What kind of Imagination remains in Aphantasia?

A phenomenological exploration

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1. Introduction

Aphantasia, as the name suggests, concerns an inability to imagine in a certain way. The definition has been slightly changing throughout the years, gaining more nuance as more research is being done. At first, it was understood as the inability to create internal mental pictures when imagining (Zeman, Dewar, and Della Sala 2015, 378), nowadays it also includes cases of inability to imagine in other sensory modalities like audio, or the inability to imagine in feelings (Jin, Hsu, and Li 2024, 3). Despite this inability, people often describe their experience with aphantasia as still being able to imagine, but not to visualize (in visual aphantasia); or being able to visualize, but not being able to see the internal pictures that one has created.

Often aphants, people with aphantasia, mainly lack imagery in one modality. That is the case for me: if you would ask me to imagine a dog, I am not able to conjure up a visual experience of a cute brown dog with floppy ears hovering before the eyes of my mind (like my friend apparently can), however, if you would ask me to imagine *Summer* by Vivaldi, I could play the whole 11 minutes of the concerto, including all the instruments, in my mind. Having said that, there are also people who lack imagery in both visual and auditory modalities. There are even people who identify as total aphants: lacking imagery in all modalities. Nevertheless, even they report they can still imagine (Fox-Muraton 2020, 3).

For someone who has an imagination enriched with visual elements, it might be very hard to understand what it is like to imagine without it. How does it feel like to form an internal idea of a visual scene, for example, without any visual experience? Another puzzling fact is that scientific studies have shown that people diagnosed with visual aphantasia, can still perform visual memory tasks without problems (Phillips 2025, 3). How is that possible?

There are currently several theories that aim to explain this phenomenon. Ian Philips (2025) summarizes in his paper the main accounts on aphantasia into two general camps, whereby the first camp suggests that there seem to be internal images generated in visual aphants, but that they are likely unconscious: akin to a computer program playing a movie, but the display is

disconnected. The second camp argues that people with aphantasia most likely engage in compensatory cognitive strategies, conceptual or verbal, to accomplish those visual memory tasks. Philips himself, who is also an aphant, proposes a third variant. In his view the other sensory modalities can make up for the lack of ability to imagine visually (Philips 2025, 12). For example, I might not see an imagined dog, but I can experience in my imagination what it is like to stroke its fur: how soft it feels. I can also imagine its dimensions in space and how my arm and hand would move to stroke it (proprioceptive modality).

In this paper I want to explore the intuitions driving these positions using my own experience with aphantasia, as well as self-reports I found online. I will describe how elements in my own imagination appear to me, and how they seem to appear to others with aphantasia, and theorize what kind of imagination might be generally preserved in people with aphantasia. To guide my exploration I will use a phenomenological distinction made by Husserl of structures in imagination that I think can be useful for identifying the part of imagination that might be preserved in aphants. Specifically, my research question is: which structural elements of imaginary experience, as identified through Husserl's distinction between *appearing object* and *complex of phantasms*, are likely preserved in people with aphantasia?

Phenomenology plays a central role in this paper as both a conceptual framework and a method. Rather than approaching aphantasia from a third-person neuroscientific or behavioral perspective, I focus on the first-personal experience of imagination—what it is like to imagine with aphantasia. The commitment of phenomenology to go back to the phenomena themselves, allows me to treat both my own experience and reports of others as valuable sources of insight about how (aphantasic) imagination is structured in experience. While attending to my own experience I have tried to perform the epoché, which is a crucial part of the phenomenological method: I tried as much as I can to bracket any assumptions I might have about how imagination might work or where it comes from.

In the next section, section two, I will introduce a part of Husserl's discussion on imagination, from his book *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*, where he distinguishes the appearing object in imagination from a complex of phantasms. In section three I will turn to my own experience and that of others found in Reddit threads related to aphantasia. I will also analyse these descriptions as we go in light of Husserl's distinction between appearing object and phantasms and provide some arguments to why it seems likely that people with aphantasia lack part of the complex of phantasm but still experience the appearing object.

