University of Glasgow | Centre for the Study of Perceptual Experience

Imagination and Perception

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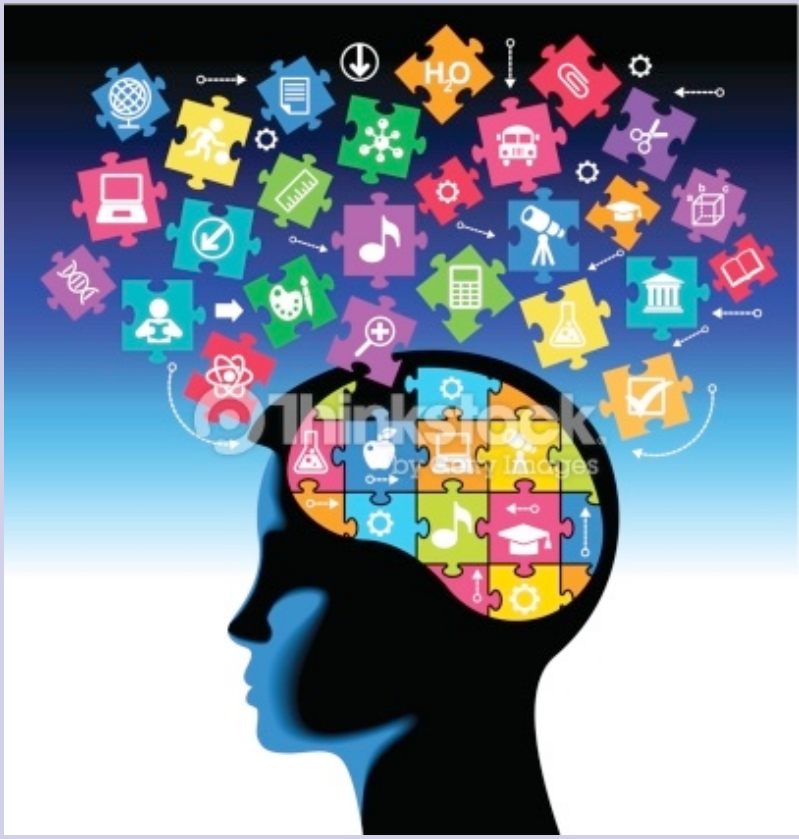
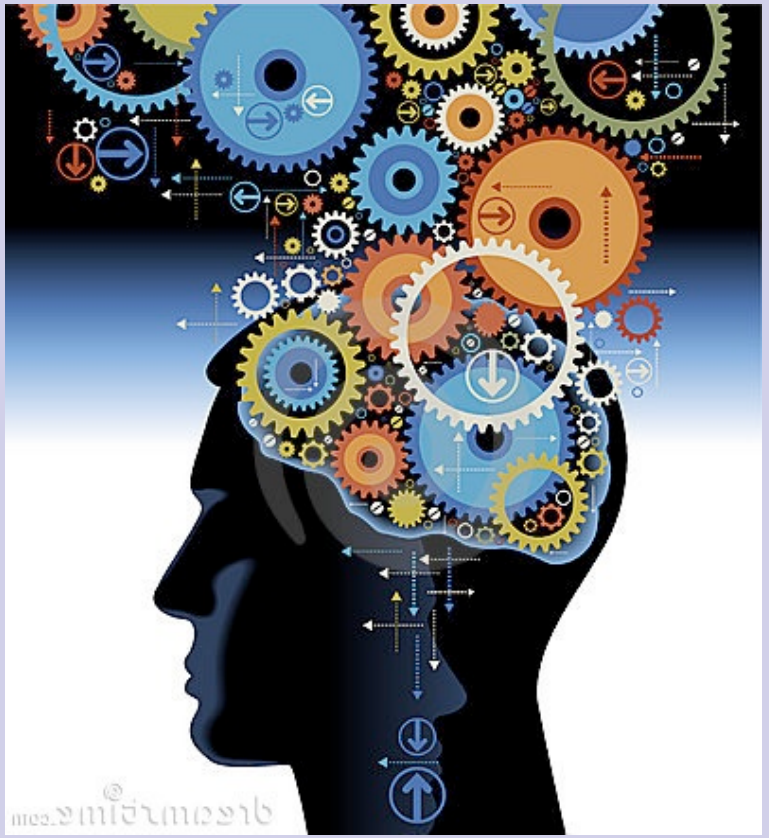


