

Conceiving and Imagining

Some Examples

By Jody Azzouni

I. Descartes' distinction

THERE IS A PHENOMENOLOGICALLY-INTERESTING DISTINCTION BETWEEN WHAT can be imagined and what can only be conceived as possible but not imagined. The distinction is clearly articulated in two places in Descartes' *Meditations*. The first appearance is during his famous discussion of the piece of wax in Meditation Two. He writes there (Descartes, 21):

Perhaps the wax was what I now think it is: namely that it really never was the sweetness of the honey or the fragrance of the flowers, not this whiteness, not a figure, not a sound, but a body which a little earlier manifested itself to me in these ways, and now does so in other ways. But just what precisely is this thing which I imagine thus? Let us direct our attention to this and see what remains after we have removed everything which does not belong to the wax: only that it is something extended, flexible, and subject to change. What is this flexible and mutable thing? Is it not the fact that I imagine that this wax can change from a round to a square shape, or from the latter to a rectangular shape? Not at all: for I comprehend that the wax is capable of innumerable changes, yet I cannot survey these innumerable changes by imagining them. Therefore, this comprehension is not accomplished by the faculty of imagination. ... It remains then for me to concede that I in no way imagine what this wax is, but perceive it by the mind only.

Later, at the beginning of Meditation Six, Descartes revisits this distinction between what's accomplished by the faculty of imagination and what's perceived by the mind only, which he now describes as a distinction between imagination and pure intellection. He writes (Descartes, 45–46):

So, for example, when I imagine a triangle, I not only understand that it is a figure bounded by three lines, but at the same time I also intuit by my powers of discernment these three lines as present—this is what I call “imagining.” But if I want to think about a chiliagon, I certainly understand just as well that it is a figure consisting of a thousand sides, and that a triangle is a figure consisting of three lines; but I do not imagine those thousand sides in the same way, that is, I do not intuit them as being present. Albeit that when I think of a chiliagon I

*Jody Azzouni is a professor of philosophy at Tufts University. He focuses primarily on the philosophy of mathematics and philosophy of science, as well as logic, philosophy of logic, and philosophy of language. Author of both *Deflating Existential Commitment: A Case for Nominalism* and *Tracking Reason: Proof, Consequence, and Truth*, Azzouni is a prominent voice in the dialogue about whether mathematical objects exist. Azzouni is a poet and also writes fiction.*

may perchance represent to myself some figure confusedly—because whenever I think about something corporeal, I always, out of force of habit, imagine something—nevertheless it is evident that it is not a chiliagon. This is so because it is not really different from the figure I would represent to myself if I were to think of a myriagon or any other figure with a large number of sides.

Typically—for a philosopher, I mean—Descartes attempts to parlay this straightforward phenomenological distinction into a substantial metaphysical difference between distinct faculties of mind. The ultimate suggestion, in Meditation Six, is that imagination isn't essential to minds, although intellection is.

My aims in this paper are far less ambitious—metaphysically speaking. Although I do (elsewhere) have aspirations to establish major claims in metaphysics, I don't intend to try to establish them here. I want, instead, only to provide examples of the conceivable that go beyond what we can imagine, but ones that are quite different from Descartes' examples. The examples I give arise from our experience of language and our experience of objects. The ways that the distinction between what we can conceive and what we can imagine plays out in our experience of language and objects shows those experiences to be strikingly layered in ways that (I claim) haven't been clearly seen before.

Before turning to the presentation of my examples, however, notice that Descartes' examples all turn on the imagination being finitary in its range in a way that he denies that intellection is. We can imagine a square, a pentagon, a hexagon, a heptagon—but at a certain point imagination fails us. We can no longer successfully imagine distinct successive polygons. The point that Descartes makes about the wax is similar: the changes that we recognize (by intellection) that the extension of a piece of wax is capable of are so “innumerable” that we cannot imaginatively survey them, although we have no problem conceiving their possibility.

This distinction, as Descartes draws it, is surely an important one, especially in the philosophy of mathematics, and especially in relation to, say, our conceptions of infinity. For it can be said (perhaps correctly) that we can only imagine the potential infinity that intuitionistic mathematicians allow us, and not the actual infinities of classical set theory, which can only be conceived. But the distinction between what we can conceive as possible and what we can imagine manifests itself in interesting kinds of cases that don't have anything obviously to do with the fact that the imagination in some sense is exhausted before our ability to conceive possibilities is.

II. Imagining and conceiving differences in meaning: A first set of examples

My first set of examples are ones that arise during our experience of the meaningfulness of language vehicles. By “language vehicles” I primarily mean sentences on a page that we read and understand as well as the verbal utterances we hear or utter. There are other sorts of experiences we have that also exhibit the division between what we can imagine and what we can only conceive, experiences for example, of patterns of clouds looking (say) like rows of camels, but I won't be saying much about these cases here.

Let's begin this way. Wittgenstein (1953, 140e, paragraph 510, italics in the original) famously writes: “Make the following experiment: *say* ‘It's cold here’

and *mean* 'It's warm here'. Can you do it?—And what are you doing as you do it? And is there only one way of doing it?"

