

Against Mental Imagery: William Fish on Imagination as Perceptual Experience

Menentang Citra Mental: Pandangan William Fish tentang Imajinasi sebagai Pengalaman Perseptual

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Abstract: *William Fish rejects the traditional mental imagery model by arguing that imagination should not be understood as the manipulation of internal representations but as a form of quasi-experience grounded in direct realism. Existing studies have primarily focused on explaining Fish's anti-representational account of imagination, while relatively little attention has been given to its internal conceptual tensions and philosophical implications for contemporary debates on perception and representation. This paper critically examines Fish's theory through a descriptive-argumentative literature study employing conceptual and philosophical analysis. The analysis demonstrates that although Fish successfully challenges the representationalist conception of imagination, his account remains theoretically incomplete. The notions of memory, residual traces, empathy, and non-visual perceptual modalities continue to presuppose mediating cognitive structures that perform representational functions analogous to the mental imagery he explicitly rejects. Consequently, Fish's theory does not entirely eliminate representation but reconstructs it within a different conceptual framework centred on quasi-experience. This study contributes to contemporary philosophy of perception by clarifying the unresolved relationship between imagination, representation, and direct realism, while opening further dialogue between analytic philosophy and phenomenological approaches to imaginative experience.*

Keywords: Mental Imagery; Imagination; Quasi-Experience; Philosophy of Perception; Direct Realism; Representationalism.



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Abstrak: *William Fish menolak model tradisional mental imagery dengan berpendapat bahwa imajinasi tidak seharusnya dipahami sebagai manipulasi representasi mental internal, melainkan sebagai suatu bentuk quasi-experience (pengalaman semu) yang berlandaskan pada direct realism. Se jauh ini, kajian-kajian mengenai pemikiran Fish umumnya berfokus pada penjelasan tentang konsepsi anti-representasionalnya terhadap imajinasi, sementara perhatian terhadap ketegangan konseptual internal serta implikasi filosofisnya dalam perdebatan kontemporer mengenai persepsi dan representasi masih relatif terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji secara kritis teori Fish melalui studi kepustakaan deskriptif-argumentatif dengan pendekatan analisis konseptual dan filosofis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun Fish berhasil mengkritik konsepsi representasionalis tentang imajinasi, teorinya masih menyisakan persoalan konseptual. Konsep-konsep seperti memori, jejak pengalaman (residual traces), empati, serta modalitas persepsi nonvisual secara implisit tetap mengandaikan adanya struktur kognitif yang berfungsi sebagai mediator dan menjalankan fungsi representasional yang serupa dengan mental imagery yang justru ditolaknya. Oleh karena itu, teori Fish tidak sepenuhnya menghilangkan representasi, melainkan merekonstruksinya dalam kerangka konseptual yang berbeda melalui konsep quasi-experience. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap filsafat persepsi kontemporer dengan memperjelas hubungan yang masih problematis antara imajinasi, representasi, dan direct realism, sekaligus membuka ruang dialog yang lebih luas antara filsafat analitik dan fenomenologi dalam memahami pengalaman imajinatif.*

Kata Kunci: mental imagery; imajinasi; quasi-experience; filsafat persepsi; direct realism; representasionalisme.

Introduction

Perceptual experience serves as the primary window to external reality, through which human beings come to know the world as it is perceived by the five senses. Naturally, the act of “seeing an object” as part of external reality is often regarded as something simple and immediate. For instance, visual perception is commonly understood as merely opening one’s eyes, allowing the object—or reality itself—to appear as something directly given. The assumption is that because the object exists before the eyes, it can automatically be recognized without difficulty.¹ Philosophically, however, the relation between the perceiver and the perceived object involves a certain “medium,” one that presupposes a series of processes corresponding to the object, which is later referred to as a mental image. The debate surrounding the role of mental images in perceptual experience has become a central issue in the philosophy of mind, particularly in the opposition between indirect realism (representationalism) and direct realism.

Within the indirect realist or representationalist tradition, which can be traced back to Thomas Hobbes, experience is understood as being directed toward internal images. In contrast, direct realism rejects the mediation of such internal representations and emphasizes the immediate presence of external objects in

experience. In this context, William Fish develops a critique of the mental image model by rejecting the existence of internal representations within the phenomenal structure of experience. The mental image model, in brief, can be traced back to John Locke's account of ideas as a network of meaningful relations between mind and object. Following Richard Rorty's reading, Locke understands ideas as a form of intentionality between matter and mind, such that ideas are immaterial. In this sense, an idea functions as a representation of the material object being thought, and it is directly present in consciousness. For example, when a person falls and feels pain, he or she is experiencing an idea of pain in the mind as a representation of the falling event. What is directly experienced, then, is not the event itself, but the idea of the event. Epistemologically, for Locke, an idea is what is present before the mind whenever one is thinking. The representational status of ideas with respect to perceptual objects is explained through a specific causal impulse originating from the external object, which produces ideas in the mind.²

Several studies have highlighted Fish's strength in dismantling the assumptions of representationalism, as well as the ongoing debate concerning the scope of phenomenal character within perceptual processes. A central point of disagreement concerns whether perceptual experience already contains certain properties that precede experience and make possible the formation of conceptual understanding, as argued by John McDowell.

