

## Research Statement

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In Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the titular character humorously mistakes a windmill for a giant. In spite of his friend Sancho's objections, he attacks the windmill-as-giant and ends up being thrown from his steed. He rationalizes his failure by contending that the giant must have been magicked away by one of his enemies at just the right moment.

Don Quixote's mental quirks frequently result in harm to both himself and his enemies and allies alike. Cervantes' perpetually befuddled hero might have served as an allegory for the faults and misbehaviors of his compatriots. In my research I am interested in exploring the features of our minds that make us full of epistemic potential just as we are prone to error, and how these features affect our ability to access available evidence as well as to behave respectfully toward our fellow humans. In short, I am interested in the epistemology of mind and how it might more broadly intersect with value theory, including aesthetics and political philosophy.

**In my dissertation, *What Imagination Teaches***, I focus on the positive epistemic powers of our imaginations. Imagination, as fantasy or hallucination, often deals in fictions; but in this dissertation I describe how it can deal in truths. Imaginings are central to our human cognitive lives: as I argue, they are unique ways of acquiring knowledge, distinct from other cognitive states, processes, and faculties, and form their own unique class of mental entities. These and other features distinguish imaginings as a central way in which we can assess information for decision-making and other tasks essential to daily life.

In "The Unique Utility of Imagination," I argue imaginings can help us to acquire knowledge of everyday truths regarding what does, could, or would have happened. I begin by refuting a *pessimistic* argument, which maintains that if imaginings remain undisciplined, they are useless for knowledge acquisition; while, if they are restricted by what we already know, then it is what we already know rather than what we imagine which will be responsible for any knowledge gained. I reject a concessive response which has it that when imaginings give us knowledge it is because they are covert inferences. I provide what I take to be a better, more optimistic alternative: imaginings make use of an essentially non-inferential process, a *combinatorial* process, that is unique to imaginings and that can be *guided* by what we know without being exhausted by it. The combinatorial process serves to *investigate* possibilities our prior knowledge leaves open. Disciplined imaginings thus help us to acquire knowledge that otherwise may have been beyond our reach.

In "The Place and Unity of Imaginings," I argue that imaginings are a unified set of mental entities, none of which can be reduced to some special operation of memory, perception, or inferential reasoning. One problem for my view is that imagination is supposed to explain a number of quite dissimilar capacities, such as predicting others' mental states, engaging in fiction, playing pretend, and finding out what is possible. I show that imaginings can all be unified by a simple family resemblance theory. Three traits, all based on basic epistemic

concepts like *truth-orientation*, *etiology*, and *method*, can pick out forms of imagining: (1) imaginings need not aim at truth, (2) imaginings originate in states of the cognizer or actor rather than states of the world, and (3) imaginings often employ combinatorial processes. These epistemic concepts justify the taxonomic separation of imaginative states and imagining processes from other mental states and mental processes. I also show how these features are sufficient to explain all of the diverse ways we characterize and make use of distinct imaginative capacities.

In “Imagination and Transformative Experience,” I turn to practical uses of imagination. L. A. Paul rightly supposes that imagination is a crucial way to acquire knowledge for use in decision-making. However, she maintains that we cannot imagine being versions of ourselves with significantly different beliefs and significantly different preferences. This leads her to conclude that there are no ways to make rational decisions about whether or not to become transformed versions of ourselves because we have no ways to *evaluate* the experiences of our transformed self. I argue, against Paul, that we in fact *are* able to imagine such transformed versions of ourselves: it only *seems* to us that we cannot because we are prone to making three distinct kinds of avoidable mistakes when we imagine being different than we are. The mistakes we make are due to conquerable features of our cognitive architecture, our focus on *components* of experiences that are not total determiners of their value, and, most importantly, the vice of *epistemic laziness*. I show how each of these mistakes can be avoided by careful use of imagination. By overcoming these flaws we can make use of imaginings to turn testimony about aesthetic or moral value into information that we can freely use without fear of inauthenticity.

**In my future research**, I want to forge into other areas which connect with the epistemology of imagination, as well as delve into the political implications of our unique capacity to imagine. I am particularly interested in connecting my work to work in social justice exploring unique and non-neurotypical cognition and how it has been classified, diagnosed, and treated as disorder.

