

Why You Can't Actually Imagine the Impossible (but Think that You Can)

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ABSTRACT: There are philosophers who think that it is possible to imagine the metaphysically impossible. On the one hand, there are philosophers that think that only knowledge limits what one can imagine. Prior knowledge of certain facts the imagination is unbounded. On the other hand, there are philosophers who think that the imagination is unconstrained whatever. I shall argue that (a) it is not actually possible to imagine what is metaphysically impossible, though (b) it appears to be possible. I take this to be a defence of the Kripkean view. I aim to develop an understanding of the imagination that can accommodate this view.

KEYWORDS: Exemplification – Goodman – imagination – knowledge – Kripke – mental representation.

1. Introduction

There are philosophers who think that one can imagine what is *metaphysically impossible*. Consider the negation $\neg E$, where E is, for example, the statement 'water is H_2O '. This kind of statement is a special kind of statement: if it is true, it is necessarily true but if false, necessarily false.¹ Here the modality is metaphysical. The philosophers in question then think that it is possible to imagine the negation of E . Given E is true, these philoso-

¹ Here and below, 'E' abbreviates this kind of statement.

phers think that it is possible to imagine the metaphysically impossible. Such philosophers fall into two camps. We have those who think that what one knows or doesn't know matters to what one can imagine (call them "epistemologists") and those who think that one can imagine the impossible whatever (call them "anarchists").

1.1. *The epistemologist view*

Alex Byrne writing about philosophers who think that one can't imagine that necessarily true a posteriori statements are false states that it is "more plausible" that such statements "might start out as imaginable but turn unimaginable once the empirical information about [them] comes in" (Byrne 2007, 8).² In this way, empirical knowledge has the power to turn a once imaginable statement into an unimaginable one.

Peter Kail argues that Hume holds a similar view. The following explanation is attributed to him: "The explanation, then, of [someone] finding some metaphysically *impossible* state of affairs conceivable rests on his [or her] ignorance of key facts" (Kail 2003, 51). Without adequate acquaintance with these facts, there is no knowledge of them. Without such knowledge, the negation of, for example, a necessary cause-effect relation is conceivable, that is, it is "separable in the imagination" (cf. Kail 2003, 52-53).

1.2. *The anarchist view*

Peter Kung is one philosopher who has recently argued that one can imagine almost anything: "Imagining impossibilities isn't unusual", he says (see Kung 2010, 626). For Kung, "When we think about imagination in its own right, and aren't biased by philosophical considerations about modal epistemology, it is plausible that we can imagine the impossible" (Kung 2010, 626-627).

Tamar Gendler's claims her story, *The Tower of Goldbach*, allows the reader to imagine the impossible, specifically that $5 + 7$ is and is not 12. She writes, that the story shows that the "conceptually impossible proposition that...twelve suddenly ceases to be the sum of two primes becomes – for the moment at least – imaginable" (Gendler 2000, 68).

² But Byrne suggests that he is an anarchist. See Byrne (2007, 2-3).

Kendal Walton seems to lean towards the anarchist position, too. In *Mimesis and Make-Believe* he suggests a player of a game of imagination is able to imagine the impossible. A player of a game in which she imagines a bear every time she sees a tree stump is able to do so, Walton (1990, 26) claims, “even if [the player] believes that the stump *could not* be a bear, that its being a nonbear is one of its essential properties.”

These are examples of philosophers who hold that it is possible to imagine the metaphysically impossible. It seems it is something like the common view and it may even be the common sense one. I'll run somewhat against the grain, then, by arguing that it is actually not possible to imagine the metaphysically impossible—regardless of knowledge, or anything else. Since so many philosophers hold the opposing thought, there is some motivation to produce an understanding of the imagination that can accommodate the heretical view. This view I attribute to Kripke and it is the view that I hope to defend. This paper provides a way to understand the imagination and the underlying mechanisms that accommodate the perspective argued for.