Structure:



(1) One argument that imagination and perception interact

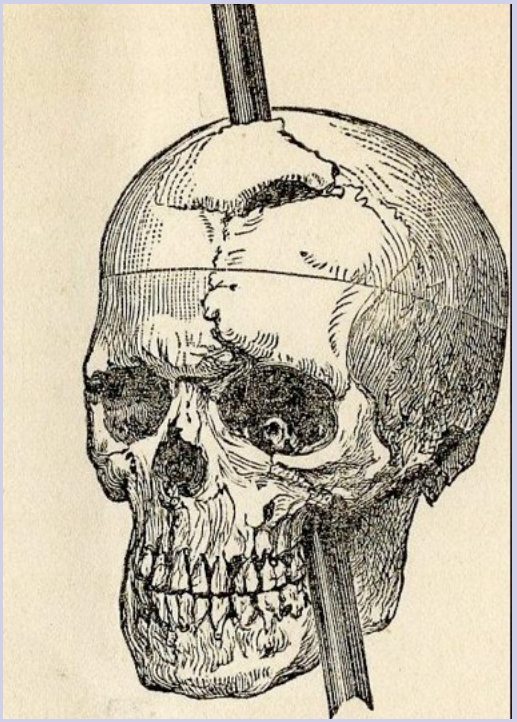
(2) A further role for imagination in perception

(3) Similarities and differences between imagination and perception

(4) What should one make of this in the light of aphantasia?

(1) One argument that imagination and perception interact

In my 2012 paper I presented arguments
for the existence of cognitive penetration.



Cognitive penetration occurs when
one's perceptual experience is altered
by the states of one's cognitive system,
for example, one's beliefs or desires.

One argument was that there are two processes
—each of which we have evidence independent to believe exist—
which together would amount to cognitive penetration.

Process one:

cognitive states cause visual imagining to occur

— or the sort of processing that typically underlies visual imagining.

Often, but not always, the content of visual imagining reflects one's beliefs or desires.

Process two:

visual imagination—or the processes that typically underlie it—

interacts with perceptual processing to yield one state with phenomenal character.

The phenomenal character is determined by both the processing underlying the visual imagining and the perception.

Why think process two can occur?

Evidence from The Perky Effect

Subjects reported an imaginary experience that reflected the projected image which was higher than visible threshold.

When quizzed they said they saw nothing.

Interpretations:

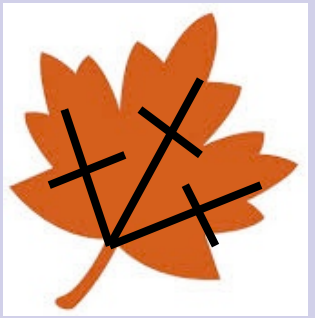
(1) Subjects mistook perceptual experience for imaginative experience

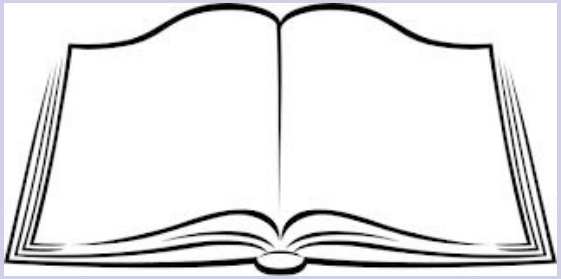
(2) Subjects didn't have a perceptual experience but their unconscious perception influenced their imaginative experience.

What is clear is that the resulting experience—be it perceptual or imaginative or both—has aspects contributed both by perceptual and imaginative processes.

As we have seen already, the projected image affected the experience.

