

Imagination and Modal Knowledge: Defending Kripke from Hill

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(First draft)

1. Introduction

In this essay, I aim to defend Kripkean arguments for the non-identity of experiential mental states and their neurophysical correlates from Christopher Hill's objections. Though Kripke and Hill are my primary concerns, I demonstrate that these points apply also to David Chalmers and Paul Snowdon's relevant work. I propose a positive reason to believe that we can use our imaginings to inform our modal understanding of some mental states, and argue that Hill's reasons for rejecting Kripke's argument for this fails on three counts.

I begin by outlining Kripke's relevant points (§2). I then outline Hill and Snowdon's objections to Kripke's arguments, their shared assumption, and Hill's relevant objections to Kripke (§3). I then argue that there is a substantive difference between states of affairs concerning experiences, and those concerning non-experiences, and that this gives us reason to suppose that the relationship between imagination and possibility may well differ between these two kinds (§4). I follow this with my critique of Hill's argument (§5). I first suppose that Hill's conditional fails due to a counterexample (§5.1). I then argue that his dismissal of Kripke's method on epistemological grounds also applies to Hill's own argument (§5.2). Finally, I argue that the Nagelian distinction upon which his objection is based is unjustified and collapses (§5.3). I conclude that we have good reason to suppose—at least in the case of experiential mental states—that our imaginings rightly inform our understanding of modal possibilities, thereby informing the relevant identity claims (§6).

2. Context: Kripke's Claims

Kripke holds that the imaginability of a state of affairs informs its modal status, and Chalmers echoes this. (Kripke 1980; Chalmers 2002, pp. 145 ff.) I aim to defend this claim specifically, setting aside their broader metaphysical commitments. To focus my arguments, I borrow U.T. Place's distinction, restricting my attention to *experiential mental states* ('the conceptual residuum'), setting aside volitional and purely cognitive cases. (Place 1956, p. 44)

Kripke claims that identity statements involving rigid designators (proper names) are necessary truths, if true at all: $(A = B) \rightarrow \Box(A = B)$. (Kripke 1980, pp. 99–103) The apparent contingency of some identities, such as 'heat = molecular motion', is due to a confusion about what is imagined and what is referred to. When one seemingly imagines heat without molecular motion, she actually imagines a situation without molecular motion but with experiences qualitatively indistinguishable from those typically caused by heat. That is, she imagines the experience of heat rather than heat. (Kripke 1980, pp. 129–131)

Kripke argues that this kind of explanation cannot apply in the case of pain. In the case of heat there is an ‘intermediary’ between the physical phenomenon and our experience. In the case of pain, there is no such intermediary. Unlike heat, the experience of pain *just is* pain. (Kripke 1980, pp. 148–155) Therefore, there is no situation wherein one experiences pain without pain, as one might experience heat without heat (say, while dreaming of a fire). When one imagines pain without c-fibre firing, or vice versa, we are not misidentifying an intermediary, but directly engaging with the phenomenon. (Kripke 1980, p. 151) This informs us of there being possible worlds with pain and without c-fibre firing, and vice versa, and thus of the non-identity of the two. (Kripke 1980, pp. 153–155)

3. Christopher Hill (and Paul Snowdon) Against Kripke

Christopher Hill, following Nagel (1974), puts forward a substantial objection to Kripkean modal arguments by distinguishing between different modes of imagination. (Hill 1997, pp. 65–66) Hill distinguishes perceptual imagination (p-imagination)—putting ourselves in the state resembling the state we would be in if we perceived that which we are imagining—from sympathetic imagination (s-imagination)—putting ourselves in the state resembling the thing we are imagining. (Hill 1997, pp. 65–66; Nagel 1974, p. 446) Hill argues that when one ‘imagines’ pain without c-fibre stimulation, she is merely splicing together these distinct modes of imagination: s-imagining pain, and p-imagining the absence of c-fibre firing. Because these modes of imagination are independent, they can be combined without any seeming contradiction. Hill argues that this renders the Kripkean intuition just as unreliable as imagining heat without molecular motion;¹ Kripke is s-imagining P, and p-imagining \sim P, and the contradiction is not immediately apparent. (Hill 1997, pp. 69–71)

Hill offers a conditional account of these seeming possibilities:

(HC): If two concepts (A and B) lack substantive a priori ties (P), and one has no reason to suppose that they are coreferential (Q), then it will *seem* as though they are metaphysically separable, even if they are identical (R); $(P \ \& \ Q) \rightarrow R$. (Hill 1997, pp. 75–78)

As such, the seeming separability of an experiential mental state and its neurophysical correlate reflects a cognitive error in our representation rather than a metaphysical separation.

