment to either his existence or non existence, I just think of him and at the same time as it happens in this particular case believe that he does not exist. In other words what I have just called imagining Harry Potter is on your account a combination of two things: imagining in your core sense i.e. thinking of him without commitment to either his existence or non-existence plus believing that it he does not in fact exist.

Berys Gaut

Yes. That might be one way of putting it. You are not convinced?

Mike Beaney

I guess someone might prefer to say that the believing is part of the imagining in such cases just as it is in the case of Macbeth. But maybe this is just a matter of terminology. I can see why you want to single out the core sense you do, given your interest in the role of imagination in creativity. Believing in the truth or falsity existence or non-existence of something seems of less importance than simply imagining things without such commitments as you put it.

Berys Gaut

Yes. What is typically involved in what I call active creativity is trying things out, playing with ideas, running through possibilities and so on, all of which do not involve commitment to the truth or falsity, existence or non-existence of something.

Mike Beaney

OK. Just one more question then before we move on to the definition of creativity. As you said earlier the term "imagine" can also be used in the sense of "form a mental image". But someone might argue that imagine in this sense is also important in creativity as illustrated in the famous case of Kekule's conjuring up the image, albeit in a dream of a snake devouring its own tail.

Berys Gaut

Well in my paper I argue that imagination can involve imagery, that's the case of sensory imagination but not all image formation is imagination in the sense I identify. For instance when I form memory images of something I am committed to the past existence of that thing. Now sensory imagination is very important in active creativity particularly for visual artists for scientists and mathematicians also sometimes report visualising various scenarios. The Kekule case is a bit under described in the literature and it may be that he was day dreaming rather than dreaming. If that is so it would have been sensory imagination that he was using. He could have been seeing the benzene molecule as a snake devouring its own tail but if he really was dreaming and in such a way that he thought he saw snakes the dream images would not have been imaginings in my sense. If so the case naturally fits what I call passive creativity, the kind of creativity which involves an idea just popping into ones head without one trying out alternative hypothesis. Kekule's dream images of snakes cause the idea of the ring structure of benzene to pop into his head on that view.

Mike Beaney

OK. So let's agree that the important sense of imagining as far as exploring the relationship between imagination and creativity is concerned is the sense you have identified as the core sense, thinking of something without leafic or existential commitment. What then is creativity? You have talked of active and passive creativity but has creativity itself to be characterised? Many people regard creativity as requiring both originality and value but you suggest that flair is also required. Could you say what you mean by flair and why you think that this is also required?

Berys Gaut

Sure. The production of something original and valuable is not enough for creativity since creativity is a matter not just of *what* someone produces but also of *how* it's produced. We

can think up examples of producing original and valuable things in ways that don't count as creative. Producing something by using mechanical search routines or discoveries made purely by chance would not count as creative even though the products of these actions were original and valuable. So Charles Goodyear's discovery of how to make solid rubber by brute trial and error wouldn't count as creative although it was an immensely important invention. And likewise my flailing around in a paint filled room and producing purely by chance a great abstract painting wouldn't count as creative either. So flair is meant to rule out at least these kinds of cases.

Mike Beaney

Isn't there a danger here though that the claim that flair is also required maybe true but trivial. After all if you can't specify what it is independently then aren't we left with the conception of flair as whatever it is that turns the production of something original and valuable into a creative act?

Berys Gaut

Yeah. I agree that's a danger. Although I do think that even saying that those two conditions are not enough for creativity is a point worth making since it is one that is so easy to overlook. However I think that we can say a bit more about this third condition. When I said "purely by chance", I didn't mean that my actions in a paint filled room were not intentional. I think any act, if it is to count as an act at all, as opposed to a bit of reflex behaviour, must be intentional under some description and my activities in the room were after all intentional under the description trying to get out of here. Nor do I think that the creative person must always act under the description of being creative. Indeed I think if you try to be creative it is often self-defeating and leads to a kind of empty originality - what Kant called "mannerism". The claim that I produced a painting purely by chance is best captured by saying that I produced it merely by luck. And making something merely by luck is opposed to making something by skill, so I think that flair is a kind of skill.

Mike Beaney

But isn't there an obvious objection to this for isn't it a commonplace that a painter can be highly skilled technically but still be uncreative?

Berys Gaut

Well that's true of course but all this shows is that the kind of skills involved in being creative aren't the same as those of simply being technically proficient; being able to paint in accurate perspective for example. They are less domain specific than that. And these skills are also what we might call non-routinised. Think of a routine as a rule which, if competently followed, will produce some known result. For example: a recipe is a routine. Follow a recipe competently and you will produce results shown in the cookery book. Some skills consist in the ability to follow routines such as basic cookery skills. But not all skills are abilities to follow routines. After all one can cook without relying on the cookbook producing subtle variations in tastes and textures in ones cooking. Flair is an example of one kind of non-routinised skill. Flair can't be routinised since a routine is something that produces an already known result but if it is already known it is not genuinely creative.