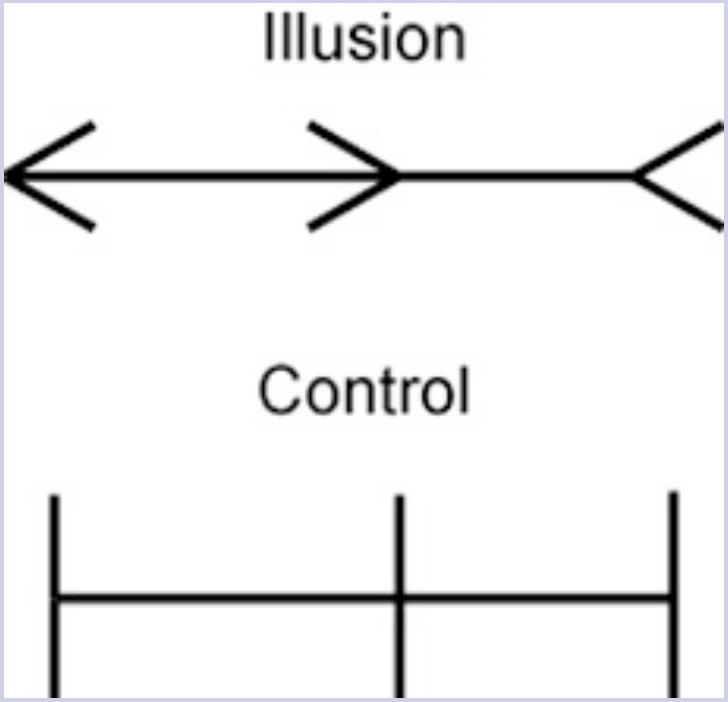
What was imagined did too:





So, states that are influenced by cognitive states can interact with the phenomenal character of perceptual experiences or vice versa.

This could be one mechanism whereby cognitive penetration occurs.



It might account for many cases of illusory perception.

Psychologists may be able to test this:

Does people's score on visual imagination tests correlate with their susceptibility to any cases of illusion?

(2) A further role for imagination in perception

Perhaps other seemingly perceptual phenomena can be explained by imagination interacting with perception.

Many people have claimed that when we see an apple we do not merely experience the facing surface of the apple we also experience the whole volume.

Controversial claim.

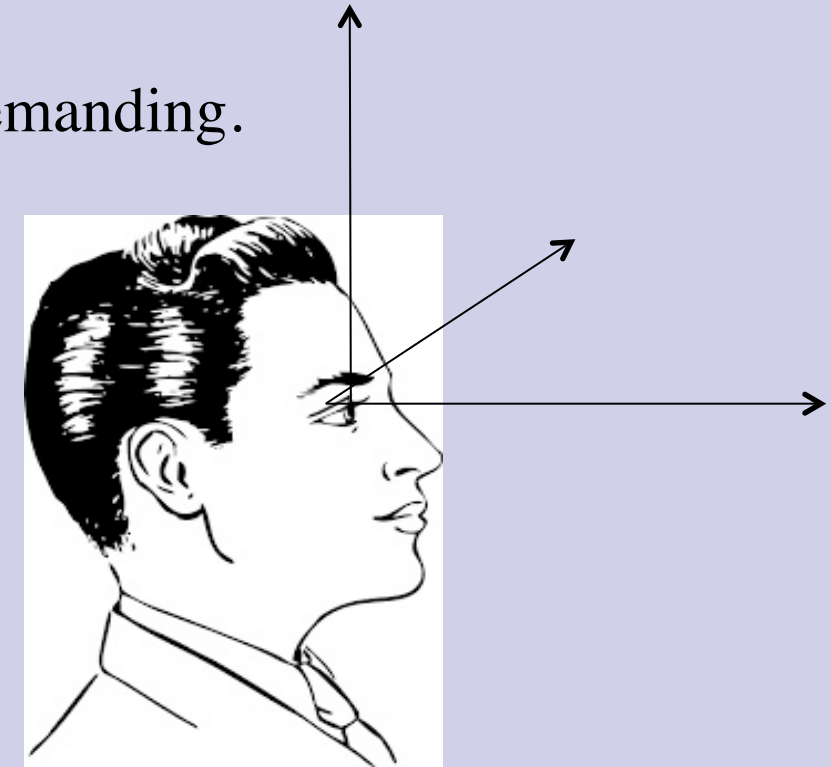
Suppose this is true for now.

Some people have argued that experiencing volumes is a matter of imagination.