To get to the conclusion I wish to draw, we need to be sure that we know what it is that we are talking about. I will start by defining the particular sense of the verb “imagine” I have in mind. The verb seems to suffer polysemy, and this may lead to confusion. So it is important to get the terms of our discussion straight. Second, I will introduce the view that I want to defend, which, I think, can be founded on a reading of Saul Kripke. Third, after some preliminary remarks, which introduce what I assume is the vehicle of imagining, I will introduce some ideas and insights gleaned from Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin. Finally, I will use these ideas to outline an understanding of the imagination which accommodates the view championed.

2. The verb “imagine”

The verb “imagine” suffers polysemy. It has several related but distinct meanings and it is difficult to distinguish these systematically. Nevertheless, we need to do what we can to differentiate the primary sense of the verb here from other senses of the verb in order to avoid talking past each other. This need can be made clear by considering the following. The verb “im-

agine” can be synonymous with the verbs “expect” and “suppose”. These two terms are semantically distinct. They are, also, grammatically distinct, the former is not always stative, but when it is, it has no imperative form. The latter is stative, and does have a widely used imperative form. What’s more there are pragmatic differences. For example, if one knows that P is true, then one ordinarily doesn’t *suppose* that P is true, but rather false. On the other hand, if one knows that P is true, one does not rationally *expect* that it is false, but only true. For all these reasons there is a need to differentiate at least these two senses of the verb.

In the context of this essay, not differentiating these senses from the actual sense of the verb that is relevant to our discussion will only cause confusion. I hope to defend the claim that it is not possible to imagine the metaphysically impossible. This claim is attributed to Kripke. But if Kripke was actually using “imagine” synonymously with “suppose”, he would have been making an obviously false claim. But, if he was using “imagine” synonymously with “expect”, he would have been making another false claim unless modified by knowledge in which case it would have been a trivially true claim. For these reasons, then, it is, also, important to differentiate the use of “imagine”, here, from uses which are synonymous with expectation and supposition (and like synonyms).

But we can provide a positive sense to the verb in question. The verb is not just used to say something is expected or supposed, etc. The primary use of the verb that is important here is the one that links thinking of something to thinking of it relative to a sensory modality: That sense of imagining that is thought to provide one with the same kind of information that one would get if one were actually seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting or touching something that one is not actually seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting or touching. This is entirely consistent with Kripke’s writings when talking about modality. For example, Kripke (1980, 121) asks us to imagine: animals that *appear* or *look* a certain way. Other examples abound (e.g., Kripke 1980, 112, 114, 118, 128, 142, 150).

Given that it is a Kripkean position about imagining that I am defending, it is not untoward to think that the primary sense of “imagine” and related imaginings relate to thinking of something relative to a particular sensory modality in the way described. This does not necessarily mean all other senses of imagining are excluded, and this is what is meant by talking of the “primary sense” of “imagine” here.

3. Kripkean reasons to think one can't actually imagine what is metaphysically impossible

A key passage in *Identity and Necessity* sums up a good deal of what Kripke says when he uses the verb “imagine”. Here he is talking of a lectern standing in his near vicinity:

What I am saying is, given that it [the lectern] is in fact not made of ice, in fact is made of wood, one cannot imagine that under certain circumstances it could have been made of ice. So we have to say that though we cannot know a priori whether this [lectern] was made of ice or not, given that it is not made of ice, it is necessarily not made of ice. In other words, if P is the statement that the lectern is not made of ice, one knows by a priori philosophical analysis, some conditional of the form “if P, then necessarily P”. (Kripke 1971, 153)

From this passage, and others like it,³ I draw three claims. First, there is the logical claim: If E is true, it is necessarily true. Second, there is the factual claim: It is the *facts* that determine whether E is true, regardless of how knowledge of the facts is ascertained. Last, the psychological claim: If it is necessarily true that E, then it is unimaginable that E is false. The key claim is the last one: given a metaphysical necessity, one cannot imagine that its negation is true. This is the Kripkean claim to be defended. To do so also involves explaining how it is that we come to *think* that we can imagine the impossible because we just do as often as not think in this way. That is something that Kripke also says something about.

