

Deliberative Imagination

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Philosophical accounts of imagination tend to focus on science, art, and games—not on decision-making. Accounts of decision-making tend to focus on desires, beliefs, and reasoning—not on imagination. Contrary to these traditions, I argue that imagination plays at least three important roles in decision-making. In what I call Diagnostic Imagination, agents aim to get clear about situations in which they act. In Imaginative Anticipation, agents mentally rehearse scenarios they take to lie ahead. In Imagination Tests, agents imagine choice scenarios with a view to assessing whether they would like them. I call these kinds of imagination “deliberative,” to signal that, while they are all concerned with decisions, they are not all about the moment of choice.

Keywords: agency, imagination, deliberation, anticipation, choice scenarios, simulation

1. Introduction

Philosophical accounts of imagination tend to focus on science, art, and games—not on decision-making. Accounts of decision-making tend to focus on desires, beliefs, and reasoning—not on imagination. Contrary to these traditions, I argue that imagination plays at least three important roles in decision-making. In what I call Diagnostic Imagination, agents aim to get clear about situations in which they act. In Imaginative Anticipation, agents mentally rehearse scenarios they take to lie ahead. In Imagination Tests, agents imagine choice scenarios with a view to assessing whether they would like them.¹ I call these kinds of imagination “deliberative,” to signal that, while they are all concerned with decisions, they are not all about the moment of choice.

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¹ There is a wide range of uses of the imagination that are broadly concerned with agency. We use the imagination when we look forward to a sojourn in the mountains, to distract ourselves while we undergo a dental procedure, and so on. Cf. (Schroeder and Matheson 2006), (Van Leeuwen 2011) and (Van Leeuwen 2016), (Gendler and Kovakovich 2005).

Imagination is a major topic in empirical work on decision-making. Inspired by this research, recent philosophical contributions defend imagination-based, descriptive accounts of decision-making.² I depart from this approach in two respects. First, philosophical accounts of decision-making often focus on choice between options. Empirical research and philosophical work about imagination, however, suggests that a wider range of uses of the imagination bears on decision-making.

Second, I argue that a compelling philosophical account cannot be entirely descriptive. If imagination figures in decision-making, it is an obvious question whether it supports good decisions. With this question, I do not propose that philosophers should be concerned with ideal decision-making, which is at times taken to be the ambition of a normative approach (cf. Nanay 2016). My proposal is normative in a more modest way. I take it to be an—often tacit—premise of work on decision-making that agents aim to make *good* decisions. And this aim does not seem futile. It is too quick to assess imagination, as it figures in decision-making, as unreliable *tout court*. Perhaps this assessment seems plausible with a view to some high-stakes decisions where agents need not only imagine competing options, but also their own future selves at times when they themselves will have changed.³ But many decisions are not like this.

Jointly, these departures can be described as Aristotelian. The philosophy of action has been shaped by Anscombe's *Intention* (1957), and thereby by broadly speaking Aristotelian premises. Meanwhile, any number of notions from Aristotle's practical philosophy have been appropriated in 20th and 21st century debates. The notion of deliberative imagination, however, has so far not received attention.⁴ I follow Anscombe in not aiming for any interpretive claims. Nevertheless, I acknowledge the ancestry of the notion that makes up this paper's title: deliberative imagination.

I start with premises about imagination from philosophy of mind and psychology (Section 2) and introduce the notion of a good decision (Section 3). Next, I lay out the three roles that I ascribe to deliberative imagination (Sections 4–7). If my argument is compelling, deliberative imagination can lead astray, but it also supports good decision-making. I conclude with the question of whether one can be better or worse at deliberative imagination (Section 8).

² This is the ambition of Nanay (2016); cf. (Van Leeuwen 2016).

³ Cf. (Paul 2014) and (Ismael 2019) on transformative choices. Cf. (Nanay 2016) on agents who imagine themselves in future scenarios among which they aim to choose.

⁴ The term deliberative imagination comes up in Aristotle (*De anima* 3.11, 434a5–11; cf. *Metaphysics* A.1, 980b26). Cf. (Vogt 2025) on deliberative imagination and practical truth.