A potential research gap that can be used to highlight the instability in Fish's position lies in the attempt to account for the claim of the immediate presence of objects in perceptual experience. More precisely, this concerns the question of how such a claim of perceptual presence can be maintained when the object is not always stably present or easily identifiable, particularly in cases involving sound, smell, and taste. In this context, Fish distinguishes between visual and non-visual perceptual experience. These two kinds of perceptual experience are taken to involve different and contrasting phenomenal properties. The assumption is that certain visual perceptual experiences, such as the perception of colour, also involve non-visual perceptual modalities, such as smell, sound, and taste, whose properties are, in a sense, separable from one another. For instance, when one sees a red apple, the property of redness is taken to be directly present in the object itself. In contrast, when one hears the sound produced by biting into the apple, the sound is transmitted through air and thus does not appear to be directly located in the apple as a physical object. Rather, sound is not a property of a solid object, but a wave like event.

For Fish, this analogical distinction between vision and audition indicates differences in their respective phenomenal properties. In the case of sound, these properties include pitch, loudness, and timbre.³

What Fish rejects is the **Phenomenal Principle**, which posits the presence of a mysterious **mental object** in the mind, implying that perceptual experience is not direct but mediated by such a mental object. In the case of sound, for example, what is directly present in consciousness is the phenomenal feeling of *what it is like* to hear. By contrast, the sound waves and vibrations that travel through the air do not themselves constitute the content of conscious experience. This suggests that phenomenological experience involves two distinct loci: the locus of consciousness, which comprises what is experienced directly, and the locus of non-consciousness, which concerns processes that are not directly experienced. When listening to music, for instance, we do not directly experience *treble* as an acoustic property referring to the high-frequency range that contributes to the clarity of vocal or instrumental sounds. Instead, what is immediately given in auditory consciousness is whether the sound is perceived as noisy or quiet, pleasant or unpleasant. In other words, within auditory perceptual experience, the direct object of consciousness consists only of qualities such as the pitch of the sound and its pleasantness or unpleasantness. Accordingly, perceptual experience exhibits two important patterns. The first is a **factive** relation, namely a direct relation to the object itself. The second is a **non-factive** relation, which concerns cognitive or mental activities directed toward the object. In the factive relation, experience consists in the sensory or phenomenological awareness through which the object is directly presented to consciousness. By contrast, in the non-factive relation, experience involves cognitive activities such as judging, believing, and other forms of mental evaluation.

The central issue concerns the assumption that perception and hallucination share the same phenomenal state of mind (*the likeness of mental states*), thereby attributing the same status to both genuine perceptual experience and hallucinatory experience. In other words, when a person is hallucinating and when a person is genuinely perceiving, both are assumed to instantiate an identical mental state and, consequently, the same type of perceptual experience. This assumption is commonly expressed through the **Common Factor Principle**. Consider, for example, a person who sees a pink mouse because the mouse has been painted pink. Contrast this with a person who hallucinates a pink mouse even though no such mouse is visually present to anyone else. According to the Common Factor Principle, both cases involve the same mental state, namely the experience of the mouse's *pinkness*, despite the fact that only one case involves an actual external object. Fish rejects this position because it treats perceptual experience and hallucination as sharing the same underlying mental state. In his view, theories of perception that endorse the Common Factor Principle fail to recognize the fundamental difference between genuine perception and hallucination by placing them under a single explanatory framework. From the standpoint of common sense, however, these are two

importantly different kinds of mental episodes. For example, suppose a person hallucinates a flying house while everyone else clearly perceives that no such house exists. The hallucinatory experience and the genuine perceptual experience of the surrounding observers cannot plausibly be regarded as the same kind of mental state. For this reason, Fish rejects the Common Factor Principle, arguing that it conflicts with common-sense intuition by equating two fundamentally different kinds of experience and mental states.

This paper therefore makes a contribution by demonstrating that, in the context of perceptual experience, the anti-mental-image position developed by Fish faces difficulties in upholding the claim of direct realism, thereby reopening the need for a more adequate explanation of the phenomenal structure of perceptual experience.

Perceptual Experience

To clarify the notion of perceptual experience, it is necessary to distinguish it as an epistemic relation between a perceiving subject and an external object. Perceptual experience is closely connected with knowledge claims, whether expressed as perceptual statements or propositions. While a perceptual statement merely describes what appears, a perceptual proposition requires epistemic justification because it asserts knowledge about an object. Despite this distinction, both presuppose the same epistemic structure, namely the relation between the subject's perceptual capacities and the ontological status of the perceived object. Thus, perceptual experience ultimately concerns the interaction between the perceiving subject and external reality.⁴

