

Sartre and Ryle on the imagination

I must begin by explaining why I have chosen to link Sartre and Ryle in this paper. Firstly, both their methods and their conclusions are similar. Secondly, the differing terminologies can be used to illuminate one another - in particular Ryle's simpler terminology can clarify Sartre's meaning. Finally, Sartre uses the results of his study of the imagination to make general remarks about the relationship between consciousness and freedom, and I think it is useful to show that these conclusions also follow from Ryle's approach.

For Ryle I shall deal only with the chapter on Imagination in *The Concept of Mind*. Sartre has written two books on the imagination; *L'Imagination* (Paris, 1916) and *L'Imaginaire* (Paris, 1940). The first is largely a critical study of previous theories of the imagination, while the second is an attempt to use phenomenological method to establish a new theory.

The main error of previous theories he characterises as 'the illusion of immanence'. This is the idea that the image is something in the mind conceived as a sort of container, something internal but nevertheless having a certain independent status, a being of its own. Perhaps the clearest statement of the 'illusion of immanence' is Hume's, to which both Sartre and Ryle refer. For Hume an image is an 'idea', having exactly the same ontological status as a 'sense impression', and being given to consciousness in the same way - that is, as an object for consciousness. Sartre argues that all the classical philosophers, from Descartes to Bergson, have in various ways construed the image as a special kind of object of which one can become conscious, and that the psychologists, at least at the time he was writing, accepted this principle from the philosophers.

The complex of ideas which Ryle is attacking when he talks about the ghost in the machine is related to the illusion of immanence. He links it specifically to the sense datum theory. Speaking of those who hold this theory he says:

And supposing erroneously, that having a visual sensation is describing a flat patchwork of colours spread out in a private space, they find it all the easier to say that in imagining we are scanning a more ghostly patchwork of colours hung up in the same gallery with that original patchwork of colours. (*CM* p. 255).

The sense datum theory itself was Locke's solution to the epistemological problems created by Descartes 'res extensa - res cogitans' dichotomy, and it seems to me that the 'illusion of immanence' is also implicit in this dichotomy. It was derived from the assumptions involved in the dichotomy, rather than arrived at by an actual description of the activity of imagining.

Sartre and Ryle both make the same two types of criticism of the illusion of immanence. Firstly, none of the different versions can give any satisfactory account of how and why we normally distinguish immediately between images and perceptions. Sartre lists three types of attempted solution to this problem, all of which tend to reduce the problem to that of distinguishing between true and false;

(a) Hume's idea that the image differs in intensity from the perception. This is inadequate because our perceptions are often given as very faint indeed, without being confused with images. If the theory were correct one might find oneself on dark nights wondering whether one was hearing a very faint noise, or imagining a very loud one - since of course you couldn't be confusing a real soft noise with an imagined soft one, as they would differ in intensity. And, as Ryle points out, whereas you may picture something vividly, you can't see something vividly, and on the other hand, whereas a real sound can be loud or faint, the image of one can be neither. The vividness of my memory is not the same kind of quality as the brightness of my original perception.

(b) Taine's idea that sensations and images are distinguished as the result of some sort of conflict within the brain, whereby the images are bereft of their natural tendency to give themselves as external by the more powerful real sensations. It is not clear how this could happen, nor why the conflict should merely remove the images characteristic of exteriority, rather than simply suppress the image.

(c) The coherence theory - whereby although isolated images are indistinguishable from isolated perceptions, nevertheless you can judge them in terms of their relation to the picture of the world which you have already built up. However, firstly this theory takes us a long way from the immediate distinction between images and perceptions and leaves us with only probable judgements about whether something is in fact an image or a perception. Secondly, investigating coherence is a satisfactory way of discov-

SARTRE AND RYLE ON THE IMAGINATION

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ering what I in fact heard or saw, but not of discovering whether I really heard or saw something, or only imagined I did so. That is, if you see something which doesn't 'fit in', you are immediately bewildered, you have to think about and explore this object and you may find that it is an illusion - that you have misinterpreted what you saw, or you may find that it actually is what it seems to be. However this bewilderment which occurs when your perceptions fail to cohere, just doesn't occur when you imagine. You are never surprised by your image (except in the case of hallucinations, which I shall discuss further), and so the problem of coherence never arises.