4. Saul Kripke on a certain confusion

Kripke offers us an idea of what kind of confusion is involved when we think we imagine the impossible: One can come to think that E is possibly false (when true) when ‘qualitative analogues’ are involved. One may confuse a qualitative analogue for the real thing. And one may, thereof, conclude that the negation of E is possible. Suppose E abbreviates ‘water is H₂O’. If we discover or imagine a substance that is qualitatively identical to actual water, but not composed of H₂O molecules, then we will have dis-

³ Also see Kripke (1980, 46, 47, 112, 113, 114, 126, 127, 129-131).

covered a qualitative analogue of actual water. One may draw the erroneous conclusion that, under the circumstances in question, E is false. That is, that there is a possible situation (or world) in which the negation of E is possible. Kripke's suggests that "We [should] say instead that just as there is fool's gold there could be fool's water" (Kripke 1980, 128). The "fools water" here is a qualitative analogue of actual water, qualitatively indistinct from actual water, but essentially different. To infer the negation of E would be based on confusing fool's stuff for actual stuff.

Talk of qualitative analogues is obscure, however, how they get mixed up in the imagination vague, and, perhaps, even inconsistent (cf. Byrne 2007). However, Kripke does, I think, point us in the right direction; when one thinks one imagines the impossible one is merely confused. I'll try to provide an understanding of the imagination that accommodates this kind of confusion without relying on talk of qualitative analogues. Before we get to this, I briefly introduce what I take to be the vehicle of the kind of imagining in question: the mental image.

5. Mental imagery

I assume that imagining, in the relevant sense, involves mental imagery and that imagery involves a set of mental images. Also, I take these mental images to be representations where that just means they provide information about objects, their qualities and relations. So imagining in the relevant sense involves mental representations that provide information about how objects, their qualities and relations would be experienced under certain circumstances in the absence of external stimuli.

Psychologists today take mental images as (a) literal or functional depictions or (b) descriptions. A debate has sprung up around which of these interpretation is correct (see Kosslyn 1995; 2010; Pylyshyn 1981; 2003; Thomas 2014; Tye 1991). On one side, we have the work of Stephen Kosslyn and his collaborators, on the other, that of Zenon Pylyshyn and his supporters. Kosslyn sometimes argues that mental images are literal depictions realised in the physical matter of the brain (cf. Kosslyn 1995, 290-291; Kosslyn 2010). Mostly though, Kosslyn argues for the less ambitious position that mental images are functional depictions. Functional depictions are not realised in the physical matter of the brain but are encoded in

the way that pictures are encoded. In contrast, description-theorists advocate the view that mental imagery is encoded in the way language is encoded. The difference between the two is one of 'format' (cf. Kosslyn 1995, 280). If mental imagery is depictive, then a mental image of, for example, *a ball on a box* is encoded in an array format – a mapping of the spatial points of relevant objects and their spatial relations to each other. The analogy is to the way information about graphical representations in a computer is stored. If mental imagery is descriptive, then the mental image of a ball on a box is encoded in a 'propositional' format, something like: ⟨on⟨ball, box⟩⟩. That is similar to the way language is encoded in a formal representation of language.

One can remain neutral on what mental images are, whilst noting that mental imagery is taken by both parties to be *representational*. This is all that is needed for the theory presented below. Each format encodes information about an object and its qualities/relations. Thus the mental image in question is representational in the sense that I outlined above.

Note that the view that associates imagining with the possession of mental images that are mental representations is not universally loved. The standard arguments against it can be found in the work of Gilbert Ryle (1951), Jean Paul Sartre (2004) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1967), and recently Colin McGinn (2006). Rebuttals are found in a number of places.⁴

We can also note that there are alternative accounts. One alternative account is offered by Gilbert Ryle: imagining is a kind of sophisticated pretending (or 'fancying', 'rehearsing', etc.; see Ryle 1951). For example, imagining *a ball on a box* is pretending that one is having the experience that one would have if one were actually seeing a ball on a box (in the absence of the relevant external stimuli). Imagining in this sense is a kind of activity and does not entail the existence or possession of any actual mental imagery. The problem with this is that one can pretend that one is seeing, etc. absolutely anything. The analogy is to supposition. And the reason to dismiss this as irrelevant here is the same reason to dismiss the claim that Kripke is talking about supposition when he talks about imagining: Kripke would have been making *obviously* false claims about the

⁴ The interested reader should consult Kosslyn (2010) and Tye (1991).

imagination. So Kripke could not have meant to equate imagining with pretending.