2. Husserl's Appearing Object and complex of Phantasms

Husserl builds up to the nuanced distinctions within imagination that form the basis of my analysis, by first describing a more obvious one. As an example he describes imagining the palace in Berlin. The picture hovering before him in his mind, is not the same as the real palace itself. However, the two objects are related to one another. The former, the mental image hovering before him, represents the real palace, the actual object in Berlin. They look similar, but one is imagined and the other is actual. The imagined picture Husserl calls the *representing* image and the actual palace he calls the represented *subject* (Husserl 2005, 19-20).

2.1 Three Objects related to the perception of a Physical Image

Before explaining the more nuanced distinction he wants to make in imagination, Husserl first turns to physical objects we see in normal perception. Such objects also have the ability to represent another object. Take for example a photograph or a painting. Husserl writes: "a perceived object is designed to present and is capable of presenting another object by means of resemblance; specifically, in the well-known way in which a physical image presents an original" (Husserl 2005, 19). Here again we see that the similarity in appearance, the resemblance, makes an object represent another object.

Then Husserl points his reader to a more subtle distinction that we might overlook. If we attend to our experience of the photograph or painting, we can find that the first, representing, object is actually multiplicit. The resembling image that we see in the photograph or painting, is not the same object as the paper and ink or the canvas and paint:

> When we distinguish between subject and image in this case, we immediately note that the concept of the image is a double concept. That is to say, what stands over against the depicted subject is twofold: 1) The image as physical thing, as this painted and framed canvas, as this imprinted paper, and so on. In this sense we say that the image is warped, torn, or hangs on the wall, etc. 2) The image as the image object appearing in such and such a way through its determinate coloration and form. By the image object we do not mean the depicted object, the image subject, but the precise analogue of the phantasy image; namely, the appearing object that is the representant for the image subject. (Husserl 2005, 20)

It can be somewhat confusing to follow Husserl as he often reuses the words 'image' and 'object' to refer to the different objects that he is distinguishing. To mitigate some of the

confusion I made a table that keeps track of some of the different names and to which object it refers (see table 1). In the above quotation we see how Husserl moves away from just two separate objects (the image and the subject as we distinguished in the beginning) to three separate objects, by revealing that the first (the image) is actually a double concept. We thus end up with these three different objects: (1) the physical paper or canvas with ink or paint, (2) the appearing image object that we "see" in the colored paper or canvas and (3) the subject, which is the actual object that the appearing image object represents.

	Name of the object	**What it refers to**
(1)	image as physical thing	the photograph / painting / sculpture itself (e.g. the canvas and the paint)
(2)	(representing / appearing) image object	an unexisting object we see *in* the physical photo or painting, a three dimensional body resembling another existing object
(3)	image subject / (represented / depicted) object	the actual object that was photographed or painted

Table 1. Objects in physical imagination

The last sentence of the quotation also shows why these distinctions are relevant: they are analogous to the different elements that Husserl will identify in imagination. Actually, the second object here is already part of imagination: the appearing object does not exist in the same way as the physical photograph or the object that was photographed exist. We do not perceive it as the other physical objects, but our consciousness apprehends an unexisting object from the sensory content in our experience. Apprehending is a phenomenological term which refers to the activity of consciousness through which experiential content is interpreted or constituted as a coherent and meaningful object of awareness.

So we have three different objects, all of which are apprehended by consciousness. However the second object is a special one, it is created in imagination. Husserl describes beautifully how this process looks like:

> the colored pigments spread on the surface of the canvas and the lines of the drawing laid on the paper are parts of the physical image thing. But these colors, lines, and so on, are not the representing image, the true image of the imagination, the semblance thing, which makes its appearance to us on the basis of color

> sensations, form sensations, and so forth. A three-dimensional body, with colors spread over it, does indeed appear to us in the engraving. (Husserl 2005, 21)

Whereas the image of the photo or painting itself is two dimensional, the appearing object we see in it is apprehended as a three dimensional object, and that is why we recognise it as resembling an actual three dimensional object in the world. This phenomenon of seeing a three dimensional object in a flat picture is described by Husserl as physical imagination (Husserl 2005, 22).