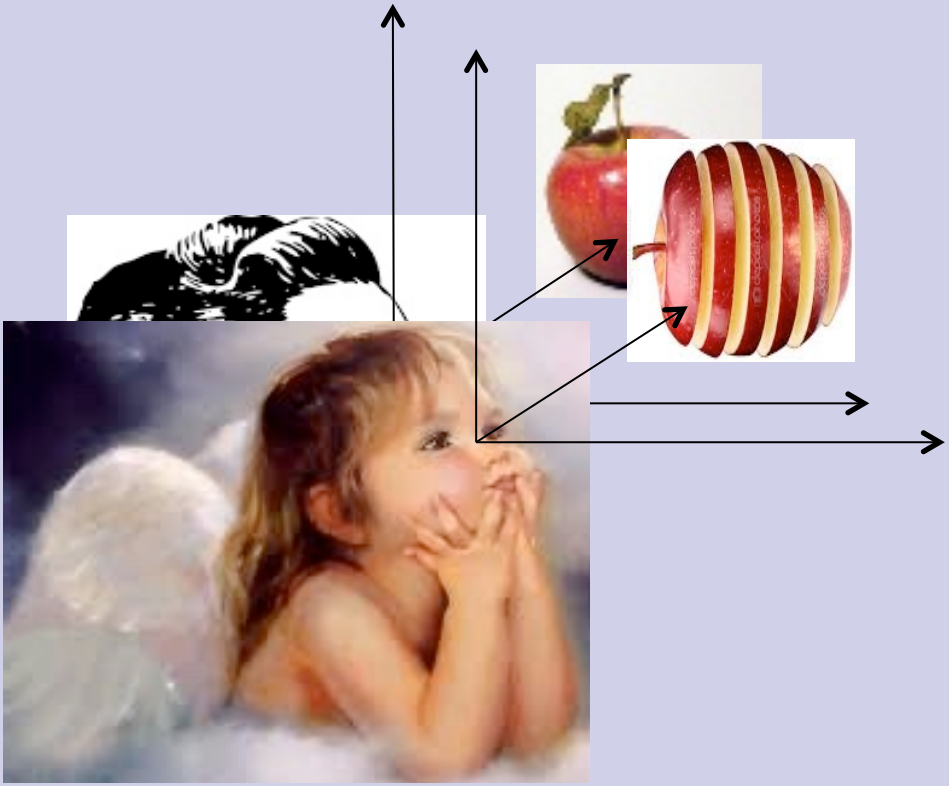
It is a matter of imagining what the object would like like were one to see it from different angles (c.f. Sellars, Church, and Noe).

I think that this is too intellectually demanding.

It is also not in line with the ego-centric nature of our perceptual experience.



If we don't just see the facing surfaces of objects, then I postulate that imagination fills in the volume of objects within the ego-centric framework.