Because the arguments against mental imagery can be rebutted and influential alternative views do not sit well with the relevant Kripkean understanding of imagining (as well as the contemporary scientific understanding of imagining – see Thomas 2014), I will proceed on the assumption that imagining involves mental imagery and mental images, and that these are representation in the sense stated.

6. Nelson Goodman

The next question to ask is how do mental images represent? Nelson Goodman provides us with some important ideas which might be used to make sense of such representations.

According to Nelson Goodman, symbol systems (descriptive, depictive, or otherwise) are composed of symbols which are of two types: labels and samples. There are linguistic labels, like names, predicates, etc. There are theoretical labels like variables, models, etc. There are pictorial labels, like portraits, caricatures, etc. Labels denote. Catherine Elgin explains the relation in the following manner.

Denotation is a two-place semantic relation between a symbol and the objects to which it applies. A symbol denotes whatever complies with, or satisfies, or is an instance of it. Thus, a name denotes its bearers; a variable, its values; and a portrait, its subject. A predicate denotes severally the objects in its extension. (Elgin 1983, 19)

Samples are also quite numerous and their uses varied:

The samples we encounter are various, and the uses to which they are put diverse. The model home on a development site, the prototype of a jet plane, and the free bottle of shampoo which arrives in the mail are integral parts of sales campaigns. A sample problem worked out in a text is an illustration of characteristic problems and acceptable modes of solution in a given discipline. And an example of the way you can expect to be treated or the sort of person you are likely to become, may serve as a promise or a threat. (Elgin 1983, 71)

Labels, then, are symbols that denote but samples are symbols that exemplify. Labels denote things. Samples exemplify predicates. Both are forms of reference.

Denotation is relatively easy to understand. Exemplification, on the other hand, is slightly more troublesome. Generally, if a sample, S, exemplifies a predicate F, then F applies to S. But not every predicate that can be applied to S is exemplified. That is, too many predicates may apply to an S. For example, a tailor's swatch may be described as 'threadbare' without, thereby, exemplifying that predicate. To understand something as a sample, then, context, intention and use are essential.

Another problem veers in the opposite direction; there are too few predicates. That is, something may be exemplified which has no corresponding linguistic predicate, a musical note, or a dance move, for example. To solve this problem Goodman and Elgin allow for non-linguistic predicates (see Elgin 1983, 78). In the special cases mentioned, the exemplifying object (note, movement, etc.) may act as its own predicate.

The most serious problem has to do with how to *define* exemplification: if a sample exemplifies F, then the sample is said to refer to F. But what this reference relation is is a matter of dispute. Does it mean that the sample *denotes* F, *exemplifies* F or *refers* to F, or does it have some other reference relation to F, which is not denotative or exemplificational?

Dempster (1989) argues that one is faced with two basic alternatives. A sample, S, exemplifies F iff F denotes S and either (a) S exemplifies F or (b) S denotes F. The former option is circular, so must be rejected. Unfortunately, the latter fares no better. Vermuelen et al., for example, provide ample cause for concern: First, Goodman says that denotation and exemplification are two distinct kinds of reference, the first goes from a label to object, the latter in the other direction. But the definition in question makes it the case there is only one: denotation (unidirectional and bidirectional). Second, the definition makes exemplification symmetrical, so it turns out that the exemplified predicates must themselves exemplify the sample. But, 'the first adjective I will use after 5pm tomorrow' may well exemplify 'predicate' without 'predicate' exemplifying 'the first adjective I will use after 5pm tomorrow', even though the two denote each other by definition (cf. Vermeulen et al. 2009).

Similar objections count against defining exemplification in the other ways mentioned. The following alternative, for example, leads to the same

set of issues: S exemplifies F iff F denotes S and S *refers* to F. But “refer” must mean either exemplify or denote, which just takes us back to the same definition dismissed in the previous paragraph. The last option is just to say there is some other sense of refer in question. However, that has no exegetical support. Although Goodman acknowledges other forms of reference, he mentions none other than denotation and exemplification.