Perceptual experience is therefore understood here as sensory experience through which subjects encounter material objects. As a "window" onto reality, perception raises a fundamental philosophical problem concerning how external objects are presented to consciousness. This problem has generated three major positions. First, direct realism argues that perceptual experience provides immediate access to mind-independent objects. Second, indirect realism or representationalism maintains that perception is mediated by internal representations. Third, critical realism challenges both views by acknowledging the role of phenomenal consciousness without reducing perception entirely to mental representation.⁵

Direct realism assumes that external reality is directly present in perceptual experience, so that phenomenal qualities are understood as the manifestation of the objects themselves. By contrast, indirect realism argues that what is immediately available in perception is not the external object but its mental representation. Bennett characterizes this position through the notion of a "veil of perception," according to which external reality can only be accessed through sensory data and mental representations.⁶

Critical realism attempts to reconcile these competing positions by recognizing that perceptual experience contains both conceptual and phenomenal dimensions. While perceptual consciousness is directed toward external objects, it also involves inner phenomenal states that shape perceptual awareness. Nevertheless, perceptual experience cannot be reduced solely to these inner states. Accordingly, perceptual theories may broadly be classified into direct realism (naïve realism), indirect realism (representationalism/idealism), and critical realism (new realism).⁷

Perceptual experience also encounters epistemic difficulties arising from non-veridical perception, particularly illusion and hallucination. In cases of illusion, an object appears differently from its actual properties, whereas hallucination involves perceptual experiences without any corresponding external object. These phenomena challenge the assumption that phenomenal appearance always accurately reflects external reality and therefore remain central problems in contemporary philosophy of perception.⁸

Besides the relation between subject and object, perception also depends upon the cognitive activity of the mind. Bloomer argues that the mind actively organizes perceptual input according to the Law of Simplicity, whereby sensory information is interpreted in the simplest and most coherent way possible. This principle demonstrates that perception is not merely passive reception but an active process of meaning construction.⁹

Finally, Dretske distinguishes perceptual experience from perceptual belief. Perceptual experience refers to direct awareness of objects or events, whereas perceptual belief concerns the cognitive judgment that follows from such experience. A subject may possess perceptual experience without forming the corresponding belief, or conversely hold a belief without direct perceptual experience. This distinction clarifies that perception and belief, although closely related, represent different epistemic states.¹⁰

Three Principles of Perceptual Experience

There are three important and foundational principles in perceptual experience, namely the common factor principle, the phenomenal principle, and the representational principle. Before elaborating on these three principles, it is necessary to first introduce an epistemic commitment within perceptual experience. The first commitment requires the existence of a perceiving subject equipped with sensory modalities. In other words, when one perceives a visual object, it presupposes the functioning of a faculty of vision, whether operating normally or abnormally. The second commitment requires the existence of an object being perceived as a concrete property. That is, when an object is perceived, it is simultaneously experienced as a physical entity or external reality. According to my view, these two commitments are

essential in order to provide a shared “grounding” for perceptual experience among different perceivers. This proposal of epistemic commitment is motivated by the fact that, within modern epistemology, particularly in Sellars’ framework, the relation between the perceiving subject and the perceived object is often characterized in dualistic terms.

Still on the subject of dualism within modern epistemology, Sellars argues that the entities of mind (ideas) and object (physical reality) have often been assumed to be fundamentally separate. This separation refers to a difference in their mode of existence: one is regarded as immaterial, while the other is material, and therefore both are treated as belonging to different domains of reality. More precisely, modern epistemological dualism maintains that a person’s ideas or knowledge are numerically distinct from the objects that are known.¹¹ However, Sellars rejects the implication that these two entities must therefore belong to two entirely separate worlds. Although ideas and objects differ qualitatively, this does not mean that they exist within radically disconnected realms of reality. In this sense, the strict separation between subject and object risks placing both entities into different “spectrums” of the world or distinct ontological spaces. To use a simple example, a tree exists objectively outside the perceiving subject. Meanwhile, the content of that object, as idea or sensory awareness, exists subjectively within the mind in the form of sense data. Yet, the separation between these two aspects does not imply that they originate from two mysterious and unrelated realms. For this reason, such separation should instead be understood by viewing sense data as a natural event occurring within the brain–mind structure of an organic subject. In this regard, sense data do not aim to isolate objects from subjects, but rather to explain that the existence of external objects and the perceiving subject are mutually correlated and capable of influencing one another.

The correlation and mutual influence between the knowing subject and the known object are what ultimately constitute knowledge. Knowledge, in this sense, refers to an empirical and physiological process between the self and the object that gives rise to ideas. This can also be seen in the subject’s interpretive engagement with the object being known. Once this correlational and interactive relation is emphasized, the rigid dualism within the process of knowing gradually begins to fade. Moreover, according to Sellars, knowledge cannot be separated from the interpretive activity through which the object becomes the content of cognition itself. In other words, knowledge is not primarily a matter of how the mind “mirrors” or reflects external objects, but rather how the object is adequately interpreted. The degree of knowledge, therefore, is closely related to a claim made as an interpretation of the content of knowledge. Put differently, knowledge is an attempt to understand ideas within the mind, rather than merely external objects themselves, since the

content of knowledge consists of ideas. However, focusing on ideas does not mean neglecting the relevant facts concerning the object. This means that a knowledge claim still needs to be empirically analyzed on the basis of relevant facts that may function as standards of scientific validity.¹²