What's interesting about this example is that, phenomenologically, how we *can* do it is quite similar to how we *can* speed up our heart rate. We can't speed up our heart rate "directly" by simply intending to do so, the way we can, say, move our arms. Similarly, in the case of perceived meaningful expressions—like the one Wittgenstein mentions—what we *can't do* is systematically reinterpret those expressions, ours or others, as *saying* "It's warm here." We can't, that is, hear or say "It's cold here," and spontaneously *understand it* as, or *experience it* as, meaning "It's warm here." Thus the experience of hearing "It's cold here," with its (straightforward) meaning is so automatic in its effects that it's seriously misleading to describe the experience as giving an "interpretation" to an expression, as many philosophers are tempted to do.

What we *are* capable of, and what we perceive ourselves as capable of, is *using* the sentence, despite our involuntary perception of its fixed meaning, to express instead "It's warm here"—by means of sarcasm (for example). Indeed, there are *lots* of ways to pull off what Wittgenstein is asking of us; the strategies for pulling it off successfully are quite open-ended. This is, no doubt, one of the points Wittgenstein intends to imply. None of these methods, however, leads to a phenomenological re-experiencing of the understanding of the sentence as having a different meaning, either by the speaker or by the hearer.

The intrinsic "attachment" of the meaning of a sentence to that sentence—by a process of our understanding it in a context of utterance—is *involuntary* in the most natural sense of the word: we have no choice about the matter. An easy way to verify this is to listen to someone speaking your native language—someone you can understand—while trying to hear the words as mere noise. It's impossible. It *is* possible to screen that someone out *altogether*—to "background" the utterances, as it were. But it's *not* possible to attend to the sound of a person's speech (in a language you're native to) yet to hear it as mere noise: to deliberately and successfully fail to understand the meanings of the familiar sentences uttered.

We are all perfectly aware, however, that *it's possible* to experience the sounds "It's cold here," without the experience of its meaning that native speakers involuntarily have. We know that it's possible for that sequence of sounds to have no meaning at all in another language. We recognize, similarly, that it's possible that English could have been different, that it could have been that the phrase "It's cold here," had as its meaning instead of what it means for us, precisely the meaning, "It's warm here."

Nevertheless, we can't *imagine* this. I mean, that is, that we can't imagine hearing the sounds "It's cold here" and nevertheless experience it as meaningless or as meaning "It's warm here." We cannot, in Descartes' phrase "intuit ... as present" the experience of the meaninglessness of "It's cold here," or of it having a different meaning; we can't imaginatively walk through the experience "in real time" the way we might imagine walking down a hallway we are familiar with. Therefore: to conceive that a kind of experience is possible isn't necessarily to have access to that experience in the sense of it being one that we can *imagine* ourselves having.

Is it fair to describe our inability, vis-à-vis “It’s cold here,” to *imagine* it possessing the meaning “It’s warm here” as a limitation of imagination? After all, it’s not unnatural to speak this way: “I can certainly imagine someone being unable to understand the phrase ‘It’s cold here’ because their language isn’t English.” Yes, it’s true that we speak this way. But this just shows that “imagine,” like most (or all) ordinary words, is used in a very wide way that isn’t particularly illuminating if we take it seriously. What I’m describing is a genuine difference in the phenomenology of experience. To the extent that this genuine difference isn’t captured by how we ordinarily use words like “imagine” or “conceive,” to that same extent, my use of these words can be seen as a refinement or an adaptation of ordinary language for philosophical purposes. Since there is no reason to think that the ordinary use of these words—as they occur in all contexts—is meant to track the distinction I’m after, this refinement of the meaning of these words is innocuous.

III. Imagining and conceiving differences in meaning: Additional examples

That we cannot imagine certain possibilities for experiences of meaningful language, although we can, however, easily conceive of them, leads to some odd effects. It gives rise to certain kinds of *meaning illusions*. Here’s an example. Consider a situation in which an ant inadvertently traces the following (scripted) phrase in the sand: IT’S SO COLD HERE. Even if we know that an *ant* is involved, that there is no secret controlling of said ant by intelligent English-speaking extraterrestrial aliens having fun with us—that is, even if we are absolutely sure that the resulting shape is due only to a monstrously improbable event—we nevertheless have no choice about experiencing the shape as meaningful words. In this respect our experience of understanding an expression is *exactly like* our experience of various visual illusions that resist inroads from our knowledge: for example, the various versions of the Müller-Lyer illusion that persist even if we know the lines are the same size.¹

It’s not unreasonable to think that a scripted “IT’S SO COLD HERE” is *not* meaningful unless it’s produced in the appropriate ways—unless, for example, it’s produced by someone who knows how to use language and is producing the inscription under normal circumstances, not because of (for example) strangely organized, but otherwise involuntary, muscle spasms. This is what motivates calling our involuntary experience of such a scripted item, even in the full knowledge that it has not been produced under appropriate circumstances, a *meaning illusion*.

It’s striking that such meaning-illusion experiences are, if anything, even more involuntary if the right sorts of sounds are involved. Should an avalanche—equally improbably—generate the clear articulation of what sounds like words shouted by a human voice full of concern, I’M COMING; PLEASE WATCH OUT; I’M COMING; PLEASE WATCH OUT, even with full knowledge of the source of these sounds, it’s impossible not to hear them as meaningful—and, indeed, as a warning!