Shouldn't we just give up on the whole notion of exemplification? The thing is that it is a very useful concept. So what is the alternative? According to Vermeulen the concept must be taken as basic. One reason to think that this is the right thing to do is that Goodman does not seek to define denotation or exemplification but takes them as basic forms of reference. Indeed, influential commentators like Elgin proceed in like manner. She stresses that she is following in Goodman's footsteps and that both denotation and exemplification are *basic* forms of reference: “Like Goodman,” she writes, “I recognise two basic modes of reference – denotation and exemplification” (Elgin 1995, 66).

All this is no cause for alarm according to Vermeulen. One reason is that every theory involves basic terms that are left undefined. For example, denotation is often left undefined. I'll follow this line. However, following Vermeulen, it can be noted:

- (a) The concept is not obscure or out of the ordinary: “In ordinary language, the reference of “man” to Churchill, and of “word” to “man”, is unequivocally denotation; while if Churchill symbolises “man”, and “man” symbolises “word”, the reference is unequivocally exemplification” (Goodman 1976, 58).
- (b) Neither does its formal introduction obfuscate: “Denotational reference goes from a label to the objects to which that label applies. Exemplificational reference goes from an object to labels that apply to it” (Elgin 1983, 73).
- (c) It is a very fruitful concept. We have already seen the range of its use which includes discussion of: models, prototypes, consumer samples, illustrations, etc. Elgin has also made use of the concept in analysing the sciences (see Elgin 2011). And Goodman applied it to the understanding of art, dance, fiction, expression, metaphor, description- and representation-as, etc. (see Goodman 1976). It can, thus, be considered to be quite fruitfully deployed.

While what has been said has not provided a formal definition, hopefully, the concept is understood as the form of reference that exists between a sample and a predicate that describes it.

Denotation and exemplification are important to Goodman's understanding of how representations represent and what they represent things as (which is important for us below): representation involves denotation; representation-as involves both denotation and exemplification at the same time (cf. Elgin 1983, 141). It is simple enough to think of representations as denoting and as such standing for whatever it is in particular (or general) that they stand for much as names do:

If a [representation] represents *k* as (or the) soandso, then it denotes *k* and is a soandso [representation]. If *k* is identical to *h*, the [representation] also denotes *h*... To represent the first Duke of Wellington is to represent Arthur Wellesley... (Goodman 1976, 30)

On the other hand: "Description-as and representation-as, though pertaining to labels, are... matters of exemplification rather than of denotation" (Goodman 1976, 66). What this means is that a representation *represents* something *as* something by exemplification: The representation, then, must not only refer to a predicate but that predicate must also denote the representation in question.

This allows a representation to not merely denote what it represents, but to refer to predicates that can be used to label and classify the representation in question. Taking a cue from Elgin (1983, 90), consider the following representation, 'The death penalty is morally inexcusable'. We can say, this representation represents a certain kind of act in that it predicates something of it. The representation exemplifies the predicate 'an-immorally-inexcusable-act-description', which classifies *the representation*. Thus, the act is represented and it is represented as morally inexcusable. But, still, it is a further issue to say whether that act just has been represented as it is; for purveyors of extreme justice may take the contrarian view. That is, they may take the view the representation in question is a *misrepresentation*.

Here is another example. Consider a description that claims dolphins are fish. The description denotes dolphins since it describes or predicates something of them. It exemplifies 'a-fish-description', since that predicate applies to the representation in question. Yet since dolphins fail to fall into

the extension of things that are fish, the representation in question fails to classify dolphins correctly – it is a *misdescription*.

Here is another example (important below). Assume, first, that water is denoted by a representation. Next that the predicate that is exemplified is ‘a-water-like-substance-that-lacks-H₂O-representation’, so that that predicate denotes the representation faithfully. Since water necessarily does not fall under the extension of this representation, it is just not represented correctly. But we might also say, it is necessarily not represented *as it is*, but rather as something that is water-like but lacks H₂O.