2. Premises from Philosophy of Mind and Psychology

Deliberative imagination relates to a range of mental capacities and states, including perception, memory, belief, and desire.⁵ Agents aim to make decisions that respond to situations they find themselves in. To that end, they need perception, memory, and beliefs. They also aim to make decisions they like and will like. This includes that, on reflection, they see and will see their choices and what comes from them as good.

This sketch implies a widely shared premise: “imaginings”—as instances of imagining can be called—are different from beliefs and desires.⁶ Imaginings are different from beliefs insofar as to believe something is to take it to be true; by contrast, one can imagine both things that one takes to be true and things that one doesn’t take to be true (Schellenberg 2013, Balcerak Jackson 2016).⁷ Imaginings often have desiderative or aversive dimensions: one imagines what one hopes for and what one fears. But imagining and desiring can come apart. One can imagine states of affairs that one is affectively neutral about, or states of affairs where one is uncertain whether one would like them.⁸

Imaginings relate in multiple ways to beliefs (Van Leeuwen 2013 and Van Leeuwen 2016, 93–94). An agent who imagines something invokes her beliefs, to the extent that her believing and her imagining may be closely intertwined (Schellenberg 2013, 511, Nichols 2006, 459, Myers 2024). For example, one’s imagination of the attitudes others hold regarding a particular situation is shaped by one’s beliefs about them and about the situation.⁹ On a standard account of belief, belief-formation and belief-revision should be sensitive to evidence (Egan 2009). Deliberative imagination inherits this concern with evidence.¹⁰ It thereby inherits a normative dimension. If one

⁵ This list is not intended as exhaustive, and there are other ways of classifying relevant activities. Railton (2020) argues that default brain functioning includes, most importantly, “episodic and semantic memory, scene construction and the imaginative simulation of possible futures, counterfactual reasoning, inferring the mental states of others, self-referential processing, and ethical judgment.”

⁶ Cf. (Kriegel 2015) on perception and (Schellenberg 2013) on belief and desire; cf. (Balcerak Jackson 2016) on whether there is a sharp distinction between imagining and conceiving. I adopt the term “imaginings” from Schellenberg.

⁷ I won’t address the question of whether deliberative imagination is typically propositional. Cf. (Van Woudenberg 2006b) on propositional and object imagination.

⁸ My argument is agnostic on whether all imaginings are imagistic, or whether a distinction between imagistic and discursive imagination should be adopted. Cf. (Van Woudenberg 2006b), (Schellenberg 2013), (Van Leeuwen 2016).

⁹ Imagination can involve greater and lesser constructive effort (Van Leeuwen 2016). Cf. (Hopkins 1998, chapter 2).

¹⁰ Cf. (Van Woudenberg 2006b) and (Balcerak Jackson 2016) for objections to the view that one can imagine anything.

imaginatively anticipates a scenario in order to be better able to respond to it, and then learns something that bears on it, one should modify the imagining. Similarly, if one imagines how someone else feels about some incident, and gains additional information about their attitudes, one should modify the imagining. For the most part, uses of the imagination that concern decisions are forward-looking.¹¹ Nevertheless, philosophical work on belief and imagination suggests that agents also imagine the present and past, as in the example where one imagines how someone feels or felt about an incident. Agents aim to get clear about the situations in which they act; this involves belief-formation and it involves what I call Diagnostic Imagination.¹²

Relatedly, theorists at times distinguish between reality-oriented and far-flung imaginings (cf. Williamson 2016, Gauker 2024).¹³ Precisely because the former are immediately informed by how the world is, they may seem easier to accomplish. For example, it is not hard to imagine that one's cat is hungry, but much harder to imagine world peace. Deliberative imagination may seem to be of the former kind, reality-oriented, and thus more mundane than imagination in science and art. Still, this contrast would be a simplification. Many instances of deliberative imagination are quotidian, but others are concerned with ideals and values that motivate long-term plans, hopes, fears, and so on.

Philosophers have been said to ignore imagination when it comes to decision-making (Van Leeuwen 2016).¹⁴ This charge seems too harsh. For example, here is Schellenberg's list of functions of the imagination: "By projecting ourselves into other situations, imagination allows us to expand our horizon. By conceiving of alternative possible worlds, imagination allows us to forge new paths in science and gain an understanding of alternative ways

¹¹ Empirical research about the evolution of imagination proposes that "foresight" and "contemplation of alternatives" are earlier than "creative" imagination (Mithen 2007). Williamson (2016) speaks of "reality-oriented" imagination as early in evolutionary terms. The early evolutionary status of these activities suggests that the imagination is pervasively concerned with the future. Cf. (Vogt 2016), (Seligman et al. 2013), (Schuberta et al. 2020).