These meaning illusions often (although not invariably) induce the impression that a mind *must be* behind the production of the items in question—that someone must have intentionally done this. This is simply because, typically, these items have such a low probability of occurring by sheer accident. Were

accidental occurrences of these scripted items much more common, we would still experience the meaning illusions but we would not experience the accompanying thought that someone must have done this *deliberately*.

Now, despite the fact that our imaginative faculties are limited in such a way as to induce these meaning illusions, as I mentioned in the last section, we (or most of us, anyway) nevertheless recognize that it's possible for someone *not* to have the involuntary meaning experiences that native speakers of English have. For someone who doesn't speak or understand English, the experience of these scripted items will be similar to my experience of Arabic writing. Arabic writing looks purely like pictorial designs to me: I sense no meaning in it whatsoever.

A natural question is this. What is the source of our recognition of this possibility that we so clearly conceive? It might be suggested to be this. Our imaginative limitations are definitely phenomenologically present to us; we often run up against them because of imaginative failures that we recognize ourselves to have. What's conceivable being broader than what we can imagine, nevertheless, seems to be so in the merely factual sense that we *know*—from experience—that there are possibilities that go beyond our imagination. In particular, it might be thought that we use a form of analogy. Pretty much all of us, for example, have had the experience of hearing a foreign language being spoken apparently at great speed and finding ourselves unable to even distinguish where the words begin and leave off. Similarly (as I mentioned with Arabic writing), we have all seen writing with which we are unfamiliar—with an alphabet with which we are unfamiliar—and so we all have experienced such writing as completely meaningless. So, we naturally think, someone could be in exactly the same position with the—to us—transparently meaningful phrase, "It's cold here." In other words, what's conceivable trades on what we recognize as possible, and what we recognize as possible—at least in this case—trades on what we know to actually be the case.

If right, this allows—at least in principle—sufficiently inexperienced people to think that only one language is possible (their own) and for them to think that meanings *really are* intrinsically wedded to particular sounds. Such people would very naturally experience language the way Putnam (1981, 3) describes some "primitive people" as experiencing language:

Some primitive people believe that some representations (in particular, *names*) have a necessary connection with their bearers; that to know the 'true name' of someone or something gives one power over it. This power comes from the *magical connection* between the name and the bearer of the name; once one realizes that a name *only* has a contextual, contingent, conventional connection with its bearer, it is hard to see why knowledge of the name should have any mystical significance.

I want to suggest, however, that this hypothesis overlooks an important aspect of the actual experience of language vehicles, one that allows someone who is sufficiently aware of his or her own experience of language to see that meaning is a projection of ours onto something that's purely physical. In other words, built into the experience of meaningful language is that meaning is a projection onto something else. I turn to establishing this in the next section.

IV. *Experiencing the functionality of objects*

Let's start the discussion with forks. The striking point about our experience of forks, and of *many* artifacts, actually—cars, trains, tools, furniture, clothing, and so on—is that we don't merely perceive them (involuntarily) as distinct objects, we also involuntarily perceive them as particular objects with such and such particular *functional properties*. Our experience of these objects, furthermore, often comes with an (also involuntary) experience of their having certain parts that are relevant to those functional properties. For example, the fork has prongs, a handle, the car has wheels, a windshield, a tailpipe, and so on.

What's notable about these experiences of forks and cars, and other artifacts, is that we also recognize that these functional properties are projections onto the objects in question. We recognize that someone who has never seen forks before (or cars or pianos, and so on) fails to perceive these functional properties. We experience a fork, for example, with all its functional properties, *while seeing it at the same time* as a mere physical object. It's not that our seeing something embodied (as it were) in its functional role as a fork obliterates our experience of it as a physical object. This is what allows us to recognize that someone can see that a fork is a physical object but fail to perceive that it's a *fork*—as opposed to finding that possibility entirely bewildering. The difference of this experience from our experience of the physical properties of a fork is striking. Were we told that someone who perceived the fork nevertheless couldn't see its color (even when staring carefully at the fork) or couldn't feel its metallic hardness, even after touching it carefully, we would think something was wrong with that person—with how his senses work. But this isn't true if we're told that someone doesn't recognize an object is a fork. (That he doesn't see that thing *as a fork*).

It's important to stress that this isn't something we merely know (or have inferred) from our interaction with all those people who haven't had the joy of forks in their lives: that we know this only on the discovered empirical grounds that there are people who haven't yet heard about the fork. Rather, we can just *see* why someone might perceive certain objects: forks, cars, pianos, and not see (not "know" is how we would put it) that they are forks, cars, or pianos. We can see the difference between the physical properties of these things, and their functional properties, ones that we nevertheless involuntarily see. This is why everyone realizes that folk from the Middle Ages would simply be put irritatedly out-of-sorts if they suddenly came upon a car parked in the brush near their usual path to the local well. They wouldn't know what it was. To involuntarily experience an object as a fork, as a car, or as a piano, therefore, is for us to nevertheless experience the objects in question as ones that we also experience as ones that needn't be seen this way.