Water does not fall into the extension of things that the representation designates *because it is impossible for water to lack molecules of H₂O*. We don’t need to know anything about any object whatsoever *except water* to draw this conclusion. Note it is correct to say that water is represented as something that is, in actual fact, essentially not water without needing to accept that there is any substance that is, in actual fact, watery but lacking in H₂O molecules, i.e. without talk of qualitative analogues. With this in mind, we can make sense of the kind of confusion that Kripke gestures towards.

7. Goodman based confusion

The last case mentioned is the kind of case that is apt to cause confusion. A representation of water that exemplifies the predicate ‘a-water-like-substance-that-lacks-H₂O-representation’ may be understood as a representation of water *that* lacks H₂O. This representation, then, may be taken to ground the inference that water could have existed without having the molecular make-up that it does actually have. And, even, that there are possible worlds in which water lacks its constitutive identity. This process of reasoning is erroneous. There is a gap between representing water *that* lacks H₂O and representing water as something water-like that lacks H₂O. A representation of water may, indeed, exemplify the predicate ‘a-water-like-substance-that-lacks-H₂O-representation’, but though and, in fact, just because the predicate is faithful to the representation, the representation in question fails to represent water correctly on the basis that water does not fall into the extension of the representation. What’s more, it is necessarily true that water fails to fall into that extension and, thereof, it is necessarily true that water is not represented as it is.

So why is there a confusion? There may be many reasons, but the fundamental reason is that the gap between what is denoted and what it is represented as is obscured. Why? Speculative answers are: just not knowing that something has the molecular structure it has. If I do not know that water is in actual fact necessarily composed of H_2O molecules, then I may draw the conclusion that what is represented is represented as *it* is. Another is not knowing that objects, like water, are identical to their molecular structure rather than other sets of properties. Heat is another example.

8. Why you can't imagine the impossible but think that you can

It is assumed that when one imagines, mental imagery and mental images are involved. Also that these images are representations as defined. Following Goodman, that means they denote and exemplify. And this means that the same kind of story that was told above can be retold below with respect to the imagination.

The kinds of cases that are important to us are those in which familiar items are imagined in a more or less a familiar way, most often when they are imagined as one thinks they would be experienced. When one imagines something and tries to represent one's understanding or experience of it in the way one thinks one would experience it one draws upon familiar predicates. One may, for example, imagine water and try to represent it as one would experience it by drawing upon predicates that are related to one's workaday understanding and experience of *it* (its wetness, transparency, tastelessness, etc.). If so, the associated images or set of images exemplify predicates that classify them as 'a-water-description'. The relevant set of predicates may, unintentionally or intentionally, occlude water's actual molecular structure. If so, as in the example above, the image exemplifies the predicate 'a-water-like-substance-that-lacks- H_2O -representation'. But water is not something that could ever lack H_2O molecules. So it doesn't fall into the extension of the denoted representation. And, thus, water is not represented *as* something it actually is. In fact, it is necessarily not represented as something it is, *even if it is represented as it is ordinarily experienced*.

As above, one may conclude that one has been able to imagine water *that* is not constituted by its actual molecular structure. This may lead one

to infer that one has represented a situation in which water that lacks H_2O could be experienced. And this may even lead to the conclusion that it is possible for the statement that ‘water is H_2O ’ to be false. But, as above, this would be wrong. As said, there is a gap between representing an object and representing it as it is.

This more or less explains just what we wanted to explain: In general, to imagine is to represent. To represent is to denote and exemplify. Denoting k always denotes h on the basis necessarily k is h . There is nothing impossible here. For the representation to exemplify is to classify the representation. To classify the representation determines whether it represents k faithfully or misrepresents it. If it doesn’t represent k as h , it necessarily misrepresents h . But there is nothing impossible referred to, here, either, since it cannot follow that k has been represented as k that is not h . One can *think* one can imagine the impossible by missing the gap between what is represented and the denoted representation. That is, by confusing the representation of k as something that is not h for a representation of k that is not h . It is speculated this is based on epistemic frailty or misunderstanding the relationship between objects and phenomenal properties. Objections and further examples will be considered below.