¹² Van Leeuwen (2016, 287) speaks of imagination that "supports" action, a locution that I also adopt. My approach resembles his insofar as he emphasizes that a range of uses of the imagination figures in agency.

¹³ Van Leeuwen (2016) discusses preferences and tendencies to the effect that people more frequently imagine realistic than unrealistic scenarios.

¹⁴ Nanay (2016, 129) argues that philosophy of action presupposes a desire-belief model, according to which "deciding between two possible actions is a matter of comparing the probability of the satisfaction of one's desires given one's background beliefs in the case of the performance of each action." Cf. (Sinhababu 2013). Others ask how ordinary desires, understood as the mental states that motivate action, compare with so-called i-desires, short for "imagination desires" (Schroeder and Matheson 2006; Doggett and Egan 2007; Doggett and Egan 2012; Kind 2011).

our lives could be. By thinking through what would happen given certain conditions, imagination allows us to engage in counterfactual reasoning [...] Imagination is a guide to knowing what is possible and allows us to think through what would happen given certain conditions.” (2014, 497-8) While these functions of imagination are not presented with a view to agency, it is obvious that they bear on decision-making.¹⁵

By contrast, psychological theories address the role of imagination directly. Much of the empirical work on decision-making is on the simulation of alternative choice scenarios, to which agents assign positive or negative valence with a view to picking one of them. While this may be the most obvious way in which imagination figures in decision-making, it is not the only one. Another long-standing topic in empirical psychology is how agents anticipate and thereby mentally rehearse actions they plan to perform (Feltz and Landers 1983, Taylor and Schneider 1989, Ballance et al. 2022). My account of deliberative imagination picks up on both of these lines of research, and on philosophical work on belief and imagination that suggests that agents also imagine dimensions of the situations they find themselves in.

3. Good Decisions

Agents typically want to make good decisions, as this is often put in everyday talk. They aim to draw on deliberative imagination in ways that support good decision-making. That is, there is a descriptive question of how deliberative imagination contributes to decision-making, and a normative question of how it succeeds and fails in supporting good decisions. Nanay (2016) endorses a purely descriptive framework, inspired by psychology. And yet he describes decision-making as unreliable (Nanay 2016, 137). He locates this unreliability specifically in imagining one's future self in choice scenarios. In his terms, decision-making is “extremely unlikely to yield the optimal outcome reliably” (Nanay 2016, 136). These, however, are normative concerns. A focus on ideal or fully rational decision-making, which Nanay rejects, is not the only way for a theory of decision-making to be normative. Con-

¹⁵ It is a difficult question whether and to what extent an episode of counterfactual reasoning is analyzable as an episode of imagining (Byrne 2005; Byrne 2016). If it is, rational choice theory has a place for the role of imagination. Paul (2014) takes it that in rational decision-making agents imaginatively model possible experiences, projecting themselves forward into possible future outcomes. The rationality of decision-making, on this approach, lies in assigning subjective values to possible future experiences and being authentic in taking charge of one's future.

cerns with flaws in our reasoning or imagining are also normative, and so is a concern with outcomes.¹⁶

A theory of decision-making is inevitably normative, then, in part because the agent's decision-making is subject to bias and other flawed patterns. It is also inevitably normative because of a premise in the background: choices affect how things will go in the future. In making a decision, agents typically aim for things to go *well*. With regard to Imagination Tests, I put this in terms of choices that the agent will like, where "like" is used in a capacious and flexible manner. If the choice is between flavors of ice cream, it means that the agent hopes to enjoy what they choose. In other contexts, it means something more complicated. Depending on the choice, it means that the agent fares well, that they can reflectively endorse their choice, and so on.¹⁷

When agents make decisions, they cannot know what the future will bring. But they have preferences: they want things to turn out in such a way that they like it, in the capacious and flexible sense I described. In some decisions, the agent is only concerned with the immediate ends of her actions. For example, in the ice cream case the story ends with enjoying one's choice of strawberry ice cream. In many cases, however, ends relate to higher-order ends. The immediate end of walking to the grocery store is, for example, to buy spaghetti. But the end of buying spaghetti relates to other ends, such as preparing dinner for one's family, and thereby ultimately to the agent's long-term values and commitments.¹⁸ This long-term horizon makes especially salient that a theory of decision-making is inevitably also normative. While the ice cream case can seem to be a descriptive matter of desire satisfaction, examples that invoke hierarchies of ends flag that good decisions can involve complex normative matters.