I used the phrase "mere physical object," and I stressed that we recognize that the *forkness* of the fork (to adopt a particularly ugly bit of nomenclature) is independent of the object's physical properties (although there is a sense in which something wouldn't be a fork—or a *successful* fork, anyway—if it didn't have some of the physical properties that it has, its shape in particular). Notice, however, that this talk of "physical properties" or of "mere physical objects" isn't a scientific one, and it isn't meant to be. In particular, there is no allusion to the science of physics, although (of course), historically, physics originally arose pointedly as the study

of mere physical objects. The notion of “physical properties” — and how they’re experienced as distinct from the functional properties an object can nevertheless also be involuntarily experienced to have — is something that nonscientists (and *pre*-scientists) are entirely aware of. No one has to be trained in a particular jargon (or, more generally, in the sciences) to understand any of this.

How is this possible? That is, what is it about *perception* that makes this possible? One way to understand what’s behind this bit of phenomenology is to recognize that we don’t involuntarily experience the functional properties of a fork, a car, or a piano in the same way that we experience the other properties of those objects. Extremely valuable for getting a grip on the nature of this kind of perception is the notion of a “cognitive experience.” Included in our experiences of objects are the perceptions of aspects of objects that aren’t among (and are experienced as not among) the “sensory qualities” those objects possess. But, as noted, our experience of physicality goes far beyond our experience of “sensory feels,” and what we *experience* is the disconnect between the functional properties of objects that we involuntarily perceive and the physical properties of those objects that we also involuntarily experience: we see that the *forkness* of the fork is something over and above its mere physical properties. A fork’s mere physical properties make it suitable (or perhaps more suitable) to be a fork; but we know that none of this will be seen by anyone who hasn’t been brought up among forks. Not involuntarily experiencing the forkness of forks isn’t a matter of lacking a piece of knowledge. Someone who quite late in adulthood comes to learn about forks needn’t ever involuntarily and immediately experience an object as a fork the way those of us who have been brought up among forks will.

(A personal confession: I don’t experience chopsticks the way I experience forks; I see chopsticks simply as sticks — wooden sticks, mostly — sometimes quite nicely ornamented wooden sticks. I always recognize these, after a moment, to be “chopsticks.” This is especially the case when I run across chopsticks, as I occasionally do, outside a restaurant.)

Although it’s a matter of upbringing what *particular* tools we recognize to be the particular tools that they are, and more generally, what particular artifacts we recognize to be the particular artifacts that they are, the capacity to *see* the functional properties of objects (to have this kind of cognitive experience) is surely species-specific: not even shared, I suspect, with those species of animal — certain primates, certain birds — that have come upon (a few) methods of tool-making.

An extremely dramatic example of this is our perception of meaningful language artifacts that was discussed in sections 2 and 3 — words, sentences, and so on. As I indicated there, our experience of the meanings of words and sentences — for native speakers — is involuntary and immediate in the same way our experience of tools is. And, here too, the experience isn’t one that need be shared by those who learn that language later in adulthood.

One last point about this particular kind of cognitive experience. There is a sense in which a person could describe the forkness of the fork as “subjective.” To do this is to acknowledge recognition of the projective nature of this experience — in contrast to the experience of the physical properties of an object. It might be thought that we ordinarily think something similar about physical properties as well: it doesn’t take all that much work to impress philosophical beginners

with the apparent “subjectivity” of colors and shapes by drawing their attention to facts about perspective (circular coins that “look elliptical”) or to facts about color-contrast illusions, or even less subtly, with illustrations of how colors change when lights are dimmed.

Notice, though, the contrast between how the “subjectivity” of perceived shapes or colors is established, and instead how the “subjectivity” of the functional properties of tools or words is recognized. In the former case, the result *really can* be described as an empirical discovery. Often, when the phenomenon in question is unfamiliar, it’s surprising—as color-contrast illusions still are to those who don’t work with color-graphic programs, Adobe Illustrator, for example. Even simple phenomena need to be exhibited to remind people how colors shift under these circumstances, for example the effect on colors by dimming lights or by changing the spectrum of the light in a room. The phenomena aren’t naturally kept in mind otherwise because they’re not built into our *experience* of colors. That is, how color-appearances depend on ambient light isn’t extractable from our sheer experience of colors. And in other cases, as with coins that (from certain angles) are supposed to look elliptical, we even have to be convinced that the coin “looks elliptical” — because (let’s be honest) it really *doesn’t*.

Our experience of functionality and, in particular, our experience of how we impose functionality on what are otherwise perceived to be mere physical objects, by contrast, is completely obvious. Even a small child will understand if we say to her: *He doesn’t know what a fork is; that’s why he’s backing away from it so fearfully*. There is a great experiential divide between the cases where we establish the so-called subjectivity of what we see on the basis of inference (and, sometimes, on the basis of rather subtle, and often fallacious) argument, and those cases where we simply experience the phenomenon in action.