Paul Snowdon is similarly sceptical. Snowdon argues that Kripkean modal intuitions are ‘flimsy’ and give us no good reason to reject mind-body identity. (Snowdon 2015, pp. 21–22) The mind-body problem, according to Snowdon, is a scientific matter: Just as our imaginings failed to inform us that water is H₂O, so too do they fail to inform us about the nature of the experiential mental states. (Snowdon 2015, pp. 26–27)

¹ Snowdon echoes this sentiment. (Snowdon 2015, pp. 26–27)

Both Hill and Snowdon, I suggest, rely on a shared assumption:

The Uniformity Thesis: The relationship between imagining a particular state of affairs and its modal possibility is uniform, whether its subject matter is external or experiential.

I will argue that this assumption—which is not explicitly justified by either Hill or Snowdon—is untenable.

4. The Positive Case for Imagination (Sometimes) Informing Reality

I will begin my defence by making a distinction related to Kripke's discussion of intermediaries, namely: there are states of affairs about experiences (SOFEs) and states of affairs about other, non-experience, things (SOFOs). SOFEs and SOFOs can both be imagined, but the difference in their subject matter affects the relationship between the imagining and the SOFO/SOFE itself. Imagining some 'external' phenomena (say, an explosion) and imagining one's experience of the phenomena (the heat, the sight, the sound, etc. culminate into 'the experience of the explosion'), are quite different circumstances. Here it is important to think about what imagining is as opposed to conceiving or considering: when we imagine, we generate (or 'conjure up') experiences.²

The importance of this for the present discussion is this: When we imagine experiencing an explosion, we generate the experience that directly resembles the subject of the SOFE, 'the experience of the explosion'. By contrast, when we imagine the explosion, we generate the experience that resembles something ('the experience of the explosion') that we suppose correlates with the subject of the SOFO, 'the explosion'. Accordingly, the same experiences are being generated in both cases, but in the SOFE the subject matter is something that we can know implicitly (our experience) and in the SOFO we are trying to infer from our experience to some external fact.

In this case, then, the Uniformity Thesis fails; we would expect imagining a SOFE to inform us about the subject of the SOFE in a manner that we might not be informed when imagining a SOFO. Thus, if imagining SOFOs does not inform our understanding of their subjects, this cannot demonstrate that imagining SOFEs cannot inform our understanding of their subjects. As such, we do have genuine reason to suppose that our imaginings can inform whether our experiential mental states are identical to their neurophysical correlates.

² Hill uses the example of 'zombies'—those that Chalmers is concerned with—but thereby introduces complications such as '*imagining* what it is like to be a zombie'. (Chalmers 1996, pp. 94–99) A cleaner example is 'out of body experiences'. In imagining an out of body experience, one generates experiences of perceiving separately from her body. This clearly exemplifies *imagining*.

Consider the examples of out of body experiences (OBEs hereinafter): When one imagines an out of body experience they are generating experiences that directly correlate to an actual OBE. This, at least, gives us some positive reason to suppose that Kripkean arguments, from imagination to modal possibility, may hold in the case of SOFEs (the relevant cases); even if they do not for SOFOs (cases of ‘heat’ and ‘water’). This, in combination with Kripke’s related argument—that in the relevant cases there is no intermediary—rejects the Uniformity Thesis and grounds this essay’s thesis.

5. Critiquing Hill’s Argument

With a positive case for considering the modal informativeness of imagining SOFEs established, there is reason to doubt Snowdon’s scepticism: there is at least one good reason to accept Kripke’s claim that mind-brain identity can be rejected by proper use of our imagination. Hill offers a substantial argument against Kripke, and the remainder of the essay is devoted to my critique of this argument. I argue Hill’s objections fail on three fronts: Hill supposes a conditional to explain Kripke’s mistaken imagining (see §3), and I propose a counterexample to this conditional; Hill’s dismissal of Kripke’s explanation of contingent seeming identities is epistemically self-undermining; Hill’s distinction between different kinds of imagination is apparently an ad hoc insubstantial distinction.

5.1. A Counterexample to Hill’s Conditional.

I outline Hill’s conditional (HC) in §3, and now propose the following counterexample:

I am interested in the concept, ‘Aotearoa’, and you have never heard of ‘Aotearoa’. No doubt, you do still have some concept of ‘Aotearoa’: you know that I am interested in it, even if you know nothing else of it. Presently, there are no substantive a priori ties linking your concept of ‘Aotearoa’ to your concept of ‘New Zealand’, and you have no reason whatsoever to suppose they are coreferential. Thus, the antecedent of HC holds in this case. However, it does not *seem* as though the two concepts are separable, even if they happen to be identical (which they do). In these circumstances the concepts ‘Aotearoa’ and ‘New Zealand’ neither seem separable or inseparable; you are simply agnostic. Hill’s conditional predicts that there is a positive seeming separability in this case, where there is none. Therefore, (HC) is false.