¹⁶ Nanay takes himself to depart from traditional rational choice approaches insofar as he invokes empirical studies on framing, bias, and the like. And yet, theorists who work in traditional frameworks often address precisely such themes. For example, theorists ask whether agents should be neutral with regard to when a positively valenced scenario occurs, thereby avoiding so-called time-bias (Sullivan 2018). Relevant phenomena can be described both in terms of patterns of reasoning, and in terms of imagining nearby states of affairs more vividly than temporally distant ones.

¹⁷ I refrain from describing good decisions as "best" and from speaking of "the right decision" as if it was obvious how to construe these notions. Cf. (Vogt 2025) on deliberation, truth, and correctness.

¹⁸ In (Vogt 2017), chapter 5, I offer an account of how the motivation for small-scale actions relates to the agent's conception of a well-going life for her.

Deliberative imagination can mislead us.¹⁹ It is an imperfect tool. And yet, the other tools for deliberation—among them reasoning—are also imperfect. As much as the failures of the imagination are familiar, so are the failures of reasoning. In many deliberative contexts, however, we can imagine things up to the point where this helps us. For example, we can imagine fairly well whether today we will make it up the stairs to the seventh floor or should rather take the elevator. Much of the bread and butter of human decision-making is like this. Similarly, in many contexts that are more complex, deliberative imagination need not be perfect in order to support good decision-making.

4. Diagnostic Imagination

Suppose someone imagines, after a day of rain, that there are frogs on their patio; when she walks out, she moves carefully, such as not to step on one of them. Here the agent imagines a present feature of the situation in which she acts, one that is currently not visible, because it is dark. Agents also imagine states of affairs that shape the present insofar as they are atemporal. Someone may imagine a “world without God,” asking herself how best to act in this world. Moreover, agents aim to imagine past states of affairs.²⁰ They don’t always remember everything that bears on a decision, and at times they realize that they didn’t pay sufficient attention in the past. For example, an agent may try to imagine how others perceived her actions. By imagining such a feature of the past, an agent aims to figure out how to act now. For example, they aim to get a sense of whether they owe someone an apology.

As illustrated by these cases, deliberative imagination is diagnostic if the agent uses imagination to get clear about a feature of a situation that bears on their decision-making. This feature can be present or atemporal or rooted in the past. Diagnostic Imagination thus speaks to a core concern in decision-making: that one recognizes those features of situations that should inform one’s decisions, in order to adequately respond to them.

Consider the three cases with a view to the familiar reservation that the imagination is unreliable. How much stock can we put in imaginings of this sort? The first kind of case seems utterly quotidian. It seems hard to deny that deliberative imagination can support good decisions in such circumstances. The agent who steps outside carefully because she imagines frogs on her patio seems to do what is good for her and the frogs. No matter whether a frog sits directly in her path or not, and no matter whether she

¹⁹ Imagination can also mislead in other domains, where it is otherwise recognized as important. Cf. (Ismael 2022) on ways in which imagination can mislead in scientific inquiry about time.

²⁰ Cf. (Hopkins 2018) on imagining the past.

would indeed have stepped on a frog had she not imagined frogs on her patio, a cautious attitude seems warranted. Here the limits of getting it right seem unproblematic. Perhaps our agent cannot fully imagine how awful it would be to step on a frog. Perhaps she cannot fully imagine whether a given frog is quick enough to hop away when she approaches, even in the dark. Either way, the imagined state of affairs, that there are frogs on the patio, given that it has been a rainy day, supports a good decision.

The second example recalls Anselm of Canterbury, who asks whether a world without God can be imagined (*Proslogion* ch. IV).²¹ Others may ask what a world without God would look like. Either way, one may aim to imagine such scenarios with a view to how one would and should act, given how the world is. Here the pitfalls of imagination seem similar to those of theorizing. Even those who make a sincere and extended effort in their use of imagination can disagree, for example, on what can be imagined.

