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Book Review

Imagination and its Pathologies edited by James Phillips and James Morley. MIT: MIT Press, 2003. ISBN 0 262 16214 8.

Reviewed by Vaughan Bell

John Lennon once said "Reality leaves a lot to the imagination". It is therefore unsurprising that some people perceive the world in ways that differ considerably from what society considers to be consensual reality. In some cases a person's reality can be so markedly different that it may become a source of deep personal distress or even becomes a source of concern to other people, usually because of their strange actions produced from within a seemingly private world. In the West, at least, such people are likely to be labelled as mentally ill, and their thoughts classified as pathological. If we agree with John Lennon's assessment of the role of the imagination in constructing reality (as many scholars of the mind have), imagination would seem to be a good candidate for the source of distressing departures from everyday reality.

Imagination and its Pathologies aims to tackle exactly this issue, and the editors have gathered psychologists, psychiatrists, psychoanalysts and philosophers to charge headlong into the fray. Accordingly, the book is in three parts, discussing philosophy, psychoanalysis and applied and clinical aspects of pathologies of the imagination.

The philosophical approach is generally phenomenological in the sense of favouring the view that the experience can be understood solely as it presents itself to our conscious selves, without the distortion of theories or assumptions from other disciplines. Although atypical of much of the opening section, I found the first chapter particularly illuminating. It analyses imagination from the perspective of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who argued that many philosophical dilemmas are derived from underlying problems with the use of language, making the issues more apparent than real. The initial chapter highlights the fact that we use the word 'imagine' to represent a whole host of experiences from creating internal sensory impressions ("I imagine feeling the sun against my face"), to expressing belief or disbelief in something ("I can't imagine that happening"). Of course there are many more examples, but it is worth remembering that we are not always talking about the same thing when we discuss imagination. Whilst Freudians may see imagination largely in terms of wish fulfilment fantasy, cognitive and brain scientists (such as

Stephen Kosslyn) have traditionally focused on visual imagery.

The other chapters in this section certainly have valuable insights, although I felt at times there were gaping holes where links to the relevant findings from experimental psychology should have been made. In my copy the margins from the chapter on *Imagination, Fantasy, Hallucination and Memory* have been heavily pencilled with pointers to the likes of Fredric Bartlett's famous 'War of the Ghosts' study and Richard Gregory's work on the influence of previous knowledge on perception. These provide good scientific evidence that support the chapter's main argument (that imagination, memory and perception influence each other) which was notable by its absence.

Before discussing the psychoanalytic part of the book, I must confess that little in Freudian explanation has ever helped me understand either the mind or mental illness. Cynics may wish to note that my mother is trained in Freudian analysis, forever damning my criticisms to be greeted with a knowing smile by anyone with an analytic background.

Despite this, I found the chapter on *The Creative Role of Fantasy in Adaptation* astonishingly refreshing, as it gives a careful classification and analysis of the sort of fantasies and day dreams that we variously indulge in, rely on or seek refuge in. The chapter demonstrates that fantasies and day dreams may have radical differences in both structure and content, depending on the use to which we put them. For example, take two sorts of fantasies which we may revisit throughout our lives. Some sexual fantasies may be static in structure and content (with the same scenario reused time and time as if it were a movie to be replayed), whereas an ego-boosting fantasy depicting great success or acclaim may change throughout a person's life depending on what is currently valued as worthy of acclaim and how that might be rewarded. The link between the everyday utility and common themes of such fantasies and the recurring themes found in psychotic delusions seems like an exciting extension of this analysis.

Unfortunately, I can't be quite as enthusiastic about the rest of the section as I found the experience a little like swimming through treacle. I'm hoping this was due to my inexperience in this area, and perhaps those familiar with the psychoanalytic theories being debated (particularly it seemed *Black Sun*, a book by Julia Kristeva) might find more of interest.

I was much more comfortable with the final section, particularly the biographies of Saint Anthony and Vaslav Nijinsky, the famous ballet dancer who descended into madness. The chapter on St Anthony focuses on an analysis of whether he was mentally ill, as is usual in studies of many important religious figures who have had intensely unusual experiences. Interestingly, and unusually for this sort of writing, the conclusion is that he was not. The chapter on Nijinsky was especially compelling, and was for me, the highlight of the book. What particularly struck me was the retelling of his final performance in which the dancer, known for his remarkable fluidity, spent the entire performance immobile, centre stage, staring at the audience whilst the music played on. Nijinksy's intent to communicate his growing alienation could not have been more articulately expressed. This not only provides some fascinating insights into Nijinsky's life but also provides a lucid example of the Hegel's dialectic (the process by which two opposing processes synthesise into a final conclusion) as it might be applied to mental illness and artistic expression.

Despite some obvious gems, *Imagination and its Pathologies* suffers a little from the omission of some important results from experimental psychology which could have provided an much needed dimension. Whilst I might disagree with his conclusions, the British philosopher Gregory Currie (2000) manages to combine his own analysis with recent research on psychology and neuroscience of mental illness in an attempt to understand how delusion and imagination might be linked. Although I

was pleased that I learned much of interest about how phenomenology can inform the understanding of mental illness, I felt a little short changed that there was not more of a balance between phenomenology and the sort of analysis of which Currie would approve.

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Reference

Currie, G. (2000) Imagination, delusion and hallucination. *Mind and Language*, 15, 168-183.