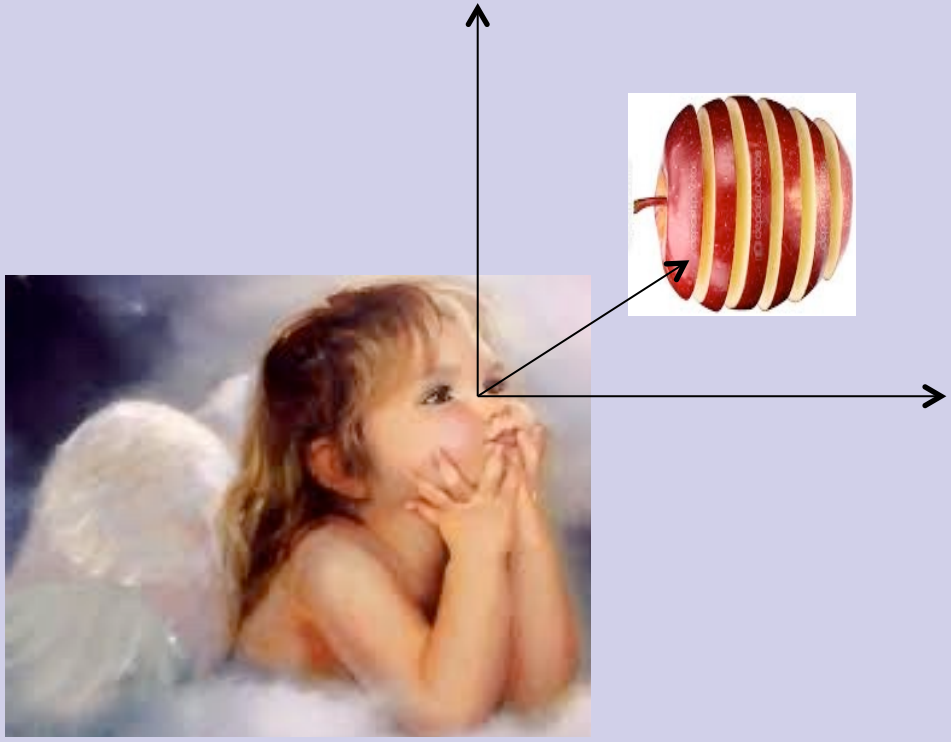


Compare our experience with "heavenly vision".

Angels were said to be able to see opaque objects and, at the same time, to see behind the opaque surfaces of those objects

– from the perspective and in the manner that they would have if the closer opaque surface was not there.

But it is uncontroversial that humans don't have heavenly vision.



On the one hand, this might make us think that our experiences don't really represent the volumes of objects.

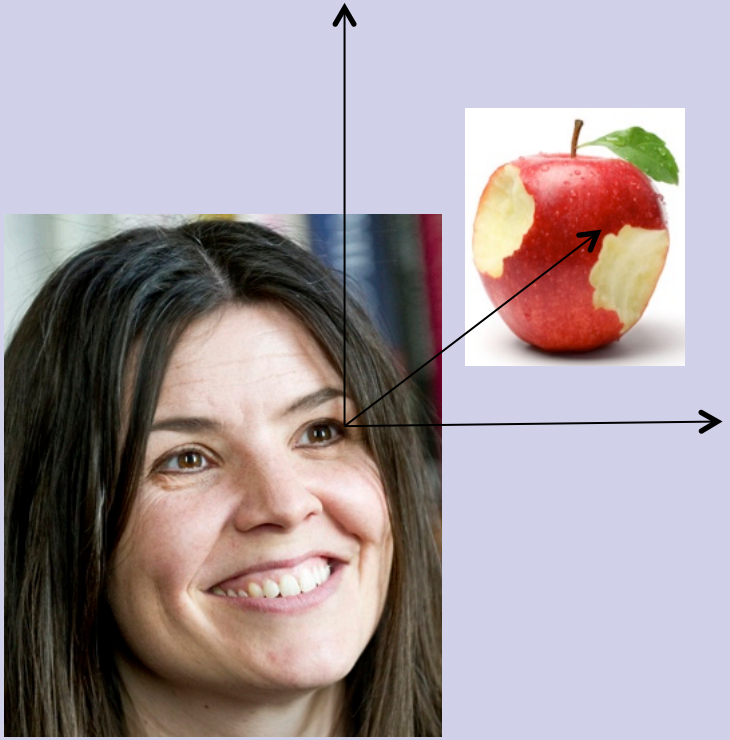
But, on the other, it might make us think that our experiences of the volumes of object is different to that of the angels.

Why don't we see what the angels are said to see?

My experience is not counterfactually sensitive to the volume of opaque objects, in the way my experience is sensitive to the front side — or the way an angel's experience is sensitive to the volume of opaque objects.

If you change the front side of the apple, this will, typically, alter my experience.

But if you change the volume of the apple without my knowledge, this will not, typically, alter the experience that I have, whereas it would alter the angel's.



So, if I represent the volume of an apple in my experience I am not doing so in virtue of picking up on information about its volume.

Either my visual system has innate or learned assumptions about objects of that sort, or I have beliefs about them

— assumptions or beliefs that
they are typically spherical.

Those beliefs might be quite counterfactually sensitive to the typical shape and size and colour of many objects.

And these assumptions or beliefs
affect my experience.

Proposal: assumptions and beliefs cause us to **visually imagine** volumes of objects in the ego-centric spatial framework.