Returning to the three important principles within perceptual experience, the first is the common factor principle. Fundamentally, this principle divides visual experience into three categories: veridical perception, illusion, and hallucination. Veridical perception refers to a perceptual experience in which a sensory object is perceived as it is presented in the mind. For example, when a person sees a pink elephant, the visual experience may indeed correspond to an actual object, whether the elephant is a rare species or has been artificially painted pink, making it different from elephants in general. The important point is that what is visually perceived and what is represented in the mind correspond to one another. In contrast, illusory perception refers to a perceptual experience in which an object appears in a certain way within the mind, even though the object itself is not actually so in reality. A common example is the optical illusion of a stick appearing bent when partially immersed in water. Visually, the stick appears bent, yet in physical reality the stick itself remains straight. The appearance is produced by the refraction of light, which creates the impression of bending. The crucial point here is that what is perceived and what is mentally represented correspond only in an apparent or deceptive manner. Finally, hallucinatory perception refers to a perceptual experience in which a sensory object appears as though it were real, despite diverging entirely from actual reality. For instance, a person under the influence of hallucinogenic substances may visually perceive a vast desert landscape before them, even though no such desert is visible from the perspective of normal observers who are not under the influence of those substances. In this sense, hallucination “displaces” reality into a non-real reality that is nevertheless experienced as if it were normal perceptual experience. These three forms of visual experience, veridical perception, illusion, and hallucination, suggest that, at the mental level, their conditions may appear similar or even indistinguishable from the perspective of the subject who merely “seems to see.”¹³

The second is the phenomenal principle, which fundamentally emphasizes that if, in perceptual experience, something appears to possess certain qualities for the subject, then there must be something that genuinely possesses the qualities being experienced by the subject. For example, when a person perceives a tomato that appears within consciousness as a tomato, it cannot simply be doubted that the red color and round shape being experienced are those of a tomato. The assumption is that what is directly present within perceptual awareness originates from the sensory object itself. In this sense, the redness and roundness are treated as real qualities that are present within consciousness. According to Fish, the phenomenal principle

transforms a mental activity that initially exists merely as an appearance (a phenomenological antecedent) into a claim concerning actual existence (a metaphysical consequence). Fish further supports this principle through the phenomenon of afterimages. Imagine a person welding metal. The intense light entering the eyes is so bright that, even after the light source disappears, a bright spot or visual trace remains in one's vision. This lingering visual effect suggests that something of the preceding object continues to be present, even though the original physical source of light is no longer there. Through the phenomenon of afterimages, Fish aims to emphasize that the phenomenal principle assumes that perceptual experience must always be "about" or "contain" something.¹⁴ Consequently, the relation between subject and object becomes necessary within perceptual experience. If the physical object itself is absent, then there must still be some corresponding mental condition within consciousness, such as a mere "appearing" or seeming, as part of the subject's awareness.

The third is the representational principle, which fundamentally emphasizes that perceptual experience involves a kind of mental image or representation that stands for reality within sensory experience. In this context, representation refers to the "aboutness" of experience, namely the way sensory objects are encountered and interpreted in particular ways. For example, when one has the perceptual experience of visually seeing a wooden chair, the chair is not merely perceived as a physical object, but also as something possessing a certain function, namely as an object to sit on. In this sense, physical objects are understood not only in terms of their existence, but also in terms of the representations associated with them within the mind, such as function, utility, commodity value, economic meaning, and so forth. Within the representational principle, there exists a correlational relation between external objects and the mental images that function as their representations. Fish illustrates this relation through the analogy between a map of London and a postcard of St. Paul's Cathedral. A London map symbolically represents St. Paul's Cathedral through a sign or marker, whereas a postcard represents the cathedral non-symbolically through a direct visual image. The important point is that although these two modes of representation are different, both nevertheless convey information concerning the same sensory object. In other words, because perception is representational, it possesses experiential content that may be understood as a set of propositions. To know something, therefore, is to possess certain propositions as knowledge. More broadly, however, knowledge may possess two dimensions. On the one hand, knowledge may require explicit statements or propositions.¹⁵ On the other hand, knowledge may also exist without being verbally articulated. The assumption here is that knowledge involves commitments that generate two characteristics of belief, which do not always occur simultaneously. The first characteristic is

propositional knowledge, in which the subject explicitly formulates and accounts for what is believed and thought. The second characteristic concerns non-propositional knowledge, where belief functions more as an aspirational or practical commitment expressed through action, even when it is not verbally stated.¹⁶ It is these statements or propositions within knowledge that may ultimately be described as knowledge claims.