The third kind of case comes with different challenges. The limits of our ability to imagine how others perceive the world are often emphasized.²² With a view to decision-making, however, we don't need to address the question of whether it is possible to see things entirely from someone else's perspective. In order to decide whether to apologize, offer help, and so on, a lower threshold suffices, at least in a wide range of cases. Indeed, it can be a lame excuse to emphasize the limits of the imagination, when in fact it is often possible to imagine things up to the point where it helps one decide whether to apologize, offer help, and so on.

In another past-directed kind of case, we use the imagination when we ask ourselves whether we find it imaginable that someone performed a certain action. For example, an agent asks herself whether she can imagine that her friend betrayed her. Given everything she knows, remembers, perceives, etc., she finds this not only unlikely, but unimaginable.²³ The example illustrates that the imagination is not only guided by what we remember, believe, and so on, but also shaped by what we desire. Because the friend is loved and trusted, someone may have imaginative resistance when it comes to seeing her as a traitor. Because the betrayal is feared, someone else may immediately imagine the worst. The example also illustrates further the relation between imagination and belief. One can make an effort to let one's imagination be guided by the evidence. In that case, imagination inherits features

²¹ This kind of case has been explored in traditional "knowledge through imagination" literature. (Van Woudenberg 2006b), (Van Woudenberg 2006a), and (Balcerak Jackson 2018).

²² Matravers (2011) mentions related limitations, in spite of which he too defends a moderately optimistic position. Related issues are also discussed in terms of empathy. Goldie (2000, 195) defines empathy as a kind of imagination.

²³ Stroud (2006) discusses the reliability of such assumptions.

like the one I mentioned earlier, that one revises what one imagines if new evidence comes to light. Alternatively, one can make an effort to let one's imagination be guided by faith in the person. Here the question of whether an agent does better or worse at deliberative imagination depends on prior commitments: whether she aims to be guided solely by the evidence or also by faith.²⁴ Depending on how an agent uses deliberative imagination, the standards for doing better or worse can be closer or less close to the norms of belief-formation.

5. Imaginative Anticipation

Turn now to a future-directed use of deliberative imagination. Anticipatory Imagination permits the agent to mentally rehearse actions they take themselves to have decided upon. In anticipating our own actions, the imagination literally guides our steps. Anticipatory Imagination can go hand-in-hand with Diagnostic Imagination: for example, the agent who imagines frogs on her patio may also imagine herself as she steps carefully across the patio.

Another quotidian example helps explain the difference between Diagnostic and Anticipatory Imagination. An agent walks by the elevator and toward the stairs; she already plays in her mind that she will walk up the stairs. Diagnostically, this involves the use of the imagination to ascertain what is the case, for example, that she is sufficiently fit today to take the stairs. In Anticipatory Imagination, by contrast, the focus is on rehearsing the path in one's mind. The agent uses imagination in order to anticipate and thereby rehearse the action or a version thereof.

Empirical work suggests that we routinely simulate ourselves performing the action that we embark on (Redish 2025). Such imaginative rehearsals ideally enable the agent to go through with plans, living up to how she thinks she should act in given situations. That is, Anticipatory Imagination is thought to have a kind of training effect. It can not only prompt one to modify one's decision, as when one imagines oneself exhausted in the midst of the staircase and reconsiders. It can also change one's ability to go through with one's decision, as when one is better able to walk upstairs because one anticipated the challenge. Of course, someone may rehearse in her mind that she walks up the stairs, and nevertheless tire of it quickly, turning to the elevator on the second floor. However, Anticipatory Imagination differs from Diagnostic Imagination insofar as the question is not simply whether we get things right. By engaging in anticipation, we aim to modify what is likely to

²⁴ Buchak (2018) discusses ways in which faith is sensitive to evidence.

happen. This may involve, for example, that we are mentally prepared for resilience in the face of exhaustion.

Consider another case. An agent takes it that she should perform a given action, say, to break some bad news to her friends. Imaginative Anticipation is an important tool for these sorts of situations. We run through the relevant scenarios in our minds, aiming to anticipate how things will play out and to mentally rehearse what we think we should be doing. Again, there is not only the question of how reliable the imagination is. There is also the hope that it can improve our ability to do what we decided to do. Again, we need not imagine things precisely right, for example, with regard to how others feel. In dire situations, we are often aware that it is pointless to aim for perfection. Nevertheless, mentally rehearsing a situation can help us go through with something that, one way or another, is challenging.