In addition to not accounting for our spontaneous discrimination between image and perception, theories based on the illusion of immanence fail to give a satisfactory account of the relation between image and thought - it makes one think about and observe the image, whereas in fact one is thinking about the *thing*.

This leads us to the second line of criticism, which is simply that this account of the nature of the image doesn't accord with what we actually do, and experience ourselves to do, when we imagine. It is an a priori metaphysical construct.

In his description of imagining Ryle says that he is not interested in questions of fact, but only in "what it means to say, e.g. that someone 'hears' something that he is not hearing". (*CM* p. 270). Sartre says his phenomenological reflection must not be confused with introspection which tries to grasp empirical facts, from which generalisations may be reached. Rather "it tries to grasp essences. That is to say that it begins by placing itself immediately in the sphere of the universal". (*Imagination*, p. 140). This is not as yet very clear. He elaborates on it in *L'Imaginaire*. He points out that imagination is a pre-reflective activity, which becomes the theme for my consciousness in reflections, and that "reflective consciousness delivers an absolutely certain given", which means in this context, that, if asked, I am always able to say whether I am imagining X or perceiving X. He continues

If these consciousnesses are immediately distinguished from all others, it is because they present themselves to reflection with certain marks which immediately determine the judgement 'I have an image'. So the act of reflection has an immediately certain content which we shall call the essence of the image. (*Imaginaire*, p. 14).

That is, since I know when I'm imaging and when I'm perceiving, I must know what it is to 'image' and what it is to 'perceive'; or, I know what the essential characteristics of imaging are. So all I have to do is to make this

knowledge explicit, to determine reflectively what criteria I automatically use in distinguishing between the two. And Sartre repeats that this remains on the level of description and does not require inductive generalisations. Ryle, in his attempt to find out “what it means to say...” is not implying that people don’t normally understand what they mean when they say things. He knows that they do, but, as he points out in his Introduction, “It is, however, one thing to know how to apply such concepts, and quite another to know how to correlate them with one another and with concepts of other sorts”. (p. 7) This means, I think, that he is attempting to explicate the meaning of ‘imaging’ etc. , or in Sartre’s terminology, to reflect on our pre-reflective understanding of these terms. Thus it seems to me that in spite of the very different formulations of method, Sartre and Ryle are in reality doing rather similar things. In general it seems to me that phenomenologists are somewhat more occupied with linguistic analysis than they normally recognise - when Sartre says he is trying to discover “all the conditions which a psychic state must necessarily realise in order to be an image”, it is, at least partly, talking about the meaning of the word ‘image’; and on the other hand linguistic analysts are much more occupied with ‘the world’ than they are willing to admit. As Strawson puts it in ‘The Revolution in Philosophy’: “For, fully to understand our conceptual equipment, it is not enough to know, to be able to say how it works. We want also to know why it works as it does. To ask this is to ask to be shown how the nature of our thinking is rooted in the nature of the world and in our own natures”. (p. 107) What Ryle is doing is to describe the activity of imagining, since of course all questions of meaning relate, ultimately, through and past the question of the intercorrelation of concepts, to the phenomenon in the world to which the word applies. Although you must know roughly what the word ‘horse’ means in order to recognise what it names, to know in detail what it means is to know what a horse is.

In their descriptions both agree that the main characteristic of the act of imagination is that it is directed towards something that isn’t there. As Sartre puts it

My image of him is a certain way of not touching him, of not seeing him, a way he has of *not being* at such and such a distance, in such and such a position. (*Imaginaire*, p. 32).

