Metaphysics // Fall 2024

Handout 3

Peacocke: Berkeley defended

THE THREE PROBLEMS. Peacocke begins by formulating three problems. They will guide his discussion later on: 19

Image/imagination When imagining a ‘ suitcase ’ and, secondly, a ‘ suitcase with a cat obscured behind it ’, the contents of my imagination (my imaginings) in these two cases appear to be the same. But the imaginative projects, as Williams called them, are plainly distinct. What does this difference amount to?

Immunity to error If I report to you that I am now imagining the White House, it seems absurd for you to respond, ‘ Well, how do you know that it’s not its replica somewhere in China that you are imagining? ’ How, that is, do we decide what exactly the content of my imagination is, and what the source of the authority (if there is any) that I exercise over it? 20

Berkeley Finally, can we imagine an unperceived tree?

IMAGINING AND SUPPOSING. Peacocke says that he’ll explore a *sui generis* mental state of imagination and contrasts it with ‘ supposing ’. Now this is a bit misleading. As Peacocke’s examples show, the sense of ‘ suppose ’ that he contrasts with imagination is really just a form of belief. I don’t see how anything is lost when I replace (3-1a) with (3-1b): 20

(3-1) a. The President supposes that there is some economic theory etc.
b. The President believes (falsely) that there is some economic theory etc.

There is, on the other hand, a sense of ‘ suppose ’ not at all alien to imagination. It usually inaugurates an imaginative project and comes at the start of its ‘ narration ’, as we saw in Williams:

(3-2) a. Suppose your father is Marcel Proust…
b. Suppose you assassinate the PM…
c. Suppose there is a tree on a desert island…

In such cases the subject is prompted to imagine a scene or a situation, though no specific image need to be part of the situation (recall the complexities in Williams). Peacocke will return to (a version of) this supposing *qua* imagining later on in the discussion of S-imagining.

TWO HYPOTHESES. The specific features of Peacocke’s type of imagination come to the surface in the following conceptual, and not a merely factual, claim: 21

General Hypothesis To imagine something is always at least to imagine, from the inside, being in some conscious state ϕ.

Imagining, as he says, involves imagining something about yourself—namely, imagining having a particular viewpoint in the situation imagined. It involves the ability to say, ‘ I am ϕ ’ specifying some elements of your viewpoint. In this sense, then, when Barenboim imagines playing a sonata, he likely imagines being in a *sui generis* artistic state accessible only to the pianists actually able to play the sonata. In doing so, he doesn’t have to imagine having a visual experience of hitting some keys or even any auditory experience. 22

Peacocke is concerned with a more specific class of internal states corresponding to seeing, hearing etc. We need to narrow down the General Hypothesis thus:

Experiential Hypothesis To imagine being ϕ in sensory imaginings is always at least to imagine from the inside an experience as of being ϕ.

Imagining, in other words, is necessarily imagining having an experience.

The Experiential Hypothesis explains why the same image of the suitcase may serve two very different imaginative projects. In both cases the experience we imagine is the same. The projects, however, are different, and this difference Peacocke labels as ‘ S-imagining ’. That is, the cat is S-imagined in one case and not in the other. 24 25

How different is S-imagining from mere supposing in (3-2)? When you S-imagine a suitcase, you still have to undergo an experience of imagination constrained by the Experiential Hypothesis. On the other hand, when I ask you to ‘ suppose ’, hence in one sense also to ‘ imagine ’, that your father is Marcel Proust, I wouldn't normally expect you to have a particular visual or other Proust-son-experience. S-imagining, then, is just an element involved in a larger imagining experience constrained by the Experiential Hypothesis. 26

IMMUNITY TO ERROR. It is a plain fact, though not a trivial one to explain, that we can be mistaken about what we are thinking about. Say, as a joke, you introduce Claudia Cardinale to me with a sentence, ‘ This is Monica Vitti ’, and I have never met or even seen either of them before. Suppose I later say to you:

(3-3) I think that Monica Vitti is pretty.

In reality, my thought can't be about Monica Vitti. When, for example, I later learn about your joke, I should say, ‘ Oh, turns out I was really thinking that Claudia Cardinale was pretty! ’ That is, properly described, my thought on that earlier occasion was:

(3-4) Claudia Cardinale is pretty.