Mike Beaney

OK. So let's agree for the purposes of investigating the relationship between imagination and creativity that the important notion of imagination is the one you have identified as the core sense. Imagining involves thinking of something without a leafic or an existential commitment and that creativity involves originality, value and flair. In your paper you suggest two models of the role that the imagination might play in creativity which you call the "display model" and the "search model". On the display model the imagination "displays" the results of creativity to the creative person but does not itself generate the results, which comes from elsewhere such as dreaming. We have already mentioned the case of Kekule. However, as you rightly argue this only does justice at best to passive creativity and not to active creativity. To provide an account of active creativity we need a different model such as the search model. On the search model the imagination plays a role in creativity in searching through possibilities from which the best is then selected. As you see it, however, on neither of these models does imagination act as a source of creativity. Rather, you suggest, and this is the central claim of

your paper, imagination is involved in creativity as the vehicle of active creativity. Could you explain the distinction here between the source and vehicle of creativity and your central claim?

Berys Gaut

Sure. The vehicle of creativity is what we use in being creative. The source of creativity is what explains why someone is creative. I argued in my paper that imagination is suited of its nature to be the vehicle of active creativity since active creativity consists in trying out various approaches in the course of creating something. Imagination in the sense that I identified, imagination, which does not involve commitments to truth or to existence, is well suited for trying out various approaches. Unlike belief it does not involve a commitment to holding anything true so we can try out various hypothesis in imagination without being committed to their truth and unlike intending imagination does not involve commitment to doing something so one can contemplate various courses of action in imagination without acting on them. So imagination allows you to play around with options in being creative. The great German poet and playwright Friedrich von Schiller thought that art involved a kind of play drive and I think that is right about creativity. We freely play with the possibilities of being creative and the imagination is well suited to doing that.

Mike Beaney

As Schiller put it human beings only play when they are in the fullest sense of the word a human being. And they are only fully a human being when they play. So according to Schiller play and creativity are essential to human life but unlike Schiller you don't believe that imagination is in itself the source of creativity though.

Berys Gaut

No. That's right. I don't. The reason is that one can use ones imagination in uncreative predictable ways, which is true of most fantasy. Since such uses of imagination are not creative one can't explain creative people's actions simply by saying that they are using their imaginations and uncreative people are not. But I would stress that what I am claiming is that imagination is not in itself a source of creativity; that is merely on it's own it can't explain creativity. Certain uses of imagination can be creative though.

Mike Beaney

I have suggested that we should also consider a third model of the role of imagination and creativity which I call the "connection model". On this model the imagination is involved in creativity in making connections between things. Consider the creativity that Kasparov exhibits in playing chess. Unlike the chess computer, Deep Blue, Kasparov is unable to run through more than a small sub-set of the possible moves and counter moves that might be made at any given point in the game. But as you yourself put it, what he may do is quote "use his imagination in seeing a current position as a variation of one with which he was previously familiar." In other words, it is in seeing connections with previous positions that he is able to narrow down the range of possible moves to consider and select a fruitful one. The creativity exhibited in aspect perception and metaphor making, which is the example that you yourself discuss, also involves connection. So do you think that there is also a connection model in addition to the display and search model that you identify or do you think it will be subsumed under the other two models? And if connection does deserve to be highlighted as an important feature of creativity, then would this provide any sense in which the imagination might be regarded as a source of creativity?

Berys Gaut

I think the idea of the connection model is very helpful. It is indeed distinct from the display and search models and also captures nicely the general point behind my discussion of metaphor. I suggest in my paper that good metaphors bring together otherwise disparate domains in a way that invites us to look at something in an original but apt fashion. The idea of connecting things together captures that point very well and gives it so to speak a local habitation and a name.

Mike Beaney

You have mentioned metaphors but another good example might be jokes, which are often also discussed in the context of understanding creativity. Here is one that generally gets a good groan and one that only works in an oral medium, if that doesn't give the joke away. According to Freud, what comes between fear and sex?

Berys Gaut

I don't know Mike. What does come between fear and sex?

Mike Beaney

Fünf.

Berys Gaut

Well Mike, don't give up the day job.

Mike Beaney

Oh dear. But awful as it is it illustrates what is characteristic of many jokes, a connecting of two "disparate domains" to use your terms or "conceptual spaces", as Margaret Boden might put it. In asking the question, the reference to Freud naturally makes us seek the answer in the domain of Freudian theory, with its talk of fear, envy, sex, snakes and so on. Could envy for example come between fear and sex? But of course Freud was also a German speaker and in the domain of German number terms, the answer is easy – *Vier, Fünf, Sechs*. What creativity such a joke involved when it was first thought up and what amusement it might cause, when it was first heard, depends on the connecting of Freud, as a psychoanalyst, with Freud as a German speaker and the sudden switch from the first to the second, much as in aspect perception which also involves connection.