Imaging is a relationship to an absent object, not to a present copy of an object. It is misleading to speak of an “image” - we should rather speak of an imaging consciousness - that is we should say not that imagining Peter involves having an image of Peter, but that it involves having an imaging

consciousness of him. This argument is reinforced by the fact that you can't observe the image, that it can't teach you anything. However vividly you think you are imagining something, you can never, from an examination of the image, learn new facts about the object. This can easily be verified. Try picturing to yourself Jameson Hall. When you are satisfied that you are imagining it vividly, count the columns on the front. You can't do so (unless of course you already knew how many there are). As soon as you try to concentrate your attention on the pillars, what seemed to be a complete picture is hazy and vague at that point. If you imagine somebody you have just noticed in the street, you picture somebody with hair, eyes, shoes, a dress - a complete person. But if you ask yourself what colour the dress is, you realise that although it is there in your image, and has colour, it has no particular colour, hair set in no particular style, eyes of no particular colour etc. There are in the image the few characteristics which you explicitly noticed, and all other features which a person must have are there in a way which is quite specific - the dress is not a blur of colours but completely indefinite. Sartre refers to this as the phenomenon of quasi-observation. You can't explore the image - it is immediately given as complete, whereas looking at even the simplest object takes time - you turn over the real cube to see that the far face is flat, but you never have to do this with the imagined cube.

Commenting on this phenomenon Ryle refers to the epistemologists' "subtle superstition" that

what is taking place when I 'see', 'hear' or 'smell' corresponds to that element in perceiving which is purely sensuous; and not to that element in perceiving which constitutes recognizing or making out, i.e. that imaging is a piece of near-sentience and not a function of intelligence, since it consists in having, not indeed a proper sensation, but a shadow sensation. (*CM* p. 265).

This means firstly that I am to a certain extent before an object - the imaging consciousness is spontaneous. Secondly, that imaging is a function of knowing - or, that imaging is a way of thinking, rather than images being something that is thought about.

At this point Sartre interrupts his description of the 'mental image' itself in order to see if anything can be learnt about it indirectly through a study of other members of the image family. Now, one of the supports of the illusion of immanence, implicitly if not explicitly, lies in the belief that when I look at, say, a photo of Peter, in order to remind myself of him, it is the photo rather than Peter that is the object of my act of consciousness. It then becomes easy to think that, similarly, there is something other than Peter present to my consciousness when I imagine him mentally. In order to take

away any force that this argument might have, Sartre tries to show that when I am looking at a material image - say a copy, as copy, of a particular thing, then it is the thing, not the copy that is the object of my 'imaging consciousness'. Of course I can look at the copy for itself in which case it becomes the object of my consciousness, but is not longer in any way an image. Thus it is my attitude towards it which determines whether or not it functions as an image: "any object ... is able to function as a present reality or as an image according to the centre of reference chosen". (*Imaginaire*, p. 45).

What exactly does the object do when it "functions as an image"? In discussing the image family Sartre gives the example of trying to picture somebody's face, not being able to, consulting a photo, and then finally getting the 'feel' of the face from the caricature. He goes on: "In the three cases I aim at the object in the same way: it is on the terrain of perception that I want to make Peter's face appear, I want to 'make him present' to me. And, as I cannot directly bring forth the perception of him I use certain material which acts as an *analogue*, as an equivalent of perception." (*Imaginaire*, p. 42).