So let me summarize. All of us have a pre-theoretical notion of what I’ll call “the purely physical” that arises directly from our experience of objects. By pre-theoretical, I mean not only pre-scientific but pre-philosophical. In particular, there is a well-known distinction between primary and secondary qualities that dates at least back to Locke, and that’s established in the way I’ve been describing the “subjectivity” of colors to be established. The view takes those properties of an object that are derived from its mass, for example, impenetrability and shape, to be primary qualities that really inhere in the object in question. Color, by contrast, is taken to be a secondary quality, not a property of the object itself but at best a “power” of it. This distinction has no echo in the phenomenology of perception, in our experience of the physical properties of objects. On the basis of our experience of the physicality of objects, we recognize (or can recognize) that meanings and functionality are projections onto objects even though our experience of both meanings and functionality is involuntary. We must instead, as I’ve indicated, make empirical experiments of various sorts to show the same thing about colors. Notice, finally, that the involuntary imposition of meaning on physical objects doesn’t obliterate our ability to see the physical properties of those objects or obliterate our knowledge that our experience of understanding those physical objects (inscriptions, sounds) as meaningful is *imposed* on them. (Although, it must be said, it does seem to affect our ability to remember the physical qualities of an object. There are studies that show it’s easier for us to

remember the functional properties of objects—that something is a pen, for example—than it is to remember its physical qualities, its exact shape, say, or even its color).

In any case, the experience of functionality nicely illustrates the distinction I'm drawing between what we can imagine and what we can only conceive of. We can easily conceive that someone could fail to experience the functionality of a fork, fail—that is—to recognize that something is a fork. And we can do this on the basis of our recognition that someone can experience the physical properties of an object without experiencing its functional properties. That is, we can realize this because during our experience of a fork, say, we *see* that its perceived function isn't intrinsically connected to its perceived physical qualities. Nevertheless, due to the involuntary experience of whatever functionality we experience vis-à-vis an object, we can't *imagine* someone not, for example, experiencing a fork *as* a fork. (Those of us familiar with forks cannot put ourselves in someone else's "shoes" who is looking at a fork but not experiencing it as a fork).

V. *Experiencing the boundaries of objects as projections*

Things are about to get a little weird. (Literally.) What I want to establish in this section is the projective nature of our experience of the boundaries of objects. By "our experience of the boundaries of objects," I mean, where objects are perceived to begin and leave off. For example, we experience a chair as beginning and ending in space in relatively definitive ways. So too, we experience a tree as distinct in its location, and separated from, the ground it's rooted in. Similarly for rivers, their banks, and the surrounding landscape. Or tools and toys. As well as the bodies of people or animals, for example, a cat. The ways that objects move often cue us (psychologically, but without our explicit awareness) as to where we will take their boundaries to be; but we can (and do) experience stationary items, large boulders for example, as definitively beginning and ending in space, and as distinct from the landscape surrounding them. My claim, to be established in this section, is that we can even recognize that our own particular experiences of where objects begin and leave off are experiences of object boundaries that we can conceive (but not imagine) someone not having.

One thing that makes it harder to get a phenomenological grip on the projective nature of the boundaries of objects than it is to grasp the projective nature of functionality is that—even though perceived functionality is *itself* an important contextual factor influencing where we see the boundaries of objects to begin and end—the contextual factors influencing object-boundaries, for the most part, aren't experienced as doing this.² Nevertheless, a lot of examples show, about the parts that we experience artifacts to have, that among the cues that induce the perception of the boundaries of objects or parts of objects are (cognitive, but involuntary) perceptions of the functional roles of those objects. The same is true of our own body parts: we distinguish hands functionally from arms, even though there is no obvious border between a hand and the rest of the arm. There being an absence of (relatively) clear visual borders isn't true about the eyes in relation to the rest of the face—there are visual (and other property) differences between the eyes and the rest of the face that we use to recognize

where one begins and the other ends. But this isn't true of the cheeks or the chin, obviously. Or the waist, for that matter.

But apart from this, the projective nature of the perceived boundaries of objects is nevertheless easily recognized by means of thought experiments about object-boundary experiences that *everyone* can recognize (with a little thought) to be possible ones. We can *easily* conceive what it would be like for people to experience the boundaries of objects differently from how we actually experience them—although simultaneously (it has to be stressed), we nevertheless can't make ourselves *actually see* things that way. That is, in the way I'm using "imagine" and "conceive" in this paper, we can't *imagine* it.

Consider the following thought experiment. Imagine (this is the part you *can* imagine) that you're sitting peacefully in your garden at dusk, luxuriating among all the plants that you own. (This is something that I've been told that people who own gardens often enjoy doing in the evenings). But *this* particular evening, you experience something like a peculiar hallucination. (I'll indicate in a moment why what I'm about to describe isn't *really* an hallucination). Suddenly, *all the object boundaries you normally experience are gone*; you're not experiencing the presence of boundaries between objects anymore. (*Am I having a stroke?* you mutter *sotto voce*). And later, when you—stutteringly—try to explain what this experience was like to someone else, you say things like: "I was experiencing everything as *One*." Or you might even say (as if you've had some kind of mystical insight): "Everything is one." (You could find yourself adding, in shock: "Including *me*, by the way.") And indeed, in some circles anyway, it would be common to classify this as a kind of mystical experience of the genuine metaphysical *oneness* of everything.