9. Objections

Consider another set of statements: E abbreviates ‘cats are animals’ and F abbreviates ‘cats are demons’. Knowing that E is true, one knows that E is necessarily true. Nevertheless, one may understandably think that one can still imagine a situation in which F is true. One may think, for example, that one can imagine a situation in the future when we find out that E is false and F is true. Doesn’t it follow from this that I can imagine the impossible? After all, F must be impossible given E is true. All this can be explained in exactly the same way as the water case was explained. To have a mental image of a cat that represents a cat as being something that is less critter than fiend is not to have a mental representation of a cat that represents a cat *that* is a demon. The representation in question if a representation of a cat, given E, denotes an animal since it is necessarily true cats *are* animals. That representation may represent its object in a certain manner and in that manner exemplify the predicate ‘a-cat-like-entity-that-is-a-

demon-representation', which correctly classifies the representation, but a representation that necessarily misrepresents the facts. Such a cat representation necessarily fails to represent its object as it is. It does not follow that a cat that is a demon has been represented nor that a cat has been represented as a cat that is a demon.

But, still, Putnam *and* Kripke suggest something possible just is imagined when one imagines 'water is not H₂O', 'cats are demons', etc. This is where "textbook Kripkeanism" takes up the story (see Yablo 2000). Textbook Kripkeans say the sense in which F could turn out to be true (or could have turned out to be true) is logical or conceptual. The possibility associated with F, here, understood as a linguistic representation, though, is the possibility associated with *using F to say something true rather than the possibility associated with what F actually says!* That former kind of possibility is primarily associated with a situated epistemic reality but, nevertheless, presents one with a metaphysical possibility, though that possibility is not to be confused with the actual metaphysical possibility associated with the statement. The theory presented can be given a similar sheen. The representation discussed above represents a cat (and, thus, an animal), but represents it as something that it is not (e.g. as a demon). All this is true whether or not there is something or nothing in the extension of the representation denoted. Something seems possible, though, right? But this latter possibility is not the same as the metaphysical possibility of F being true. It is the possibility of the denoted representation representing something true in some situation, e.g. representing something less critter than fiend experienced as we experience actual cats.

Another objection may seem to come from an interpretation of David Chalmers. Chalmers provides us with a theory of conceivability. There are various kinds of conceivability some of which involve the imagination. Chalmers talks about two central kinds. First, we have 'primary positive conceivability' and, second, 'secondary positive conceivability'. Positive conceivability is another name for imagining (see Chalmers 2002). Thus, we have what can be called 'primary imaginings' and 'secondary imaginings'. Imagining that 'water is not H₂O', 'cats are demons', etc. are cases of primary imagining. To say that one cannot imagine these things is to talk about secondary imagining, one cannot imagine that 'water is not H₂O', 'cats are demons', etc. It seems that one 'passes' from the former to the latter once one is endowed with the actual facts. In any case, primary imagin-

ing is a kind of imagining, and if 'water is not H₂O', etc. is what one imagines when one imagines that such statements are true, the impossible really is being imagined.

But is this a good reading of Chalmers? Chalmers is a textbook Kripkean (see Yablo 2000). The key textbook Kripkean move is to say that when one thinks one can imagine the possibility of an impossibility one is confusing a different *metaphysical* possibility for the actual possibility in question. We've already seen how this move can be accommodated by the theory being defended here. It is also possible to see how it is accommodated in Chalmers theory. One may say one imagines that water is not H₂O in the primary sense (based on the conceptual relations), which makes us think we can imagine the impossible. One may come to see that one cannot imagine that, that is, in the secondary sense, when the facts are in. However, when we consider the metaphysical possibilities associated with each kind of imagining, we see, on Chalmers view, since there is only one set of worlds, such that those worlds are not distinguished at the primary and secondary level (cf. Chalmers 1996), that the conceptual possibility associated with imagining that 'water is not H₂O' is just the metaphysical possibility associated with what one can imagine being true of *some* state of affairs (i.e. there being a watery substance that is not H₂O) and not *the* actual state of affairs. This explains the metaphysical possibility that the conceptual possibility associated with a sentence such as 'water is not H₂O' etc. implies. And similar explanations can be given for sentences like 'cats are demons', etc. The related conceptual possibilities, then, do register the *metaphysical* possibility of something just not the metaphysical possibility associated with actual water, cats, etc. The same can be said of primary imaginings. They do register the metaphysical possibility of something but just not those associated with actual water, actual cats, etc.