This concept of analogue is not very clear, and can be misleading. Mary Warnock, for example, concludes that by using it Sartre has himself fallen for the illusion of immanence. Now clearly, when I look at the photo of Peter, I am seeing Peter, not a flat piece of coloured cardboard, or even a three-dimensional model constructed by my sense organs on the basis of the hints about perspective contained in the photo, since this construction would itself be dead, like the photo. I am thus 'present to' Peter. On the other hand, equally clearly, I cannot in fact get out of my body and go and see Peter where he is - that is I cannot in fact see him in the same way as I see him when we are together. Some intermediary is necessary to, as it were, guide me in my reconstruction of Peter's face. It is this function which is performed by the analogue. It can do this in many ways - through its resemblance to the object; in the case of the photo, through the use of symbols to evoke affective reactions in the case of imitations, and by provoking various types of eye motions, as in the case of schematic drawings, faces in the flames, marks on the wall, oddly shaped rocks, hypnagogic images, crystal balls and tea leaves.

In all these cases the analogue is some real phenomenon, and it is this that has suggested to some critics that when Sartre speaks of the analogue for a mental image he is once more thinking of some immanent shadow real phenomenon.

The first suggestion for a solution to this problem is contained in his concluding summary of the section on the image family. “As the matter of the imaging consciousness gets further and further from the matter of perception; as it is more and more penetrated by knowledge, its resemblance to the object of the image is attenuated ... This implies, naturally, that knowledge plays a more and more important part, to the extent of substituting itself for intuition even on the terrain of intuition itself.” (*L’Imaginaire* 107). That is, as the resemblance to the object decreases, so I become more and more dependent on my prior knowledge of it, and less and less able to make use of information contained on the analogue itself, in my attempt to ‘lie present to’ the thing.

If we now relate this back to the phenomenon of quasi-observation, the fact that I can’t learn anything new from the image, it is clear that what serves as the analogue in the case of the mental image is, at least partly, my knowledge of the object that I am trying to picture. Here we can return to Ryle: “Having a tune running in one’s head is one familiar way in which knowledge of how that tune goes is utilized. So having a tune running in one’s head is not to be likened to the mere having of auditory sensations, it is to be likened rather to the process of following a familiar tune...” (265), and, a little further on: “We might say that imagining oneself talking or humming is a series of abstentions from producing which would be the due words to produce if one were talking or humming aloud.” (269)

How exactly is my knowledge of the thing related to and different from my image of it? (Many philosophers have confused the two, thinking of “pieces of knowledge” as consultable images in my mind, and of thinking as involving a succession of images - hence insoluble problems about knowledge of, or images of, general terms.) Sartre tries to show the difference by considering the difference between reading a novel and reading a theoretical work. Although in reading a novel one need not normally have any images, nevertheless the words seem to mean or signify in a rather different way from words used in other types of work. We are, assuming that it is a good novel, involved in it, emotionally committed to it, in a way in which we are not in the case of a text-book: “... in reading, as at the theatre, we are in the presence of a world, and we attribute to it just as much existence as we do to the world of the play: that is to say a complete existence in the unreal. The verbal signs are not, as they are in the case of mathematics, for example, intermediaries between pure meanings and our consciousnesses: they represent the surface of contact between this imaginary world and us.” (*L’Imaginaire* 127). In order to explain this, speaking of the syntheses involved in understanding any book, he says of those involved in un-

derstanding a novel: 'I operate these syntheses in the same way as perceptive syntheses, and not in the same way as signifying syntheses' (129). In the novel the word refers to a thing, whilst in other circumstances it refers to a relationship (even though it may be a particular, rather than a general, relationship). When I am reading a scene set in an office in a city, I am pre-reflectively aware of the city and of the events which have lead up to the scene, in approximately the same way as I am aware of the world outside at this moment; that is, as a world of objects, not of meanings. But when we think normally, we think simply in words, without implicit reference to things at all - the meaning lies in the words.

Now, the exact nature of this difference is not very clear, but it does seem that there are these different ways of understanding. Sartre calls one 'pure' knowledge and the other 'imaging' knowledge or downgraded knowledge (*savoir dégradé*).

Things give themselves first as presences. If we start from knowledge, we see the image born as an effort of thought to make contact with the presences. This birth coincides with the degradation of knowledge which no longer aims at the relationships as such but as substantial qualities of things. (*L'Imaginaire*, p. 135).