### **1. Misimagination and the Politics of Difference**

I wish to apply my theory of imaginative mistakes to the problem of imagining *others*. As Adam Morton asks: what is it to imagine someone correctly? I believe I can offer up some criteria for accurate imaginings of others that rival Morton’s own. I wish to argue that my criteria better explain our intuitions about our own reliability and unreliability in imagining others accurately. I would also like to apply my theory to contemporary political issues involving what Miranda Fricker calls *epistemic injustice*: when people are wronged in their capacity as knowers, as testifiers and individuals with lived experiences. How does our ability or inability to imagine others accurately affect our capacity to grasp their epistemic perspective, in particular the testimony of members of marginalized groups? If it we cannot accurately imagine others, I argue, we also cannot *uptake* the testimony of others regarding their own experiences. What gets in the way and what helps us to accurately imagine others? Relatedly, we may ask: how could imagination ameliorate, or misimagination aggravate, the problem of speaking for others? Being

too confident might lead us perpetuate paternalism and epistemic injustices. However, being too humble about our imaginative capacities could also have ill effects, leading us to inaction and even to guilt by omission: for example, we can and should imagine the experiences of persons with disabilities when designing public spaces. I want to show that lessons from the pragmatics of unjust social discourse and presupposition-blocking can be applied to issues involving misimagination.

## 2. Knowing Value Through Testimony

When a person tells you, “There is a dog outside,” you are justified in believing what they say. You could say that you *come to know* that there is a dog outside. However, were a person to tell you, “The sweet potato ravioli at the Trattoria is delectable,” you would not seem to acquire knowledge that the sweet potato ravioli at the Trattoria is delectable. On the contrary, if you have not tried the ravioli at the Trattoria, it seems that the statement has provided you very little, if any, justification for asserting that it is delectable.<sup>1</sup> There are often thought to be parallel problems for assertions of moral worth or moral value. Call this the *problem of testimony*. At its worst, the problem of testimony predicts that *no* kind of testimony actually conveys justification. At its best, the problem of testimony seems to imply that there are severe epistemic divisions between distinct kinds of testimony.

I want to argue that there *is* a way to use testimony of aesthetic properties, and perhaps of moral properties, to gain defeasible justification for believing their contents. First I want to argue for the claim that there are distinctive ways of attaining knowledge of value. For instance, our *capacity for imagination* is one of the best ways and only ways available by which we can gain knowledge of aesthetic properties. This seems to play well with Wollheim’s claim that judgments of aesthetic value must be based on first-hand experience of the object. I then wish to argue that we can rely on imagination to bridge the gap in justification between testimony of value properties and belief in that testimony. I want to then expand the theory to accommodate *other* forms of testimony: I predict that, in fact, there are justificatory gaps across all cases of testimony, and that some imagination-like cognitive process is required to bridge each of these gaps. I also wish to explain why the gaps are not obvious in cases of non-value-laden testimony.

## 3. Neurotypicality and Disorder

Imaginings can sometimes be atypical: they can be hallucinations or illusions. The persons who undergo these imaginings are often themselves classes as atypical. Who gets to be normal? Standard scientific methodology often requires an experimenter to define, at minimum, one variable to test: testing this variable typically calls for the experimenter to distinguish between a *control group*, to which the variable does not apply, and an *experimental group*, which exhibits or is subjected to the relevant variable. When science regards human subjects, it becomes clear

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<sup>1</sup> Kant might have been the source of the contemporary controversy: “[T]hat a thing has pleased others could never serve as the basis for an aesthetical judgment” (from *The Critique of Pure Judgment*)

that there can be no value-free classification. Experimental choices can have significant sociopolitical consequences.

I want to examine the ethics of diagnosis of neurological and psychiatric disorders. A number of disorders have been revealed, over time, to be social constructions, and this ought to have direct implications for diagnostic practice. For example, *hysteria* was invented to describe and classify once socially undesirable behaviors in women. There are many contemporary diagnoses which should also come under scrutiny. For example, conduct disorders are much more commonly diagnosed in black urban youth. Given that people tend to *essentialize* disorders, to assume that they inhere *in the patient* rather than that they are caused by the patient's environment, these diagnoses can be hugely problematic: Nassir Ghaemi discusses the particular effects of the bio-psycho-social model of mental illness. Some theorists, like Thomas Szasz, have gone so far as to reject mental illness as a 'myth'. Many psychologists and some philosophers have relied on particular criteria, such as Jerome Wakefield's 'harmfulness' criterion, to maintain realism about mental illness. I want to apply Sally Haslanger's realist ameliorative theory of social kinds to the problem of categorizing mental illness.

Questions about diagnosis naturally engender questions regarding the ethics of treatment. For example, sometimes children diagnosed with mental illness acquire more acute impairments as a result of receiving premature pharmacological treatment. Relatedly, I want to examine the use of diagnoses and classifications in discussions of epistemic skill, emotional intelligence, moral judgment, and social impairment.