From these three principles, perceptual experience presupposes that knowledge arises from the encounter between the subject (as sensory modality) and the object (as property), producing certain qualities or ideas within the mind. In this regard, the function of the mind or reason is not simply to produce ideas, but rather to serve as an “active container” through which ideas or qualities given in perceptual experience are organized and utilized. Perceptual experience, therefore, may be understood as a form of sensory knowledge acquired through the five senses. Biologically speaking, the function of a bodily organ cannot be separated from its structure. Likewise, knowledge concerning the anatomy of the brain (structure) and knowledge concerning the way the brain functions have continually developed alongside one another. The development of functional theories of the brain has also been shaped by anatomical studies, making it difficult to understand how the brain operates without considering structural changes within it. For this reason, recent developments in anatomical research have significantly influenced contemporary understandings of brain function, particularly through six major concepts: Cell Theory, Neuron Theory, Functional Units, Reflex Pathways, Synapses, and Cell Membranes. These six important concepts collectively demonstrate that brain function is fundamentally influenced by the structures supporting it, namely cells. In 1665, Robert Hooke introduced the term “cell” while observing the pores of cork through a microscope, an instrument originally developed by Zacharias Janssen around 1590.¹⁷ Accordingly, the common factor principle, the phenomenal principle, and the representational principle within philosophy become important points of intersection with contemporary scientific developments concerning cells, neurons, and Neuroscience.

Mental Images and the Status of Imagination According to Fish

Tracing the notion of mental imagery cannot be separated from epistemological debates concerning the relationship between mind and object. The central question is whether understanding necessarily depends upon possessing mental images or whether meaning can be grasped independently of them. Consider three examples. A listener may easily visualize a ruler when hearing that an object is “nine feet away,” whereas the statement that the Earth is ninety-three million miles from the Sun evokes only a vague image. By contrast, highly theoretical concepts such as a proton

may be understood despite the absence of any clear mental image. These examples suggest that comprehension does not always require vivid imagery.¹⁸

The vividness of mental imagery may therefore be understood in three degrees: clear images associated with ordinary objects, faint images referring to objects beyond everyday experience, and the absence of imagery despite successful conceptual understanding. Drawing on G. E. Moore, this distinction demonstrates that understanding is not identical with possessing a mental image. Moore differentiates between *knowing*, *understanding*, and *grasping the sense* of a statement. Although imagination may facilitate understanding, meaning can still be grasped even when no corresponding image is present in the mind.¹⁹

A different perspective is offered by Thomas Hobbes, who associates imagination with the persistence of sensory impressions or the "decay of sense." In *Leviathan*, Hobbes argues that dreams, ghosts, and private visions are products of imagination rather than genuine perceptions of reality. Such images become problematic when individuals mistake them for objective reality. If social and political action were guided solely by dreams, supernatural voices, or private visions, public order would become impossible because no common criterion could distinguish reality from illusion. Mental imagery therefore lacks any necessary connection with external reality and remains fundamentally subjective.²⁰

The discussion becomes more systematic in John Locke's theory of representation. Locke distinguishes between primary qualities, such as solidity, extension, motion, and figure, which belong objectively to external objects, and secondary qualities, such as colour, sound, and smell, which arise through the perceiver's sensory experience. Consequently, ideas of secondary qualities do not resemble anything literally existing in objects themselves; rather, they are effects produced by the primary qualities of material bodies upon the perceiving mind. Mental imagery thus functions as a representational state mediating the subject's relation to reality rather than constituting reality itself.²¹

Locke further explains that these ideas are preserved in memory, although their vividness gradually weakens over time. Repeated experience strengthens remembered ideas, whereas neglect or biological conditions contribute to forgetting. Ideas impressed through multiple sensory channels remain more stable because repeated encounters reinforce their persistence. Mental imagery therefore originates in sensory experience but continues to exist as remembered representations stored within the mind.²²

From Locke's perspective, mental imagery consists of ideas derived from both primary and secondary qualities. While external objects provide the initial source of these ideas, the mind actively preserves and reorganizes them through memory. Perception therefore produces two complementary outcomes: it identifies relatively

stable properties belonging to objects while simultaneously generating subjective sensory qualities dependent upon the perceiver. Mental imagery consequently functions as a partial representation of external reality rather than reality itself.²³

The next issue concerns the relationship between mental imagery and imagination. Ronald Finke understands imagination as a cognitive capacity that enables individuals to generate, manipulate, and reorganize mental images in order to recognize patterns and construct new representations. Mental images may arise from perceptual experience, but imagination actively transforms them into new cognitive configurations. Imagination therefore functions not merely as a repository of perceptual traces but as an active process of mental construction.²⁴

This distinction raises an important epistemological question: does perceptual experience provide direct access to external objects, or does it only provide access to mental images representing those objects? If perception is mediated entirely by mental imagery, then external reality becomes epistemically inaccessible because subjects encounter only representations rather than objects themselves. Conversely, if perception relates directly to external objects, then mental imagery cannot serve as the primary object of awareness. This tension forms one of the central problems in contemporary philosophy of perception and prepares the ground for William Fish's critique of representationalism.