In Imaginative Anticipation, the modal status of what the agent imagines is that of future contingents. In my example, the agent mentally rehearses what she thinks she must accomplish. And yet it may not come to this. At the last minute, there may be an update that makes the news appear in a different light, or it turns out that her friends have already been informed, and so on. These kinds of contingencies supply a rationale for the iterations and variations that Imaginative Anticipation is prone to. By running through a scenario multiple times, one mentally prepares also for alternative ways in which things can go.

One often aims to anticipate what one takes to be the most likely scenario. One also aims to anticipate scenarios that are especially salient. For example, if you anticipate telling someone with a chronic heart condition about a deadly accident, you want to be prepared in case she needs medical assistance due to the shock from learning this news. It may be less likely that she needs medical assistance than that she does not need medical assistance. However, the former option is especially salient—it is the option for which one needs greater preparation. That is, Anticipatory Imagination aims to get right which scenarios are both somewhat likely *and* in special need of mental preparation, such that one can run through these in one's head.

6. Imagination Tests and Valence

Finally, a use of deliberative imagination counts as an Imagination Test if the agent imagines choice scenarios that they take to be possible with a view to deciding between them. Suppose you have job offers in different cities. You imagine yourself in these positions and places, with a view to deciding between the options. That is, you imagine alternative scenarios, with a view to whether you would like them. I mentioned before that the relevant notion of liking is not in general hedonistic or in any other way specified.

Depending on the case at hand, liking involves different dimensions of evaluation: whether one would enjoy the option, whether it would accord with one's considered values, whether it speaks to one's aspirations, and so on. Imagination Tests are used in cases where an agent makes a decision, such as between two job offers. They also figure at a prior stage of deliberative thought. One can ask oneself, for example, whether one wants to have children, or whether one would be blissfully happy if one won the lottery, even if now one is not faced with the relevant choices.

Imagination Tests overlap with and interact with Imaginative Anticipation.²⁵ For example, an agent who is almost decided in favor of a given plan of action mentally anticipates it; this may solidify the decision or it may prompt the agent to reconsider. Even in the former case, where the choice is solidified, Imaginative Anticipation can prompt Imagination Tests at a more fine-grained level. As the agent imaginatively anticipates her action, she fine-tunes her plan, which can involve comparatively imagining options. For the sake of identifying distinctive uses of deliberative imagination, these kinds of overlap between Imaginative Anticipation and Imagination Tests are unproblematic. All that is needed for the sake of my distinction is that the two uses have different foci. Imaginative Anticipation is about mentally rehearsing what one takes to lie ahead, while Imagination Tests are about choices.

Imagination Tests come with at least two distinctive challenges. One, from the point of view of an agent, the future is contingent (Ismael 2019, Vogt 2025). How things turn out is not only a matter of what you decide to do, but subject to any number of things you cannot possibly predict. Two, you imagine yourself at a given place and with a given job, and yet your future self will be changed by your experiences between now and then. We may be prone to mis-imagine our future selves, which will be shaped by experiences that, at the time of decision, we haven't yet had (Paul 2014, Chang 2015, Ismael 2019). It is specifically with a view to these challenges that deliberative imagination can seem unreliable. Nevertheless, insights from the discussion of Diagnostic and Anticipatory Imagination carry over. In many quotidian cases, even incomplete and flawed imaginings meet the threshold for usefulness.

Decisions can be small-scale, as when an agent chooses between tea and coffee. Here Imagination Tests can provide on-the-spot guidance. When offered tea or coffee, an agent may immediately imagine the scent of freshly brewed tea, register that this is what she likes to experience now, and go ahead and choose tea. Other decisions are on a larger scale, even if they are decisions for one-off actions. For example, whether one tells the truth or lies at a given occasion can shape one's own life and the lives of others in the long

²⁵ I'm grateful to Anthony Hejduk for notes on this point.

run. Imagination Tests can play a crucial role in these kinds of decisions. An agent may imagine herself as a person who, in a given context, lied, and immediately think that she does not want to be that person. This response to the imagined scenario need not be overriding. It is conceivable that in some cases one should, on the whole, act against it.²⁶ Nevertheless, it seems hard to deny that this kind of response is informative. Other quotidian decisions are not implemented in a single moment. For example, someone who decides to study chemistry must take any number of actions to pursue her choice. Here, too, Imagination Tests are familiar. An agent may engage in them repeatedly, while they begin to implement the choice and at moments where the choice can be revisited. Here and in many ordinary contexts, the incomplete nature of how one imagines some scenarios at the outset is not set in stone. Imagination can support decision-making as one goes along.