In trying to describe this experience, how you now see everything around you, you might say: "It's sort of like everything is water now." You might also say: "Everything that I used to see as distinct objects I now only see as so many patterns in the One." ("*Which is so cool,*" you might add.)

But this isn't quite right as a description of this possible experience because in trying to convey how your experience has changed, how everything looks to you now, you're not mentioning the important ways in which *everything continues to look exactly the same*. Because, after all, it isn't that everything *really* looks like water now; it isn't like everything you're seeing is kind of undulating now in that watery way that you've experienced in the past (patterns of dye, for example, permeating through a liquid). The latter experience *isn't* one of the vanishing of object-experiences; it's instead an experience of something else that we'd describe as something only "looking like" objects, in the sense that patterns in sand sometimes "remind us of objects." The same is true of formations of clouds that occasionally "look like" camels or faces (or whatever clouds look like when they look like objects to people), or patterns in landscapes, and so on. And as I'm describing this possible experience, the perception of depth is entirely untouched as well: it's not that everything has been strangely *flattened*. That's a different possible experience we can imagine people having too—but it's not the one I'm describing here.

That's why—above—I wrote parenthetically that the garden-experiences I was momentarily going to describe aren't really hallucinations. These experiences aren't ones of things that aren't there; rather, the experiences—in a sense we can

easily recognize—leave our perception of everything out there in the world exactly the same. The objects are still distinguishable, in particular—especially when the perceived object boundaries coincide with discontinuities in physical properties. It's just that we no longer experience objects *as* distinguished, *as* distinct objects.

Just as we can conceive that someone might experience the objects around us as suddenly having no boundaries between one another, we can also conceive someone experiencing the objects around them as having different object boundaries. For example, we experience trees as objects distinct from the ground that those trees are growing in. Someone might experience trees as simply parts of one big "Mother Earth," and consequently experience trees as protuberances of the ground, rather than as distinct objects in their own right. Notice that it isn't the case that differences in color, or even physical discontinuities force us to experience those discontinuities in color or in what something is made of as simultaneously a border between where an object begins and leaves off, as our experience of multi-colored objects, or snap-together toys, indicates.

Let's now look at an entirely different set of examples. First, imagine that a flat plane is polka-dotted: imagine that each polka dot is the same size and that the polka dots are monotonously spaced out in infinite rows and columns. *We* (because of the simple color shifts along the boundaries of the polka dots) involuntarily experience these polka-dot-shaped colors as distinct objects against a background (that we perceive as *nothing*): there are just polka dots there. The object experience I'm describing is even more dramatic if the space is instead three-dimensional and the polka dots are spherical. We nevertheless recognize (we can conceive this, but we can't imagine it) that people could see exactly the same distribution of colors, and color-discontinuities that we see, but nevertheless instead see the "objects" as arrays of tiny pixels—*those* are the objects that they see, each one a particular color. Or instead (more weirdly) they could see "the objects" as polka-dot halves—even without any color-change cues across the invisible vertical middle dividing each polka dot half from the other one it's joined to. Or people could see any of numerous other ways of imposing objecthood onto this color-distribution pattern.

Imagine now that the polka dots are moving. Movement cues of various sorts even more strongly impel *us* to see the shifting colors as single objects that are moving. People with a different psychological makeup needn't experience things that way: they could experience them as pairs of objects moving (as it were) in *lockstep*—or as objects that are put together in some other way entirely.

Let's get some even more drastic thought experiments of possible experiences of objects on the table. Can an object be experienced as being located at two places at the same time? I don't mean like this: consider the possibility that spacetime is curved in some strange way. No, just consider our ordinary two-dimensional plane again with some polka dots on it. And I don't mean: consider the idea that some (large) object is discontinuously located in two places. I'm not speaking of a (big) object that has noncontiguous polka-dot-shaped parts—that some of the polka dots are parts of the same objects. (That's a possible object-experience *too*; but it's not the one I'm trying to describe at the moment). The idea is this: there is this object *O* that's an entire polka dot here *and* an entire polka dot there.

It's not possible to experience *that*, some philosopher is likely to say, because it violates Leibniz's law. Leibniz's law, roughly, is that if there is a property that *A* has but *B* doesn't have, then *A* can't be identical to *B*. It seems to follow from this that the same object can't have different spatial locations; it can only have parts that are distributed in different spatial locations. This is because if *A* is located in one place and *B* is located in another place then there seems to be a property, the-location-of-*A*, that *B* doesn't have, and furthermore, a second property, the-location-of-*B*, that *A* doesn't have.

No, the suggested experience doesn't violate Leibniz's law, because the reasoning described in the last paragraph is fallacious. This is because the same object is perceived to have such-and-such spatial locations *as well as* such-and-such spatial locations. Notice the logical trick that makes this experience a cogent one: The "object" *O* in question—that both polka-dot *A* and polka-dot *B* are—doesn't violate Leibniz's law simply because *O* has *two* sets of location-properties, *A*-relative properties and *B*-relative properties. These don't conflict. Someone might say in response: "*That* amounts to the object being partially in one place and it's being partially in another place." No, that's a description of an experience of a different object. The experience I'm describing is the experience of an object that is the same object (entirely) there *as well as* here. Remember: What's being requested isn't that *we* experience this, or that we are enabled to imagine ourselves experiencing this. That's not possible. What's being requested is that we recognize (conceive the possibility) that someone else *could* experience this while still experiencing all the properties and relations the same way that we do (for example, the colors, the other physical properties, as well as the discontinuities in color, or in mass, and so on). And that the someone experiencing this could say: "No, it's not that part of the object is here, and the other part is there. That's something different, that's a description of a different object from the one I'm seeing." We are being asked to conceive of the possibility of a particular experience that we simultaneously know we ourselves can't have.