The 'imaging knowledge' involved in reading a novel is already half way to the pure image, in which consciousness spontaneously uses its knowledge of the object to help it 'reach' the absent object. My knowledge 'exists' in some way independent of my use of it as analogue in an imaging consciousness - since I can think about the thing, and in other ways use my knowledge of it, without imaging it. I think that this is why Sartre thinks it useful to use the word 'analogue' to relate the way my knowledge functions in the mental image to the way the photo functions in the earlier example.

A second element in the mental analogue is affectivity. All feelings are intentional, are directed towards an object. The object is given, or experienced in a different way from purely intellectual knowing, and this affective consciousness may also be used to make me present to the object. In fact the affective element can only be separated from the element of knowledge by abstraction, since affectivity is always involved in my experience.

The problem of how the analogue manages to help me become present to the absent object is a difficult one. At the risk of being completely misleading, I think perhaps that its status is rather like that of the 'context' when I'm thinking. In any act of knowing the thoughts which are at the focus of my attention get their meaning from and are comprehensible to me in terms of a vast complex of concepts which are only present as an undifferentiated horizon, on the periphery of my consciousness. Perhaps the photograph, or

my knowledge and affectivity, function in a roughly similar way in the case of the analogue - a non-thematized, undifferentiated, but vital support for what is actually the theme of my consciousness.

To sum up this discussion of the analogue, then, we may say that it is never 'inside' my mind; it is something present to consciousness which serves to guide me to the object, or which serves as a 'skeleton' for my imaging consciousness of the object. Sartre's main concern here as in the 'Transcendence of the Ego' is to get rid of the idea of the mind as being some sort of container and the analysis of the different kinds of material image are designed to soften the blow of rejecting the mental image by showing that even in these cases it is the object, not the image, of which I am conscious.

You will remember that one of the criticisms of the classical theory was that it did not give a satisfactory account of the relationship between image and thought. It could either make the 'immanent' image into something thought, or else it made thought into a succession of images connected externally by the laws of association.

I have already quoted Ryle as implying that imaging is a function of intelligence. Sartre also argues that imaging is a way of thinking. The first point he makes is that making an image, just like drawing a picture, involves judgements about the object: "Yes, that is what it's like" is implicit. Secondly, in line with the idea of a 'downgraded' knowledge, he argues that the image is in general, an exploratory mode of thought. The image is part of the thought process, not something foreign to it.

To summarize, to imagine is to use one's knowledge of or affective attitude towards, an object in order to make oneself 'present to' it when it is not really there. Now this involves, obviously, making oneself in a sense, 'absent to' what is really there, and it is this point that interests Sartre most when he goes on to draw conclusions about the relationship between imagination and consciousness in general.

He starts his analysis by discussing the relationship between imagination and perception. In looking at, for example, a carpet, it is not given as stopping at the point where it leaves my field of vision - it is given as continuing under the chair - I see it as continuing under the chair. Sartre calls my relationship to the bit of carpet I don't see directly "an empty intention" or "aiming at emptily", which must be distinguished from the "being given-absent" of the image.

I perceive the hidden beginnings and ends of the arabesques as continuing under the armchair. So it is in the way that I grasp the given that I posit as real what isn't given: with the same right to be considered real as the given, as that which con-

fers on it its meaning and its very nature ... In this sense to perceive such and such a real given is to perceive it on the background of the whole of reality as a totality. This reality is not the object of any special act of attention, but it is co-present as an essential condition for the existence of the reality at present perceived. We see that the imaging act is the opposite of the realising act. If I want to imagine the hidden arabesques, I direct my attention towards them and I isolate them, just as I isolate the thing which I am perceiving at present from the background of the undifferentiated universe. I stop grasping them emptily as constituting the sense of the perceived reality, I give them to myself, in themselves. But as, precisely, I stop aiming at them from a present and instead grasp them in themselves, I grasp them as absent ... I grasp them as a nothingness for me. (*L'Imaginaire* 348).