In imagining scenarios relevant to longer-term choices, an agent may take an immersed perspective, aiming to imagine the person she will be if and when she made the choice.²⁷ She may also try to imagine things from other points of view. For example, she may try to imagine scenarios as they look for others, or as they may look to her at the end of her life. It is distinctive of deliberative imagination that none of these perspectives is inherently privileged. This speaks, I think, to the agent's awareness that imagining some scenarios is difficult. It is a common and plausible tool to imagine them from several points of view. An agent may go back and forth between these as they make a choice.

Different models for the relation between imagined scenarios and their valence have been defended (Van Leeuwen 2011 and Van Leeuwen 2016, Schroeder and Matheson 2006, Hopkins 2010, 10, and Vogt 2025, 282–283). Rather than ask which model gets things right in general, I propose that several models capture familiar phenomena. While these phenomena can bleed into each other, it seems helpful to distinguish between them.

Affective Feedback Model: The agent simulates a scenario and experiences affective feedback (Gendler 2000).

Valence Ascription Model: The agent simulates a scenario and ascribes valence to it.

Imagined Valence Model: As the agent imagines a choice scenario, she also imagines that she likes or dislikes it; the valence is part of the simulation.

²⁶ Cf. Williams' cases against utilitarianism (1973).

²⁷ Nanay (2016, 135) speaks of imagining from the inside: "you imagine the person you imagine yourself to be in a situation you imagine to be the outcome of your decision."

In some cases, the valence of simulated choice scenarios seems to be supplied by an immediate, affective response. Agents imagine choice scenarios against the backdrop of attitudes they already have: likes and dislikes, habits, value commitments, memories of relevant earlier experiences, and so on. Here it may seem that all the agent needs to do is imagine the choice scenario. If she gets it at least in outline right, the thought goes, affective feedback is informative. It tells the agent that she would, or would not, like the choice.

Suppose someone recoils from the imagined future scenario of being married to a given person. Even if the imagined scenario is fragmentary, this kind of affective feedback provides overriding guidance against accepting the person's proposal. In other contexts, affective feedback to mental simulation is informative, but nevertheless cannot play the role of decider. Say, an agent with a toothache shudders when imagining herself going to the dentist. This tells her, quite likely reliably, that she won't enjoy the visit at the dentist. But presumably, she should not infer that she is better off not going to the dentist. In making a decision, we may be aware that the affectively assigned valence of these scenarios is only one piece of information. Nevertheless, it is an ordinary and pervasive feature of agency that, as we decide between options, we want to know whether we would like a certain choice. Would we like it initially? Would we like it in the long run? Would we be torn about its rightness?

Sometimes we would find affective feedback helpful, and yet don't have it immediately available. At least some of these cases fit the Valence Ascription Model. Suppose a student has to meet a requirement outside of their core interests, let's say a philosophy requirement. They have no idea whether epistemology or ethics or whatever would be more enjoyable. These are cases where imagination and belief-formation work hand-in-hand. The agent may collect information about these classes, until they get to the point where they can imagine the scenario in such detail that they can ascribe valence to it.

Consider finally a case where the Imagined Response Model seems compelling. The agent imagines not only an episode where she herself is in a given situation, but also whether and how she would like it. Suppose an agent imagines winning the lottery and becoming rich. She is aware of research according to which people who win the lottery are not, in the long run, as happy as they imagined. She engages in an open-ended quest of the imagination. How would I feel about being rich? Would I enjoy it? Would I be bored? Etc.

To return to the case I started out with, the choice between job offers in different cities. Does it fit neatly into one of the three models? The answer must be "it depends." A person who strongly dislikes a given city may

experience immediate affective feedback when she imagines herself there. Another person may gather information about the two cities and positions until she is able to imagine herself in both positions; this, she takes it, helps her get a sense of which scenario she would like better. Another person may not be in the position of choosing between jobs right now. She may nevertheless ask herself whether, say, she would like to live in Paris. Here the Imagined Valence Model may apply. She tries to imagine herself as she enjoys life in Paris. If she finds that this is something she can easily imagine, this may inform her longer-time pursuits.