Berys Gaut

I think that we should allow that the connection model works in the case of some jokes. This is particularly true of jokes involving puns such as a multi-lingual monstrosity you have just told. Puns involve shifting between two meanings of one word and so in a way connecting things together. But I wouldn't say that the connection model fits all jokes well. Here is a better one, which is in Arthur Koestler's book "The Act of Creation". So imagine we are at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Mike Beaney

OK.

Berys Gaut

An art dealer bought a canvas signed Picasso and travelled all the way to Cannes to discover whether it was genuine. Picasso was working in his studio. He cast a single look at the canvas and said: "It's a fake." A few months later the dealer bought another canvas signed Picasso. Again he travelled to Cannes and again Picasso after a single glance, grunted: "It's a fake." But, cher maitre, protested the dealer, it so happens that I saw you with my own eyes working on this very picture, several years ago." Picasso shrugged. "I often paint fakes."
[AUDIENCE LAUGHTER & CLAPPING]

Mike Beaney

Berys, your talents are obviously wasted as a philosopher; ever thought of being a stand-up comic?

Berys Gaut

Well, it hadn't occurred to me but now you mention it! Anyway, what is interesting about the Picasso story is that it is not really about connecting different things together. It works more by violating a conceptual norm. You can't fake your own work. And quite a lot of humour works by virtue of absurdity or incongruity in the sense of norm violations.

Mike Beaney

I guess if this is so the jokes might provide an illustration of Margaret Boden's account of creativity as involving the exploring and or transforming of a conceptual space. By violating a

norm a joke reveals something of the rules and boundaries of a conceptual space and depends upon the recognition of this in having the effect it does.

Berys Gaut

Yes. That may be so. Actually the Picasso joke violates more than one norm. For instance there are social or conversational norms such as that one shouldn't make self evidently crazy replies to serious questions on serious topics. Anyway not only in respect of jokes but also in other cases I wouldn't want to over generalise the application of the connection idea. There are kinds of active creativity, which are not well captured by the idea of connection. For instance creative music might not involve connecting anything much with anything else other than the trivial fact that notes are connected together. Creative music just might be beautiful in a new way and have certain formal properties that hadn't been heard before. And the same could be true of the kind of creativity involved in thinking up new shapes and forms in the visual arts. I also wouldn't say that the connection model shows that imagination is the source of creativity if we mean by this that imagination is in itself the source of creativity. That's for the reason I mentioned earlier. Imagination on its own can't explain creativity since there are uncreative uses of imagination.

Mike Beaney

But could it be said that imagination, when connecting things together, is a source of creativity?

Berys Gaut

The problem with that is that one can connect things together in an uncreative fashion, which is indeed what we generally do. Everyone connects cutlery with eating; paper with scissors and so on. So the most promising way to defend the source claim would be to say that imagination is a source of creativity when it connects things together in a fruitful and original way which is how you formulate the view. Then one can say that an explanation for active creativity is that the creative person is connecting together disparate elements in a fruitful and original way.

Mike Beaney

But isn't this open to the charge once again of triviality. If we say that it is only making those connections, which are valuable and original, i.e. creative, which explains creativity, then isn't our explanation circular?

Berys Gaut

Well I wouldn't agree with that objection, in part because the explanation does tell one something, that the making of connections is sometimes involved in creativity. But although the explanation does have content, I think it's going to be at best only a partial explanation of why some people are creative and others not since there seems to be lots of other factors such as those of personality type and sheer motivation that play an explanatory role in creativity. But nothing much may turn on whether one calls the connection model shown in the making of metaphors and elsewhere a description of one use of the creative imagination as I would prefer to do or a partial explanation of creativity as I think you would prefer to do it is still the case, that imagination, despite what many of the Romantics thought, can't in itself be an explanation of creativity. And that's the point I was after.

Mike Beaney

I agree with you that the Romantics had an absurdly inflated conception of the imagination and that when we look in detail at our talk of imagination and creativity we can see this. So perhaps on that point we should draw our discussion to a close and I should thank you for flying down from St Andrews to talk about your work.

Berys Gaut

Thanks. But before we end Mike, I really must ask and I am sure many others will want to know, do you really have a cat called "Emmanuel"?

Mike Beaney

Alas, I am afraid not. That was a creative stroke of my own - connecting Kant with cats. I'm allergic to cats actually so I have to imagine that I have a cat. What better name to give an imagined cat than Emmanuel?

Berys Gaut

Ah so in imagining Emmanuel you are not committed to its existence?

Mike Beaney

No. But I am committed to its non-existence. Do you have a cat Berys?

Berys Gaut

Unfortunately not.

Mike Beaney

So maybe at some level we ought to agree in our conceptions of imagination. After all we can both imagine a cat together.

Sound Fxs: MIAOW! MIAOW!