This diagnosis is dubious: e.g., could I have a thought like (3-4) if I didn't know the name ‘ Claudia Cardinale ’? In any case, it seems that I can meaningfully be challenged, and that I did unwittingly commit some error in reporting my thought in (3-3).

Question 1. Think of more plausible alternatives to (3-4).

One explanation why we are happy to attribute an error to the speaker in (3-3) is that we are dealing here with propositional thoughts. We first associate thoughts with propositions. Then we say that a certain proposition P might not in principle be accessible to the speaker, so that when he reports thinking about P, he's got to be mistaken.

Suppose, on the other hand, I want to report to you my S-imaginings. Presumably I can't say: 27

(3-5) # I S-imagine that Monica Vitti is pretty.

Question 2. Explain the problem with (3-5). Can I say, ‘ I suppose now that Monica Vitti is pretty ’, in the sense of ‘ suppose ’ in (3-2)?

Instead, I say something like:

(3-6) I S-imagine how Monica Vitti smiled.

The content of my S-imagining is not affected by my error of misidentification. The name ‘ Monica Vitti ’ or the proposition/situation ‘ This woman is called “ Monica Vitti ” ’ are not part of my experiential state ϕ reported in (3-6). The ability to identify the woman I now S-imagine as Monica Vitti or as Claudia Cardinale, as bearing this name or another name, is not part of my S-imagining, either.

Question 3. On this view, is the statement (3-6) true or false?

Suppose, however, that Claudia Cardinale (i.e. *that woman* you introduced me to) didn't really smile—she was merely baring her teeth to exercise her facial muscles. Smiling, we have just assumed, is part of what I S-imagine, and now you might wonder: ‘ Do you S-imagine her smiling, or do you S-imagine her baring her teeth? ’ I declare that I S-imagine her smiling, but it seems as though I *may* be mistaken about what I really S-imagine.

Well, I think this is true. I see two ways to defend the epistemic immunity of S-imagining. The limited defence is that we are not dealing with a radical error, and that the imaginer is competent *ex ante* with the things he S-imagines. He is competent with recognising them, talking about them, and identifying them. Thus in Wittgenstein's original example of King's College there is no implication that the imaginer doesn't, in the real life, know what King's College is, can't distinguish it from other colleges etc. This defence is rather limited, because, having assumed that much, the question, ‘ How

do you know that you imagine King's College and not its replica?' receives the same answer as the question, 'How do you know that you refer to King's College and not its replica, when using the name "King's College"?' Wittgenstein says that the former question is silly, but it is only because we already have no doubts about the imaginer's ability to refer to King's College.

The other defence is, together with Peacocke, to not to make any far-reaching assumptions about the imaginer's competence and consider the situation of a radical misidentification. This defence should go, I think, through cutting the link between what is thought and what is said.

BERKELEY DEFENDED. The defence of the Master Argument is pretty much built into the Experiential Hypothesis. When I am asked to visually imagine (rather than merely suppose) an unperceived tree, I imagine a *tree*, not just some experience of seeing a tree. Saying this is needed, for example, to distinguish my imaginative project from a very project of having a visualisation of a tree planted in me by a neurosurgeon. These two imaginative projects are distinguished not by the imagery involved in them, but by what I S-imagine on the two occasions. On one occasion, I S-imagine that the neurosurgeon is tinkering with my brain. On the second occasion, I S-imagine the experience of a tree. This immediately entails the tree is S-imagined as being perceived.

As Peacocke notes, this defence does not entail idealism. The possibility of material objects may be established by some means other than the refutation of the Master Argument. At this point Williams might protest and say: 'You are working with a very particular notion of imagination. There is another notion of imagination, W-imagination, which may be used to refute the Master Argument.' The clause proposed for W-imagination is this:

(3-7) x W-imagines unperceived γ iff γ is an objective state of affairs presented as obtaining in the `imagined` world, and x S-imagines it unperceived.

But, Peacocke says (I think!), this involves a *petitio principii*: we already assume that γ may exist unperceived. The Berkeleian idealist is not compelled to grant this possibility.

THE MACHINE EXAMPLE. ...

OTHER MINDS. ...

A PARTING SHOT ON BERKELEY. I happen to think that, for all their brilliance and ingenuity, both Williams's attack and Peacocke's defence are massively out of focus, and that Berkeley should be uninterested in either of them. And that is because I think of Berkeley as a proto-Kant and a proto-quasi-semi Kuhn. Why and how, I'll try to explain in class (if I can!).

YSB