This type of analysis applies also to the past and to the future, to ordinary memory and anticipation.

All real existents give themselves with present past and future structures, so the past and the future as essential structures of the real are equally real I can live the same future real, as a basis for the present (...) or on the other hand I can isolate it and posit it for itself, by cutting it off from all reality and annihilating it, by presentifying it as nothingness. (*L'Imaginaire* 351).

The other side of the ash-tray I am looking at and the imagined Pantheon are both outside my field of vision - they are both in one way 'absent'. But the way in which I am conscious of them is different in each case. The other side of the ash-tray is not the theme of my consciousness, and the Pantheon is. The one is implicit in the given (hence co-present), the other is explicitly postulated as absent. So the image is different from the sort of "lateral awareness" one has of non-perceived objects in perception, and what makes it different is the negation involved, the specific rejection of the present given, with all its implicit relationships, as the theme of one's attention.

To posit an image is to constitute an object on the margin of the totality of the real, it is thus to keep the real at a distance, to free oneself from it (s'en affranchir). (*L'Imaginaire* 353).

Thus a consciousness which can imagine is a free consciousness. A consciousness which was "in-the-middle-of-the-world", that is, was so involved in the details of the world that it could not conceive of the world as a whole, could not imagine. Nor, of course, would it be a consciousness, since it is precisely the ability to get a perspective on the world, and thereby to see it as a whole, which defines consciousness.

In fact the act of negation and the act of constituting the world as a whole are the same. Denying of something that it is present involves knowing

what is present, and then relating this absent object to everything that is present, not one by one, since there would then be no guarantee of exhaustiveness, but en bloc. And since the entire world is experienced as present, as the “horizon” of my present perception, I am relating it to the entire world. On the other hand, if I imagine Peter, I am not making him absent from the entire world as such, but absent from a particular perspective in the world, just in the same way as I see the whole world, but always from a particular perspective. Incidentally, in discussing this Sartre uses his infamous neologism “nihilate” for the first time.

Thus the thesis of unreality (of the imagined object) has given to us the possibility of negation as its condition; now, this is only possible through the “nihilation” of the world as totality, and this nihilation is revealed to us as being the corollary of the very freedom of the consciousness,

and, a little further on, “thus to posit the world as a world and to ‘nihilate’ it are one and the same thing”. (*L’Imaginaire* 354). He also uses the expression “prendre du recul”, roughly “to take up a proper perspective” or to “withdraw”, to describe this nihilating structure of consciousness.

If a situation is defined as “a mode of apprehension of the real as a world”, then the condition for the possibility of imagination is to be in situation. Particular images are not arbitrarily made: they are indicated and motivated by the situation.

On the other hand the meaning of the situation is not given from the outside, it is given precisely by the way in which I nihilate the world - or, to put it in somewhat clearer language, the things in the world around me take on meanings for me in terms of my goals, and my goal is always something which at the moment isn’t the case, and so has to be imagined. Thus being able to imagine is the prerequisite for being in situation (being-in-the-world). From this circularity it can be seen that the ability to imagine is not a contingent characteristic of consciousness, it is an essential element in consciousness.

Thus talking about being conscious, being free, and being able to imagine, are different ways of talking about the same thing.

Ryle, I think, would find these remarks unnecessary, perhaps silly. In his discussion of “freedom of the will” and mechanism he says “Men are not machines, not even ghost-ridden machines. They are men - a tautology which is worth remembering” (*CM* 81), and seems content to leave it at that. I’m not always sure that he is wrong - in my sane, non-philosophic moments it seems silly to have to prove that I am free. But of course it is also useful to explicitate the concept “freedom”, to show exactly in what

human freedom consists, and this is what Sartre is doing, in the above analysis, and what Ryle fails to do, although he has the necessary concepts available to do so.