Of course, in the case of experiential mental states, there is a genuine positive *seeming* that, for example, the concepts of ‘pain’ and ‘c-fibre firing’ are separable; this is not just a lack of seeming inseparable. There are also some further concerns with this conditional in the relevant cases. For example, it is not obvious that concepts such as pain and c-fibre firing ‘lack substantive a priori ties’: both concepts have shared expected behavioural correlates, which provides some substantive a priori reason to suspect they are coreferential.

5.2. Hill's Epistemically Self-Undermining Dilemma

My second criticism of Hill's argument is that his critique of Kripke's explanation of contingent seeming identities is epistemically self-undermining. To be more specific, in response to Kripke's explanation of how we could mistakenly take ourselves to be imagining the separability of, say, heat and molecular motion, Hill claims that this is "fundamentally misguided ... [because] ... in non-pathological circumstances introspection gives us pretty accurate access to the contents of our own states of imagination." (Hill 1997, p. 83)

However, if this explanation is misguided because introspection tells us what we are imagining, then this is just as much an issue for Hill's own arguments. Indeed, Hill is supposing that when Kripke or Chalmers imagines an OBE or a zombie, they are mistaken about what it is they are imagining (they take themselves *not* to be imagining c-fibre stimulation, but they are in fact s-imagining pain and pain = c-fibre stimulation). It seems that Hill must either accept that Kripke's attempted explanation was not fundamentally misguided, or that Hill's own attempt was misguided just the same. If introspection tells us what we are imagining, then Kripke genuinely is imagining pain and genuinely is not imagining c-fibre stimulation; introspection affirms this.

Either introspection accurately reports the content of our imagination—in which case Kripke and Chalmers are right to say they can imagine OBEs and zombies—or it does not—in which case Hill's rejection of Kripke's explanation of contingent-seeming identities fails. Hill cannot have it both ways.

5.3. Collapsing Hill's Core (Nagelian) Distinction

Finally, the distinction upon which Hill's argument relies is not properly substantiated. Hill cites Roger Shepard's relevant experiments. (Shepard and Cooper 1982) However, Shepard's experiments—even if interpreted in the controversial manner that Hill does—do not by themselves establish a genuine distinction between the processes of s-imagining and p-imagining, only that there is some relation between 'p-imagining' and actually perceiving.

In fact, what distinguishes imagining from conceiving or considering, is that by imagining one generates particular experiences. In this way, it would seem that the process could uniformly be described as s-imagining; p-imagining is reducible to s-imagining, and so the distinction collapses.

For example, if I imagine Bob Dylan wearing a top hat, I generate an experience that I would expect to correspond to the external phenomena of Bob Dylan actually wearing a top hat in my presence. This is just the same as s-imagining (what it is like) to be in the presence of Bob Dylan in a top hat. Of course, one might object that it does not *feel* the same to imagine Bob Dylan in a top hat, and to imagine what it is like to perceive Bob Dylan in a top hat, but the fact of the matter is that both of them *feel* like something. In both cases, you are generating experience, and so imagining 'what it is like'.

What may (but does not necessarily) differ, then, between ‘p-imagining Bob Dylan in a tophat’, and ‘s-imagining what it is like to perceive Bob Dylan in a tophat’ is not the *mode* of imagination. Rather, it is just the ‘it’ in ‘what it is like’; perhaps in one instance the ‘it’ is just *seeing* Bob Dylan, and in the other the ‘it’ is a more complete experience, perhaps seeing and hearing and shaking the hand of Bob Dylan in a tophat. If imagination is the generation of first-person experience, then Hill’s sympathetic/perceptual distinction cannot carry the weight his argument requires. If the s-imagining/p-imagining distinction collapses, then there is no foundation upon which Hill’s argument can be built.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that there is good reason to suppose that Kripke’s (and perhaps also Chalmers’) inferences from imagination to modal possibilities is well-founded. Snowdon’s scepticism must be reconsidered. Hill outlines a substantial objection to such Kripkean arguments, but this argument is unsuccessful. Hill’s explanation of the phenomena relies on a now refuted conditional, he supposes that it is misguided to suppose introspection fails to determine what it is we are imagining but argues that such a method is apt in Kripke’s case, and he bases his objection upon an unsubstantiated, collapsible distinction between modes of imagination.

The upshot is this: Hill fails to dismantle Kripke’s arguments for the non-identity of (at least) experiential mental states and their neurophysical correlates. Snowdon is thereby wrong to claim that we have no good reason to believe that the mind and brain are distinct, as Kripke has given us good reason to think so. Unless Kripke’s arguments can be refuted in some other manner, we have good reason to reject the claim that an experience is identical to its neurophysical correlate.

Imagination, when directed at SOFes, *accesses* rather than merely *represents* its subject matter; contra Hill’s attempt to overcome Kripke’s disanalogy.

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Wordcount: 2498

Body: 2433

Footnotes: 65