It seems to me that if this line of reasoning is not available to Chalmers, it is difficult to see just how his Conceivability Argument for Dualism (or his defence of Jackson's Knowledge Argument) is supposed to work (see Chalmers 1996; 2004). Contrast two primary imaginings: 'water is not H₂O' and 'pain is not the firing of C-fibres'. For the physicalist either is impossible. But Chalmers wants to show that the latter is metaphysically possible and he wants to do so by showing that he is justified in *moving from a primary conceivability to a secondary conceivability*. So he has it that we can primarily imagine both (based on not knowing enough). When the

facts arrive (and we do know enough), we realise that we cannot imagine such cases and, thus, *that we were not imagining what we thought we were imagining*. The conceptual possibility is just that of being able to think that 'water is not H₂O' based on the primary imagining. But what that conceptual possibility turns out to be is just the possibility of being able to say that 'water is not H₂O' based on the metaphysical possibility of there being some water-like substance that is not H₂O. It is now available for Chalmers to say that line of reasoning is not available to the physicalist when the primary imagining associated with imagining pain that is not the firing of C-fibres is concerned. To say that one can primarily imagine that pain is not the firing of C-fibres where that primary imagining points to a conceptual possibility where that possibility is the possibility of saying that the sentence in question can be used to say something true is all well and to the good. But when we look for what the related metaphysical possibility is, that is, what the statement in question could be used to say that is metaphysically possible, it turns out that it could not be used to say anything but pain is not the firing of C-fibres since there is nothing else pain could plausibly refer to: there is no possibility of pain-like phenomenon that is not pain as there is of a water-like substance that is not water (or a cat-like fiend that is not a critter, etc. – see, e.g., Chalmers 1996, 67-69, 73, 146-149). We have come to the conclusion that all the sentence, in fact, could say is just what it does say. And, thereof, mind-body materialism is false.⁵

Last, note Chalmers (1996, 146) introduces Kripke's argument against mind-body identity theory in exactly the manner laid out and notes his arguments affinities to Kripke's argument with respect to their shared modal and logical core.

One last objection, what if we don't know which of E and F is necessarily true and which necessarily false. In such a case, we surely seem to be able to imagine either one is true. If so, surely that is to imagine the impossible. Say, now, E = 'Goldbach's Conjecture is proved', and F = 'Goldbach's Conjecture is disproved'. We may think we can primarily imagine either. But, according to Chalmers (1996), if E actually turns out to be true, then F will have been a misdescription of a possible world. And, so, if there is a conceptual possibility associated with F, it will be the possibility asso-

⁵ Strictly speaking, Chalmers only draws the conclusion that the present form of materialism is false.

ciated with F being used to say something true and that might be, for example, the metaphysical possibility of a mathematical outcome that involves a miscalculation; *not the negation of E*. On the theory presented here, Goldbach's Conjecture will have been represented, thus, its true status will have been represented. But it just will have exemplified the predicate 'a-Goldbach-Conjecture-is-false-representation'. The denoted representation will, then, have misrepresented Goldbach's Conjecture. It will have represented it as something it is not. It does not follow that a mathematical truth *that* was false was represented or anything was represented as a mathematical truth *that* was false.

10. Conclusion

It has been claimed that one cannot imagine the impossible because the imagination involves mental images, that they represent objects and their qualities/relations, and that the relevant images can be analysed as Goodman analyses representation. One can *think* one can imagine the impossible by missing a gap between what is represented and what it is represented as. Reasons for such confusion may be due to epistemic frailty or misunderstanding the relation between objects and phenomenal properties. Epistemologists are wrong, then, to say knowledge regulates the imagination and anarchists are wrong to think nothing constrains the imagination.

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