Mary Warnock likewise argues that imagination is a fundamental power of the human mind. Unlike perception, which depends upon the presence of external objects, imagination enables subjects to engage meaningfully with both existing and non-existing entities. Through imagination, individuals are able to anticipate possibilities, construct hypothetical situations, and evaluate alternative courses of action. Imagination therefore extends perceptual experience beyond immediate sensory awareness without requiring the actual presence of its object.²⁵

Although both mental imagery and imagination involve representations, they perform different cognitive functions. Mental imagery primarily preserves perceptual content derived from previous experience, whereas imagination actively reorganizes, combines, and transforms that content into new possibilities. Mental imagery is therefore relatively passive, while imagination is constructive and creative. This distinction is particularly significant because William Fish rejects the assumption that imagination should be explained merely as the manipulation of stored mental images.

Rather than treating imagination as an inner picture or representation, Fish argues that it is better understood through its relation to perceptual experience. The central philosophical question is therefore no longer whether imagination contains mental images, but whether imagining should be understood as a distinctive mode of experience possessing its own ontological status. This shift from representational

content to experiential structure marks Fish's departure from traditional theories of mental imagery and provides the conceptual foundation for his account of imagination as quasi-experience.

Unlike traditional theories that explain imagination through mental imagery, William Fish shifts the discussion from an epistemological problem to an ontological one. The central question is no longer whether imagination contains mental representations, but what kind of experience imagining actually is. Fish illustrates this through several examples: imagining a three-sided circle, empathizing with someone who has experienced extreme hunger, or imagining life as a woman in order to understand gendered experiences. These examples indicate different modes of imagining. The first concerns conceptual impossibility, the second refers to remembered or reconstructed experience, while the third exemplifies what Fish calls quasi-experience—an experience that resembles perception without becoming genuine perceptual experience.

Fish argues that imagination should not be understood as the manipulation of internal pictures or representations. Rather, imagining is an intentional activity in which subjects adopt an "as-if" experiential stance toward an object or situation without committing themselves to its actual existence. Consequently, imagination differs fundamentally from perception. Perception places subjects in direct experiential contact with objects, whereas imagination recreates the structure of experience without reproducing its perceptual presence. This distinction enables Fish to reject the traditional identification of imagination with mental imagery.²⁶

For this reason, Fish is skeptical of theories that treat imagination as phenomenal content preserved inside the mind. If imagination were identical with phenomenal content, then imagining would simply become another form of perception. Instead, Fish argues that imagination operates through the residual traces of previous perceptual experience, which function as resources for imaginative activity without constituting mental pictures representing reality. Imagination therefore possesses its own experiential structure rather than borrowing its ontological status from perception.

Fish further strengthens this position by distinguishing between epistemological and metaphysical explanations of perception. From an epistemological perspective, perception and hallucination appear to share a common phenomenal character because both generate intentional content about objects. Consequently, the Common Factor Principle treats perception and hallucination as fundamentally similar experiences that differ only in the existence of their objects.²⁷

Fish rejects this conclusion at the metaphysical level. He argues that perceptual experience is constituted not merely by intentional content but by the actual presence of mind-independent objects. Objects are therefore not passive recipients

of representation but active constituents of perceptual experience itself. Changes in the object necessarily transform the character of perception because the object partly constitutes what is experienced. The explanatory priority thus shifts from intentional content to the ontological status of the perceived object.

This distinction has significant implications for imagination. Since imagination lacks the constitutive presence of external objects, it cannot be explained using the same ontology as perception. Nevertheless, neither should imagination be reduced to inner representations or mental images. Instead, Fish conceptualizes imagination as quasi-experience: an intentional activity that reproduces certain structural features of perception while remaining ontologically distinct from genuine perceptual experience. In this way, Fish attempts to preserve the realism of perception without returning to the representationalist theory of mental imagery.

The Limitations of Fish's Critique of Imagination

After discussing in the previous subsection Fish's account of imagination as a mental activity that does not directly relate to perceptual objects, this final subsection attempts to outline several limitations within Fish's critique itself. Before examining these limitations, it is first necessary to describe the five modalities of perceptual experience along with their respective characteristics. The purpose is to identify the distinctive features of each modality and their relation to perceptual properties, thereby clarifying the contrasts among vision, hearing, smell, texture, and taste. These differences concern the "source" of perceptual objects as causes, and what is directly received by the subject from those sources as effects. Accordingly, the central pattern underlying the limitations of Fish's critique of imagination concerns the problem of the "source" of perception and the direct effects experienced from perceptual objects. As an illustration, consider encountering a garbage bag filled with vegetables that have begun to decay, thereby producing an unpleasant smell. Ordinarily, such an odor can already be detected from a relatively distant range of approximately three to four meters. This indicates that there exists a spatial gap between the property of the object and the sensory modality of the perceiving subject. The important point here is that there is an asymmetry between the "source" and its perceptual effect, such that mediation becomes necessary. In other words, the odor is not captured directly by the sense of smell itself, but rather through a certain medium, namely air, through which the smell becomes perceptually accessible.

Thus, what is directly perceived by the subject through the olfactory sense may not actually be the odor itself, but rather the air carrying it. This problem becomes one of the central issues that will be explored in this final subsection.