Some philosopher or other might stubbornly say: *Now wait just a minute.* We know that objects can have relations to themselves. But the relations that objects can have to themselves are supposed to be really boring and trivial ones like self-identity. Objects can have interesting relations to their parts, and their parts can have interesting relations to one another. But the so-called objects that *you're* describing have interesting relations to themselves (like an object being two feet away from itself). I don't like that. So? This is a contradiction? How? And even if it were, this would make it an impossible object-experience? Why?

(So there are these Sci-Fi scenarios in bad movies, bad television, bad stories, and in comic books too, where someone meets himself because "universes have collided" or something dumb like that. Incoherent? Not as far as what we can *conceive* object experiences to be like. These object experiences, though, *would be* incoherent if we officially restricted our concept of an object only to what we could *imagine*. Our notion of an object, however, isn't restricted in this way.) Some philosopher or other might say: "This experience isn't possible unless we perceive there to be *causal connections* between these two 'instantiations' of the same object. If an object is located, somehow, in two places at once, those instantiations of the object have to act in some coordinated manner." This isn't true either, at least it

isn't true as a condition on the *possible* experience of objects—on what we can conceive as possible experiences of objects.

Notice what's being asked for here: we are being asked to recognize that people can experience objects differently from the ways that we do. These alternative experiences of *this over here* being the same object as *that over there* aren't cued by the same factors that our own experiences are. The point is that there is *no contradiction* in experiencing objects the way I've been describing: someone *could* experience objects this way. (And this is something that we can recognize.)

These object experiences *aren't* a matter of experiencing everything as "one" as I earlier described the garden experiences. Those—strictly speaking—were cases of losing one's sense of object-boundaries altogether. Here the idea is that one could experience what we ordinarily take to be two otherwise distinct objects to be the same object. Imagine John and Sarah, say, who have never met—John lives in London, Sarah in Melbourne. The suggestion is that some being or other could have the kind of object-experiences that allows that being to experience Sarah and John to be the same object without, as a result, there being any further experienced connection between them.³ If we extend this possible experience to include the identification of every object, we get a different way in which someone could (suddenly) have the mystical experience that "everything is one."

One last (strange) example related to the ones I've been giving. Notice that if someone can experience objects the way I've been describing, that same someone could experience numbers this way as well. "All the numbers are the same object," is something such a person could say. *Oh*, we might respond (if we didn't initially understand what was being suggested), *you mean that all the numbers are aspects of the One (or something like that)?* "No," the person would reply thoughtfully, "in bringing up talk of aspects the way you've just done, you're really just talking about one thing having parts (although you're speaking somewhat euphemistically). I don't mean that at all. I mean that they're all the same object. That's just what the (single) abstract object *is*: numbers. All of them, I mean."

VI. A thought about the experience of functionality

How is it that we can recognize that object experiences of this sort are *possible*? Unlike the cases of conceiving alternative meanings of sounds and inscriptions that we're familiar with, we really can't entertain the suggestion that the knowledge of these possibilities is due to our knowledge of certain empirical facts about the object experiences that people have had. In saying this, I'm presuming (possibly falsely) that there are no definitive examples of people having the kinds of experiences that I've been describing in this section.

I'm perfectly willing to be corrected about this, of course, especially because it won't have any effect on either the distinction between conceiving and imagining that I'm trying to elucidate, or on the examples of the distinction that I've been giving. I'm aware that there are mystical traditions that seem to indicate that people actually have experiences similar to the ones I've been describing in this section; some of those mystical traditions even describe these experiences as desirable. There may also be scientific studies—ones that I'm currently unfamiliar with—of methods of inducing such experiences, as there now are for inducing out-of-body experiences.

Regardless, our ability to recognize that these kinds of experiences are conceivable, despite our inability to imaginatively reconstruct them, is due to the structuring of our experience of object boundaries that's similar to how our experience of the functionality of objects, and our experience of the meaning of inscriptions and verbal utterances, is structured. Our experience of the boundaries of objects, we recognize, *separates from*—as it were—perceived physical discontinuities. I indicated this with some examples in section 5, when I mentioned cheeks and wrists and snap-together toys, and when I made the general point that neither color discontinuities nor other physical discontinuities seem necessary and sufficient for our experiencing object boundaries. Part of the reason for this (I speculate) is that where we see an objects as beginning and leaving off is psychologically permeated by our experience of that object's perceived functional properties; but functional properties, generally, cross-classify with the physical properties that operate as foundations for them. This paper, however, isn't the place to explore this fertile thought further.

