Commentary on "Supposition and the imaginative realm" by Margherita Arcangeli

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In her excellent monograph, Margherita Arcangeli argues in favour of a positive account of supposition that aims at situating this phenomenon within the imaginative domain. Embracing a simulationist approach of imagination, she debunks faulty desiderata on imagination used against the imaginative account of supposition (Part. I) and argues that supposition is a re-creative state of acceptance (Part. II). She also makes a valuable contribution to the literature by showing against a widespread view that supposition is more demanding than merely entertaining a content (§ 5.2).

*Supposition and the Imaginative Realm* is, in my opinion, an important book and the best existing defense of the imaginative account of supposition.

The structure of Arcangeli’s argument is as follows. According to her, supposition is a sui generis mental state (p.6). This can be understood with the help of two claims:

A. Supposition is neither reducible to cognitive imagination (belief-like imaging) nor to a non-imaginative state (entertaining a thought, believing or accepting); it is a genuine mental state (pp.85; 132–133)

B. Among the imaginative states, supposition is the only one to be fully realised in the higher cognitive system (i.e. system2) while perceptual and cognitive imagination have a leg in the lower cognitive system (i.e. system 1), another in system 2 (pp.43–45 & 133–135)

In the first part of the book, Arcangeli convincingly dismisses phenomenology as a criterion that might set supposition outside the imaginative domain (§ 1). She then discards objections according to which supposition cannot be an imaginative state because it lacks emotional engagement (§ 2) or any participation/engagement by the subject (§ 3). In the process, she relies on claim B to explain the specificity of supposition in contrast with the other imaginative states that possess these features (pp.41-3).

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1 Arcangeli does not qualify B as a sui generis claim, but it turns out to be central to her discussion.
This strategy is highly efficient inasmuch as Arcangeli not only rejects classical objections, but also offers a positive explanation of the specificity of supposition. For instance, claim B sheds light on how we enrich content in supposition – we add content proposition-by-proposition without embellishment, rather than holistically (p.42). It also makes clear why we cannot be surprised at supposing whereas we can imagine perceptually without noticing it or having decided it (p.81, ft.16).

However, the strength of claim B is also what makes the imaginative account less plausible owing to the peculiarity of supposition. We should take Alan White seriously when he argues that imagination is a faculty we can exercise – just as thinking (1990, p.185). As Amy Kind (2013) puts it, philosophers want to identify what imagining in a primary sense is: a sense in which imagination is a faculty we exercise. Arcangeli anticipates this criticism by saying that “faculty” is a fuzzy notion and that supposition is a way of thinking since it is a psychological attitude which takes its content in a specific manner (pp.56-7).

Let’s say that supposing is an attitude in this broad sense. Still, this should not make us think that supposing is on a par with the psychological attitudes we ordinarily identify. The attitude involved in supposition seems much closer to the attitude involved in playing chess than it is to the attitudes of believing, desiring, being afraid and even perceptually imagining. In playing chess, we surely take an attitude toward chess pieces, but this is simply an activity derived from explicit intentions to follow game rules, not a way we are presented with a content.

There is indeed no natural function of supposing (or playing chess) since all its aspects are retrievable at the personal level. Even the aim of supposition is retrievable – although it can be implicit (p.55). Conversely, a baby can be afraid without knowing that the aim of his/her emotion is representing danger – or without knowing anything about danger at all (Deonna & Teroni, 2012).

As White (1990: 138) emphasises, no skill is involved in supposition precisely because there is no faculty to exercise. This distinctive trait, just like the others noticed by Arcangeli, speaks in favour of White’s account rather than in favour of the imaginative account. By situating supposition within the realm of imagination, Arcangeli seems to face
the same problem as Gilbert Ryle. Since Ryle considers imagination to be pretending, he seems to endorse the claim that training to box is imagining just as much as having mental images – Ryle, 1949, p.237; see Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002, § 2.3, for a discussion.

To be fair, Arcangeli has a card up her sleeve. She can keep supposition within the imaginative domain thanks to the simulationist approach: some (but not all) features of acceptance are preserved in supposition (p. 117). Arcangeli insists that supposition possesses two additional paradigmatic features of imagination: it is not truth-dependent (contrary to accepting) and it is subject to the will (p.118). All in all, the imaginative account may be accepted in the absence of a better explanation (p.124).

Let me emphasize that Arcangeli does not just hold a conceptual distinction depending on our goals, she argues that supposition and acceptance are two genuine mental states (p. 127). There is a natural kind of supposing – that is claim A.

I am not sure that we can distinguish acceptance from supposition in such a clear-cut way. Observe first that they are hardly separable. When someone supposes, she seems to deploy the concept of acceptance – this is suggested by expressions such as “let’s accept/say/assume p for the sake of the argument”, “by hypothesis, I will take p for granted”. Second, it seems that as soon as a subject is able to accept, she is immediately able to suppose – this is clearer when we consider Arcangeli’s example of a lawyer who either accepts or supposes that his client is innocent (pp.98–99). By contrast, we can form mental images without invoking the concept of perception (think about dreams or involuntary images) and someone can perceive without having the ability to imagine perceptually – see Galton, 1880; Zeman et al., 2010; 2015.

Of course, acceptance and supposition still differ in important respects, especially in the fact that acceptance is truth-dependent. However, if supposition and (presumably) acceptance are fully realised in system 2 (i.e. claim B), the so-called “doxastic goal” of acceptance and the “pragmatic goal” of supposition (pp.99-101) are entirely up to a willing strategy endorsed by the subject. There is no reason to say that the differences between
these two phenomena trace back to a difference in kind rather than a difference in cognitive strategy – just like choosing to play offensively or defensively at chess.

In a nutshell, Arcangeli’s distinctions are certainly sufficient to explain why we distinguish supposition from acceptance, but insufficient to endorse the claim that supposition is a specific kind of mental state simulating acceptance – like perception and perceptual imagination are. The plausibility of the simulationist approach in Arcangeli’s argument “depends on how the notion of re-creation is spelled out” (p.123) and she explicitly adopts a broad interpretation of this approach (ibid).

That being said, Arcangeli’s inquiry is essential to understanding the peculiarity of supposition and acceptance. However, since supposition is a fully cognitive strategy, we should detach these ideas from the claim that supposition is an imaginative faculty or a genuine mental state.
Bibliography