Previously, I emphasized that in the case of the sense of smell, the nose does not directly perceive odor itself, but rather directly encounters the air that carries it. The

assumption here is that odor relates to the “source,” whereas air relates to the medium or the “effect.” In short, the source of an object’s modality cannot automatically provide certainty that it constitutes the primary reference point of perceptual experience itself.

The same issue applies to the sense of hearing. Put simply, the ear perceives sound through sound waves propagating through the air, which subsequently become vibrations within the eardrum, allowing the brain to register them as particular ideas or auditory contents, such as loudness, softness, and related qualities. Drawing upon William Fish, both smell and hearing involve particular properties that constitute the contents of perceptual experience. Fish further argues that perceptual capacities may be divided according to two levels of properties: low-level properties and high-level properties. Low-level properties include basic features such as color, shape, spatial location, and movement. This position is generally associated with what Fish describes as the conservative view. High-level properties, by contrast, involve more complex features, including kind-properties, causality, and generic classifications, and are associated with the liberal view.²⁸ For the conservative position, perception functions as a relatively passive “instrument” that merely receives sensory inputs without significant intervention from the mind. The liberal position, however, regards the senses as more active instruments that allow room for cognitive intervention and interpretive activity by the mind itself.

The distinction between low-level and high-level properties provides an important starting point for understanding William Fish’s theory of perception. According to Fish, conservative theorists maintain that perception is initially limited to low-level sensory properties such as colour, shape, or movement, whereas liberal theorists argue that perception may also include high-level properties such as object kinds and causal relations. For example, when observing a speeding car shattering a glass door, conservatives claim that perception registers only successive events, while causation is supplied by cognition. Liberals, however, argue that the causal relation itself is visually perceived. Fish employs this distinction to explain that perceptual experience may already include conceptual organization rather than consisting solely of raw sensory input.²⁹

Fish extends this discussion to imagination by rejecting both the traditional mental imagery model and the reduction of imagination to purely propositional cognition. Rather than treating imagination as the manipulation of internal representations, he characterizes it as quasi-experience—an experiential state that resembles perception without constituting genuine perceptual awareness. In this account, imagination concerns what it is like to experience an object despite the absence of that object in direct perception. Consequently, imagination is neither identical with perception nor reducible to linguistic or conceptual judgment alone.³⁰

Although this position offers an important critique of representationalism, it also raises a significant philosophical difficulty. If imagination involves neither mental imagery nor direct perceptual contact with objects, what explains its phenomenal character? Fish replaces the traditional representational foundation of imagination with the notion of quasi-experience, yet this move appears to relocate rather than eliminate the problem of mediation. The concept of what it is like still requires an explanatory basis capable of accounting for the continuity between previous perceptual experience and present imaginative awareness.

This difficulty becomes more evident when considering the role of memory. Fish explains imagination through residual traces of previous experience rather than through mental images. Nevertheless, residual traces presuppose memory, and memory necessarily preserves previous perceptual contents in a form that can later be reactivated. Even if these traces are not understood as pictorial images, they continue to perform representational functions. Consequently, Fish does not completely abandon representation but reformulates it within a different conceptual vocabulary.

A similar problem appears in empathy. Understanding another person's suffering does not consist in literally sharing identical experience but in interpreting another's condition through memory, concepts, and previous embodied experience. Phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and Edith Stein likewise argue that empathy is an intentional act through which one apprehends another's experience without becoming that person. Accordingly, Fish's account of what it is like seems to depend upon cognitive mediation even while rejecting representational explanations.³¹

The appeal to what it is like also encounters difficulties when applied to subjective experiences such as pain. Phenomenal experiences differ significantly according to bodily, psychological, and situational conditions, making it difficult to establish a common experiential reference shared equally by different subjects. Consequently, quasi-experience cannot fully explain how imaginative consciousness acquires stable phenomenal content without relying upon previous experiential structures.

These considerations suggest that Fish's account occupies an uneasy position between direct realism and representationalism. On the one hand, he rejects mental imagery as the explanatory basis of imagination. On the other hand, his notions of quasi-experience, memory, empathy, and residual traces continue to function as mediating structures that enable imaginative awareness. Rather than eliminating representation altogether, Fish reconstructs it in a less explicit experiential form.

From this perspective, Fish's project remains philosophically unfinished. His rejection of mental imagery successfully challenges the classical representational model inherited from Locke and empiricism, yet it does not completely resolve the

question of how imagination becomes phenomenally meaningful. The explanatory role assigned to memory and residual experiential traces indicates that imagination continues to depend upon representational resources, even if these are no longer conceived as internal pictures. Fish therefore transforms, rather than abolishes, the representational foundations of imagination.

Conclusion

This study has examined William Fish's rejection of the traditional mental imagery model and his proposal that imagination should instead be understood as a form of quasi-experience rather than as the manipulation of internal representations. Fish successfully demonstrates that imagination cannot be adequately explained through the representational model inherited from classical empiricism, particularly the assumption that perceptual experience is mediated by mental images. By grounding imagination within the framework of direct realism, Fish shifts the discussion from internal pictorial representations toward experiential engagement with imagined situations.