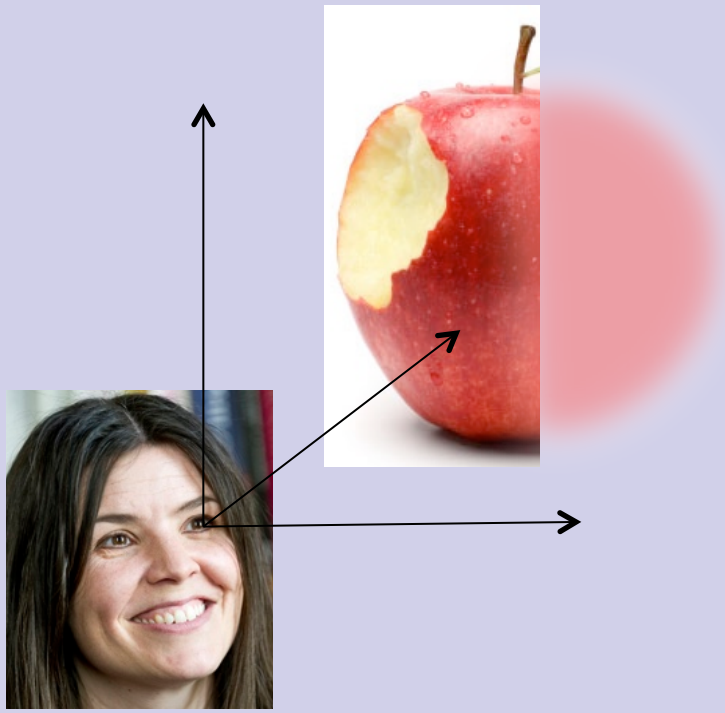
The experience of volumes is the addition of visual imagery.

This reflects the phenomenal character of our experience of volumes.

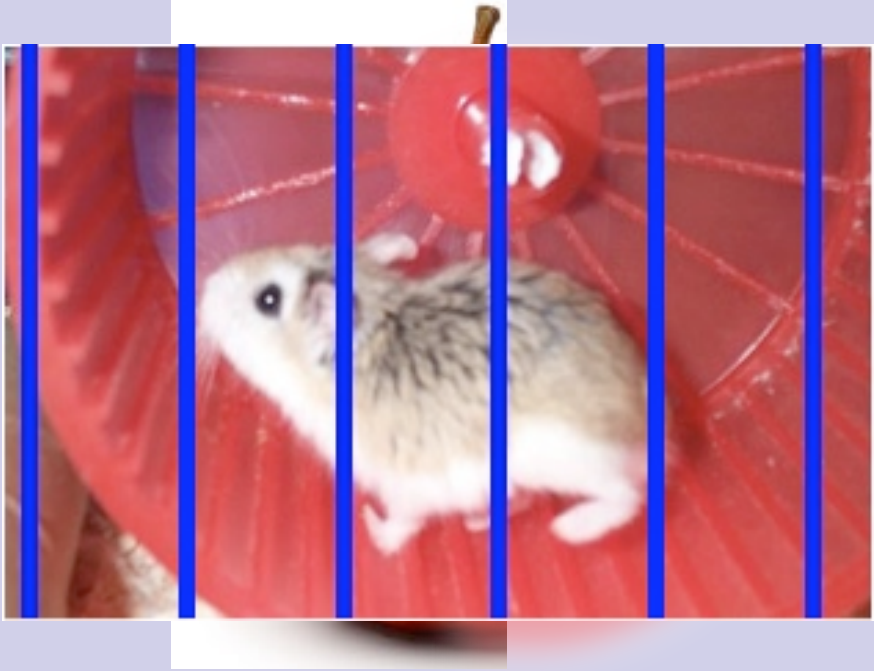
It is ego-centric.

Representation of the volume is not as determinate as the representation of the front side — or as determinate as an angel's experience of volumes:

it is phenomenologically **less vivid and less determinate.**



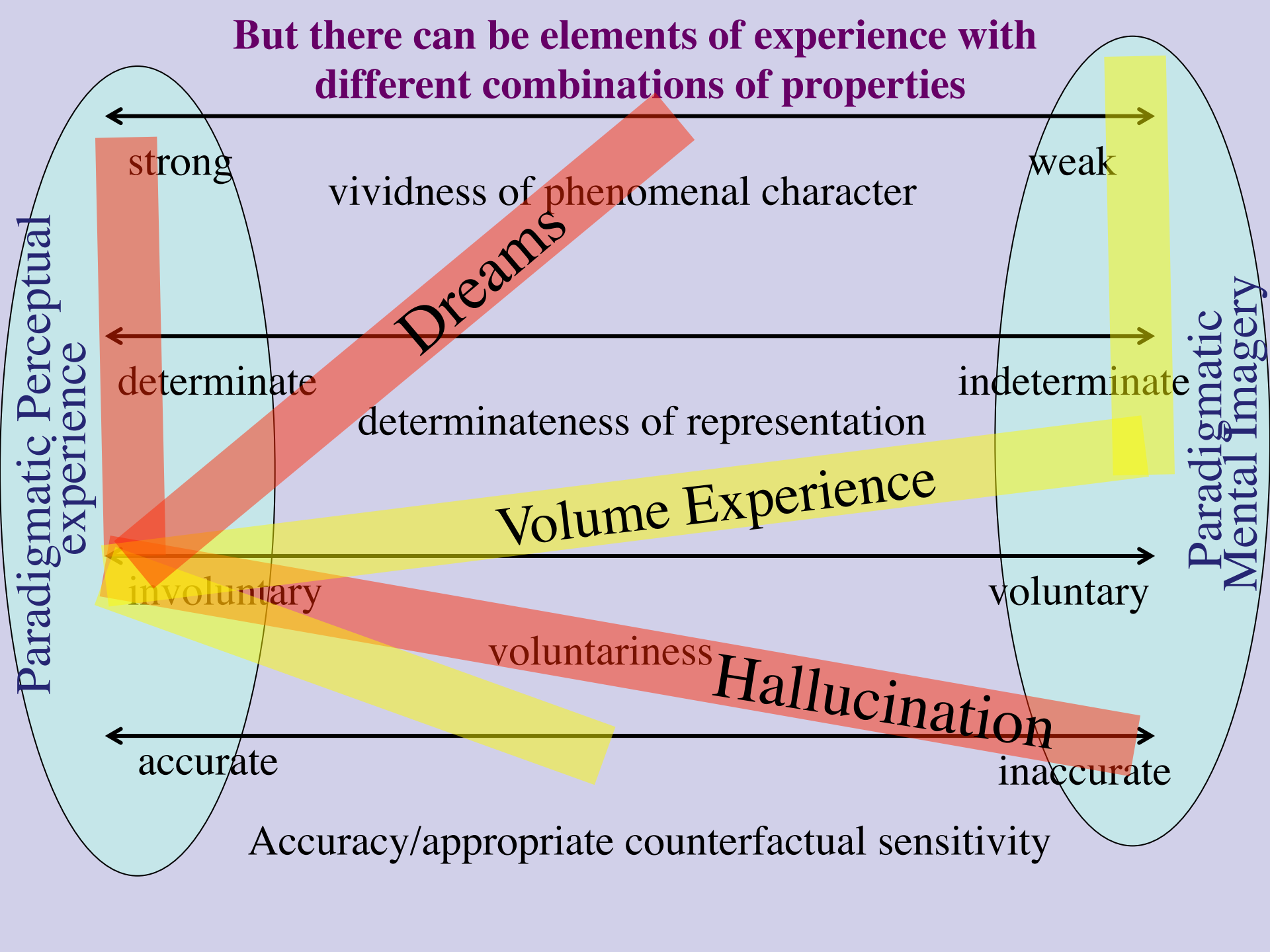
If this is right, our ordinary perceptual experience is shot through with visual imagery.



Perhaps in other ways too: occlusion phenomena (c.f. Bence Nanay).

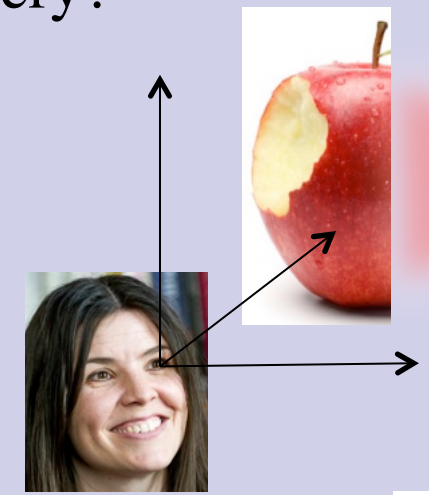
This might make one think that the difference between perceptual experience proper and mental imagery is really one of degree and not kind.