VII. *Some conclusions*

Philosophers regularly draw distinctions, and they usually illustrate their distinctions with examples. Often, very often, the examples illustrating the purported distinctions are much more interesting than the distinctions themselves are. I'd like to think, however, that I've managed both an interesting gloss on an admittedly very old distinction, as well as managed to offer a number of surprising (and new) examples of the distinction.

Notice the implicit principle behind my distinction between what we can conceive and what we can only imagine. It's due to our own recognition of the ways that our experience is locked into being a certain way simultaneously with our recognition that there is nothing in what that experience is of that *requires* our experience to be so locked in. So, in particular cases (say, when experiencing the physical contours of human beings), our perception of the boundaries of such objects seems to operate in tandem with our perception of certain physical discontinuities, although we recognize that there is nothing about those physical discontinuities that *requires* that our experience of the object boundaries follow suit. This is what allows our conception of possible experiences of object boundaries to advance so far beyond what we recognize ourselves as able to imagine.

There is, of course, an echo of a kind of a priori structure to the experience of object boundaries, as well as to our experience of meaningfulness and functionality. But it's only an echo, and not a particularly illuminating one, as it turns out. This is because genuine a priori structure (at least according to the standard philosophical tradition) is supposed to place constraints on possible experience, and here the imaginative constraints we recognize our experience to obey instead do the opposite: what we conceive as possible sprints beyond—sometimes well beyond—the possibilities that mere imagination allows. That's a striking result, and one, as I mentioned, quite opposed to the philosophical tradition—at least when it comes to the relation of the a priori to the conceivable and the possible.

A question naturally arises. Do these phenomenological results have any metaphysical implications, either ones similar to the kinds of implications that

Descartes hoped to draw, or quite different ones? I think they do. I will briefly discuss what I have in mind, leaving details for future work.

I think it's relatively clear (although further philosophical argument is certainly required) that meaning properties and functional properties are genuine projections. I mean by this that there is nothing in the world that they correspond to. It isn't, that is, that there are meaning properties or functional properties antecedently existing *in the world* that our experience has to correspond to in order for that experience to correctly capture the phenomena being experienced, or for that experience to be true to the world. I claim (but will not show here) that a similar result holds of the boundaries of objects. This is more controversial if only because, first, there is a sense in which our involuntary experience of object boundaries is more robust (or more believable) than our involuntary experience of meaning or functionality. But, second, there is a long and illustrious philosophical tradition dedicated to establishing the metaphysical presence— in the world—of one or another species of object boundaries. That is, many metaphysicians—including contemporary ones—believe that there is a way that object boundaries appear in the world that's metaphysically genuine and that our experience of object boundaries must be evaluated against.

To refute this kind of realism about the boundaries of objects it's not enough, I need to say, to exploit the differences that our experience of object boundaries allows, between what we can imagine object boundaries to be like and what we conceive them to possibly be. After all, the fact that we can conceive something *as* possible shouldn't be taken to imply (on those grounds alone) that it *is* possible. Perhaps the way the world is forces objects to have certain boundaries and not others, regardless of the alternative possibilities that we are capable of conceiving of. What's needed at this point is a sustained analysis of exactly what a metaphysically-genuine object boundary is. It can't be simply a matter of what we *experience* a boundary of objects to be—since that's quite open-ended.

One possibility, of course, for establishing the metaphysical presence of object boundaries is providing philosophically-convincing necessary and sufficient conditions for the boundaries of objects in terms of (say) some set of underlying physical properties and relations. Nothing I've said in *this* paper rules out the potential success of such an analysis. I think it can't be done, but that issue goes quite beyond questions of experience, possible experience, what we can imagine, as opposed to what we can conceive. That is, it goes quite beyond the topics of this paper.⁴

References

Azzouni, Jody. 2013. *Semantic perception: How the illusion of a common language arises and persists*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Azzouni, Jody. Forthcoming. *Talking about something: Metametaphysics, quantifiers, and what there is*.

Descartes, René. 1641. *Meditations on first philosophy*, translated by Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. (1979)

Putnam, Hilary. 1981. *Reason, truth and history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Notes

¹ Anyone unfamiliar with the Müller-Lyer illusion need only type “Müller-Lyer illusion” into a search engine, and a dozen or so illustrations of it will immediately appear.

² An extremely important point: Contextual factors have far-reaching causal effects on our experience of: colors, the boundaries of objects, the meanings of sentences and words, and much else besides. And even when those contextual factors are visible to us, their role in influencing our experience is nevertheless still invisible, except by (laborious) empirical inspection—e.g., by the use of Mill’s methods. I illustrated this invisibility of the influence of context on our experience of language at length in Azzouni 2013—specifically with respect to our experience of the meaningfulness of language artifacts; it’s also easily exhibited in color contrast illusions, as well. But the phenomenon is frighteningly ubiquitous. (“Frighteningly,” because it neatly illustrates how much *ignorance* is built into perceptual experience—“built in,” in the sense that consciously-achieved knowledge of the true state of affairs has no impact on that perceptual experience).

³ Again, in terms of the “trick” I’ve described: the experience of *A* and *B* being the same needn’t require that the *A*-relative properties to be nomologically (or conceptually) connected to the *B*-relative properties *in any way at all*.

⁴ I take up these issues in my forthcoming book.