7. Imagination Tests and Possibility

In mentally simulating each of several options, an agent may register that she dislikes all of them. This upshot presupposes a modal assessment of such-and-such options as possible. Registering that one likes neither of the options may lead one to question whether one made a modal mistake, taking some states of affairs to be impossible that in fact are possible. Alternatively, one may readjust one's goals, such that additional courses of action become possible. When we don't like any of the options we consider, we often aim to extend the range of options. This extension involves reasoning and deliberative imagination.

The dictum that deliberation is about the possible is at times illustrated with examples that relate to flying.²⁸ A person cannot deliberate about whether to fly, because humans cannot fly. Agents in antiquity who dreamt of flying evaluated flying positively. They could not decide whether to fly. But they could imaginatively engage with a world in which humans can fly, in their heads form images of what tools for flying may look like, and so on. These sorts of situations may prompt story-telling, invention, engineering, trials, failures, partial successes, and so on. If "humans cannot fly" is understood in comparison with birds, it still holds. Nevertheless, and with the help of technology, flying has become an option, while previously it was not an option.

The ability to imagine positively valenced states of affairs, even if these are far-flung, is fundamental to any number of domains in which humans can make progress. Some ideas and ideals—justice, world peace, and so on—are less concrete than the dream of a world in which people can fly to faraway places. Nevertheless, imaginative engagement with high-level values can translate into first steps toward their realization. When values are

²⁸ This premise is formulated in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* III.3, but accepted beyond Aristotelian approaches.

ranked very highly, their grip on the imagination may help agents come up with new options even after temporary defeat.

To get the modality of choice scenarios right can turn out to be highly demanding. It includes not writing off courses of action once and for all that are currently, for technical or other pragmatic reasons, unavailable. It may require an open mind regarding the modal status of some option, where one does not settle whether something is possible or impossible. Our experience may limit what we find imaginable (Paul 2014), and psychological resistance can make something that is doable appear undoable. At times an agent cannot imagine states of affairs that to her are revolting (Gendler 2000).

In some contexts, imagination helps agents expand the range of what is seen as possible. In other cases, it is good for an agent, and reflects well on them, if they find themselves unable to imagine certain courses of action. If courses of action appear unthinkable—and in that sense, impossible—based on values that on reflection one endorses, then it is not the task of the imagination to “peel off” resistance and make the unimaginable imaginable. This makes me end where I began: deliberative imagination is pervasive, but it is not an isolated tool for decision-making.

8. Conclusion

I argued that there are three distinctive uses of deliberative imagination. Diagnostic Imagination supports agents in getting clear about the situations in which they act. Imaginative Anticipation helps to mentally rehearse what lies ahead. Imagination Tests can support good choices between options. These uses of deliberative imagination are pervasive. Ordinary decision-making relies on them. In many ordinary contexts, we can imagine scenarios sufficiently well for this to contribute to good decision-making. In other contexts, it is helpful for agents to be aware of how hard it can be to imagine things in ways that are informative. In such contexts agents may end up imagining things from several points of view, using the imagination in exploratory fashion.

In saying that deliberative imagination supports good decision-making, I refrain from saying that it delivers results that are, in general and in principle, unattainable via other mental activities. My proposal does not aim to minimize the roles of other mental activities that figure in decision-making. I compared deliberative imagination to deliberative reasoning: while both are flawed, it does seem that both contribute to good decisions. In both cases, it is not far-fetched that one can become better. Just as one can try to become a better thinker, one can try to educate the imagination.²⁹ It would

²⁹ Ismael (2019) employs this phrase.

be a plausible extension of my view to ask whether—and if yes, how—agents can become better at deliberative uses of the imagination. For present purposes, I stop short of that. I argued for the preliminary claim that an account of the role of imagination in decision-making is inevitably partly normative, namely insofar as agents aim to make good decisions.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for comments to Jens Haas, Anthony Hejduk, and Aaron X. Wang, and to the “Happiness and Well-Being” project, funded by the John Templeton Foundation and Saint Louis University, for supporting my research on imagination in 2016–18.

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