

# Mindsight

*Colin McGinn*

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We have three senses. Sight, hearing and touch, the last one including taste and smell. For most mammals the last two are primary, for man, the first takes precedence and provides our window to the outside world<sup>1</sup>.

As noted, our visual experience provides our most palpable proof of being spatially situated in a surrounding objective world. To the author McGinn, what we see and perceive requires a special denotation, henceforward to be called a percept. Once we have agreed on the case of the percept we can appreciate the sight of what the mind merely conjures up, namely an image. Why the percept is in front of our eyes occupying a visual field, the image is internal and far more shadowy. It seems to be transparent, as it does not have the power to occult, yet it nevertheless appears to give the same impression of sight as the direct perceptual one. Another observation is that while the percept provides technical information which we can consult for specific purpose, the internal image is far more evasive, giving the impression of sight, without any palpable particulars. In a way, it is like a smile without a face. The author brings as his two main sources a work by Sartre and reflections of Wittgenstein. As to Sartre there is the idea that a visual image does not contain more than what we put into it. It is all volition and intentional and unlike the percept needs continued attention to assert itself. Attractive as Sartre's remark may appear, I doubt whether it really stands up to further scrutiny, even if we discard the notion of so called photographic memory. More interesting and incisive is the observation of Wittgenstein to the effect that you cannot simultaneously form an image of something you are looking at, i.e. entertaining as a percept.

Dreams and hallucinations, how should those be classified? In dreams we do have the feeling of looking at something. It appears vivid and even palpable, if somewhat fantastic at times. In short it appears external, thus our existential anxiety of not ultimately being able to distinguish between dream and reality. McGinn clearly, without compunctions, comes down on the side of images, not percepts. Clearly the dream is manufactured by the brain, if not consciously so, and thus it cannot be a case of a percept. This is definitely not to be seriously refuted, still one is not entirely comfortable with the notion of dream images being on par with consciously conjured images. For one thing there is no volition, no conscious intention, as to attention McGinn makes the very interesting remark that in dreams our consciousness is focused, our mind does not stray, and hence we never find dreams boring, even if they are quite tedious, which often becomes manifest when you try to relate them afterwards. McGinn also points out that in images and in dreams we do not recognise people, in the sense of making visual inferences as to somebody's identity, we

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<sup>1</sup> Our personal extinction being for obvious reasons unimaginable we tend to think of death as being trapped in an eternal sensory deprivation. The future ceases to be, but the past is not obliterated. We are left to mourn during an eternity our lost opportunities

simply 'know' whom we are dreaming or thinking of. This I find not empirically true. I have myself recently had the experience of being presented with an involuntary image on the verge of falling asleep, and gradually forming a recognition of its identity. No doubt I have had that experience many times before, but not until now taken notice of it. In fact I believe that your mind is filled with involuntarily visual fragments, flitting like butterflies in your periphery, and which, at the time of sleep, alight and spread their wings in front of you, displaying startling images.

McGinn suggests that dreams constitute the basis of fiction and also of day-dreams. Of the distinction between day-dreams and dreams he says very little. Day-dreams seem less interesting than dreams, as they are mostly there to inflate your ego, the typical daydream involving a sense of being seen and famous and extolling in some glory which is your due. Day-dreams usually lack dramaturgy and tend to be repetitive. In a sense they are but variations of the sexual phantasy. You may dream about dreaming, but you never day-dream about day-dreaming. As to dreams, it is also indeed suggestive to point out the minimality of dreams, that you are visually only aware of what you need to know. But I do not know whether it is legitimate to draw the conclusion that the techniques of fiction are based on this, although it is a suggestive and an unrefutable idea.

As to hallucinations McGinn clearly is of the position that those are not percepts, and hence that they reflect no sensory malfunction<sup>2</sup>. They are images, willfully or unconsciously conjured, and the delusional aspect is due to the inability of properly distinguishing between a percept and an image. The author has also a theory how the abused child desperately flees reality into a dream-world, where volition and wishes take precedence over verification. If this process starts before the child has learned to make the basic distinction between a percept and a mere image, it is doomed. The whole discussion is reminiscent of the theories of Jung, who explained the difference between rising to the sky as a genius, or falling to your perdition into madness, as the ability of the ego to withstand the onslaught of the powerful archetypes.

In the ultimate part of the book, McGinn moves from the concretion of the visual image to imagination in general. The English language itself suggesting the transition of imagination in the visual sense of forming an image, to the more abstract sense of a cognitive image, in which visualization does not seem to play any role at all<sup>3</sup>. The whole point of McGinn's book is to anchor the formation of imagination to its inauspicious beginnings as visual imagery. To make this even more suggestive he also wants to find the analogy to percepts and settles for 'belief'. Belief being beyond willing and as such, like the percept, forming a link to reality. You need not think of a belief to have it, it requires no attention, it can be called up when it is needed, unlike the mere entertaining of a hypothesis, to which the mind is neutral as to veridity. In order to make the analogy even more perfect McGinn wonders whether Wittgenstein's observation that a percept and an image of the very same percept cannot be simultaneously entertained, corresponds to a similar phenomenon concerning beliefs and the associated imaginations, and comes to the

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<sup>2</sup> Supporting the claim on the writings of Karl Jasper

<sup>3</sup> It could be that any thought carries with it some fleeting fragmentary form of visualization, usually so indistinct and tentative that it disintegrates on inspection. One may, following James, refer to this as one of the components of the fringe of a thought.

conclusion that this cannot be so.

The purpose of McGinns book is a celebration of imagination, to show that it is not just an embellishment and a decoration, but that it is fundamental to our mental life. He is writing a book on philosophy and not cognitive science, thus in stead of focusing his scope, he covers a lot of ground, going over much of traditional philosophical concerns. Similarly his ambition is not to reduce things to simpler components as in traditional scientific analysis, but to relate a diversity of mental phenomena to imagination, a concept at least as intricate and elusive, as those he wants to illuminate. This is not meant as a criticism, just as a statement of ambitions. Philosophy is not science, although it touches upon it repeatedly, as in the various connections to neurology and cognitive psychology, displayed in the book; rather it should be thought of as the poetry of science, its ambitions being of a suggestive and evocative nature rather than one of verification.

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