I propose that this is the case, and that there are a variety of dimensions along which paradigmatic perceptual experience and paradigmatic mental imagery differs.


But there can be elements of experience with different combinations of properties
strong
vividness of phenomenal character
weak
Paradigmatic Perceptual experience
Paradigmatic Mental Imagery
Dreams
determinate
determinateness of representation
indeterminate
Volume Experience
involuntary
voluntary
voluntariness
Hallucination
accurate
inaccurate
Accuracy/appropriate counterfactual sensitivity

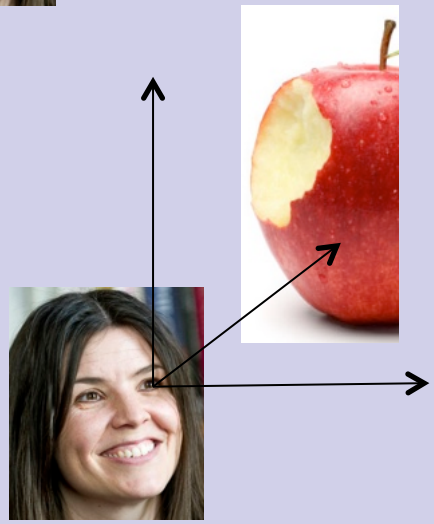
Worry: if ordinary perception is infused with visual imagination, wouldn't that mean that those with aphantasia have very different experiences from those that have visual imagery?

Perhaps! Let's get Adam & Crawford to test!



But if they don't, then perhaps this shows that aphantasia consists in lacking only **paradigmatic voluntary** visual imagery.

Perhaps aphantasics can have the kind that is involved in volume perception (involuntary) and which is somewhat sensitive to the world (c.f. Adam's comments about dreams).

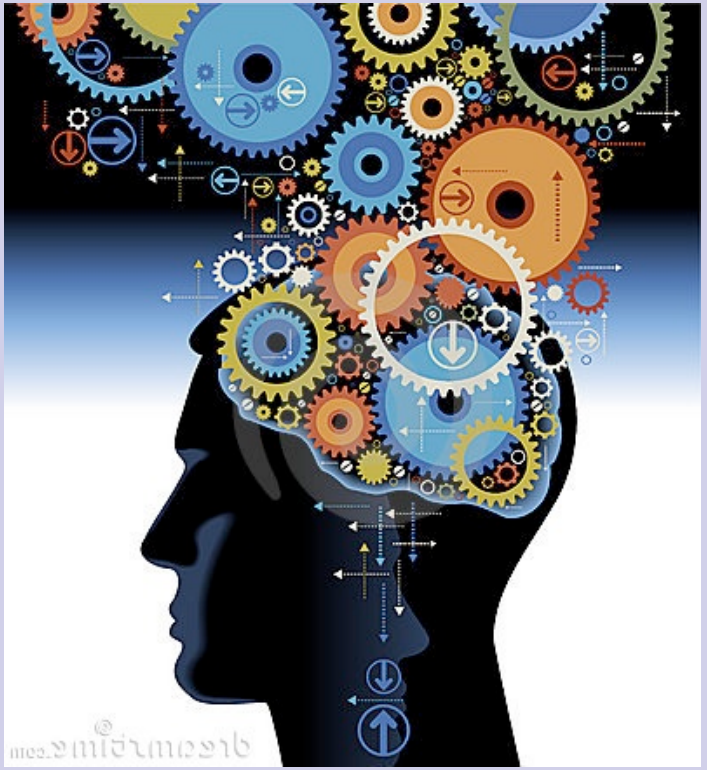


But if there is variation in the population then perhaps this explains why there is disagreement over whether we do perceptually experience volumes!

Summary:

(1) Perky shows that imagination and perception interact

(2) A further role for imagination in perception: volume experience



(3) Similarities and differences between imagination and perception:

phenomenology (vividness and determinacy), voluntariness, accuracy, counterfactual sensitivity.

(4) What should one make of this in the light of aphantasia?