Nevertheless, the analysis also reveals important philosophical limitations in Fish's position. Although he rejects mental imagery explicitly, his account continues to rely implicitly on cognitive structures such as memory, residual traces, empathy, conceptual understanding, and previous perceptual experience. These elements function as mediating structures that enable imaginative experience and therefore perform representational roles, even if they are no longer conceived as internal pictures. Likewise, the analysis of non-visual perceptual modalities—including auditory and olfactory experience—demonstrates that perceptual experience is not always characterised by the immediate presence of identifiable external objects, thereby complicating Fish's claim concerning the directness of perceptual awareness.

Accordingly, this study argues that Fish does not completely overcome representationalism. Rather than eliminating representation, his theory reformulates it through the concept of quasi-experience, thereby replacing pictorial representation with experiential and cognitive mediation. This finding suggests that the central philosophical issue is not whether imagination involves representation, but what form such representation assumes within perceptual consciousness.

Theoretically, this article contributes to contemporary philosophy of perception by reconstructing Fish's anti-imagery thesis through a critical dialogue with representationalism, direct realism, and phenomenological approaches to imagination. It further demonstrates that imagination cannot be fully separated from the cognitive conditions that make experience intelligible, thereby opening new possibilities for future research on the relationship between imagination, memory,

embodiment, empathy, and perceptual consciousness within both analytic philosophy and phenomenology.

Endnotes

1. For McDowell, a capacity that plays a role in experience is conceptual only if it is manifested in that experience solely through the act of its acceptance. Indeed, the evaluation of an experience, which involves the capacity to use concepts to assess that experience is not something that stands on its own. In short, the capacity to evaluate cannot exist independently of the capacity to use concepts outside of that connection. John Mc Dowell, *Mind and World with a new Introduction*. (USA: Harvard College, 1994), p. 11.
2. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror Of Nature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 27
3. William Fish, *Philosophy of Perception a Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 158.
4. E.D. Klemke, *The Epistemology of G.E. Moore* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), p. 142.
5. Kenneth T. Gallagher, *The Philosophy of Knowledge* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), p. 88; Sajahan Miah, *Russell's Theory of Perception: 1905-1919* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), p. 62.
6. Joel J. Kupperman, "Realism vs Idealism", *Journal of American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 3. July 1975, p. 202; David McGraw, "Against the Combination of Materialism and Direct Realism," in Wayne Country Community College, United States, 2018, p. 68; Jonathan Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley Hume Central Themes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 68-69.
7. Paul Coates, "The Metaphysics of Perception Wilfrid Sellars, *Perceptual Consciousness and Critical Realism*" (Rutledge, 2007), p. 4; Idealism, in its conception of perception, rejects the limitations of consciousness in direct perception, which does not extend beyond the bounds of the mind, even though it succeeds in integrating perceptions of the physical world. John Foster, *The Nature of Perception* (Oxford: Brasenose College), p. 2.
8. Coates, *Perception*, p. 1.
9. Carolyn M. Boomer, *Principles of Visual Perception* (Van Nostrand Reinhold Company: 1976), p. 14.
10. Fred Dretske, *Perception, Knowledge and Belief* (Cambridge University Press: 2000), p. 113.
11. R.W. Sellars, "Epistemological Dualism vs. Metaphysical Dualisme", *Journal of The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 30, No. 5. September 1921), p. 483.
12. Sellars, "Epistemology Dualism", p. 484.
13. Fish, *Perception*, p. 3-5.
14. Fish, *Perception*, p. 6-7
15. Fish, *Perception*, p. 8.
16. Javier Gonzalez de Prado Salas and Jesus Zamora-Bonilla, "Collective Actors Without Collective Minds: AN Inferentialist Approach, SAGE, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 20 February 2014, 3&10."
17. Chandler McC. Brooks, *Current Developments in Thought and The Past Evolution of Ideas Concerning Integrative Function*, (Oxford: Black Well Scientific Publication, 1958), h. 236

18. E.D. Klemke, *The Epistemology of G.E. Moore* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), p. 55.
19. Klemke, *Moore*, p. 55.
20. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 199.
21. Ulla Schmid, *Moore's Paradox a Critique of Representationalism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), p. 10; Barry Straud, "Berkeley v. Locke on Primary Qualitis". *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 55, April 1980, p. 150.
22. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (USA: Pennsylvania State University, 1999), p. 135.
23. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (USA: Pennsylvania State University, 1999), p. 135.
24. Ronald A. Finke, *Principles of Mental Imagery* (London: The MIT Press, 1993), p. 13
25. Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), p. 197.
26. William Fish, *Perception, Hallucination, and Illusion* (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 131.
27. Fish, *Perception*, p. 91-92
28. Fish, *Perception*, p. 136.
29. William Fish, *Perception, Hallucination, and Illusion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 86–92.
30. William Fish, *Perception, Hallucination, and Illusion*, 120–138.
31. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989); Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989).

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