2.2 Tripartite Distinction in Imagination

Next, Husserl makes the full shift to imagination, or *phantasy,* as Husserl calls it. What is the difference between physical imagination and phantasy? One of the differences is that in phantasy "a mental image is there without being tied to such a physical excitant" (Husserl 2005, 22). In physical imagination the appearing object is constructed from the visual sensations of colors and shapes we see on the photo or painting. When we imagine without such a physical carrier of an image the appearing object must be constructed from something else. What could that something else be?

In the first chapter of this part of the book, Husserl already made a distinction that becomes relevant here:

> Perceptual appearance and phantasy appearance are so closely related to one another, so similar, (...) Sensations serve as the basis for perceptions; sensuous phantasms serve as the basis for phantasies. (...) To every sensuous sensation content, to the sensed red, for example, there corresponds a sensuous phantasm: the red actually hovering before me in the intuitive re-presentation of a red. (Husserl 2005, 11)

Phantasms, experiential content evoked by imagination, are, thus, equivalent to perceptual sensations. Both serve as a base for the apprehending consciousness of imagination to create the appearing object. According to Husserl, concrete sensations or experiential contents by themselves do not yield an object, they however become part of an appearing object that is apprehended by consciousness:

> Just as in the one case the color sensations and the other visual contents in their concrete complex are not yet the image itself — since, for example, they still contain

> nothing of the full three-dimensional corporeality that characterizes the appearing image — so too in the other case, that of phantasy, the phantasm, or the complex of phantasms, is not yet the phantasy image. (...) Sensations accumulated with sensations, sensuous contents accumulated with sensuous contents, just give ever new complexes of experienced sensuous contents; they do not yield an appearing object. What is added in both cases, of course, is the objectivating consciousness. (Husserl 2005, 24)

Here, 'objectivating consciousness' means the same as 'apprehending consciousness'. Just like the visual sensations we have when perceiving a photo, imaginary sensations, or *phantasms*, also serve as "bricks" or "colors" to give flesh to the imagined appearing object apprehended by consciousness.

What we have seen so far is, thus, that in phantasy too there seems to be a tripartite structure. Although there is no physical object, there are (1) phantasms that resemble perceptual sensations and which give experiential "color" to (2) the appearing object that is apprehended by consciousness. This appearing object represents, just like in physical imagination, (3) an actual object in the world or even a fictitious object or concept.

	Name	**What it refers to**
(1)	complex of phantasms (not an object)	the experiential content in imagination
(2)	(representing / appearing) image object	an unexisting object we see *in* the experiential content, a three dimensional body resembling another existing object
(3)	image subject / (represented / depicted) object	the actual or fictitious object that is represented by the appearing object

Table 2. Tripartite distinction in phantasia

2.3 The Appearing Object, Phantasms and Aphantasia

Husserl's account on imagination and his distinction between (1) phantasms and (2) the appearing image object apprehended by consciousness, provides a useful tool to think about aphantasia and the question of what part of imagination is preserved in aphantasia. After reading Husserl my intuition was that what I miss in my aphantastic imagination are visual phantasms, but that I still have an appearing object apprehended by consciousness.

If this would be the case, several questions arise; questions that relate to the theories I mentioned in the introduction. Can consciousness apprehend an imaginary appearing object without phantasms? What is it like to experience an appearing object that does not have a (visual) appearance? Does the lack of experiential content that normally would give flesh and concreteness to the object make it something abstract? Or maybe I do have phantasms, but are they unconscious? In the next section I will explore some of these questions by describing and analyzing my own experience and the report of others, through the lens of the distinctions between concrete phantasms and an appearing object apprehended by consciousness.

3. The Appearing Object as a subtle and elusive Experience

3.1 Two parts to Imagination: holding the idea and recreating its image

If you would ask me to now imagine a car, and ask me to describe it, I would say it is red, has smooth edges, that, in my imagination, I face it from an angle—if I could see it, I would see the car's frontside and part of its right side—and that it has eyes—like in a cartoon. I am not sure where the eyes are, though, maybe on the very front, where the headlamps are positioned. Oh no, they are positioned in the windshield! It is Lightning McQueen from the Disney/Pixar *Cars* franchise. I looked up "cartoon car" on the internet, and I recognized Lightning McQueen to be what I had in mind. If I now imagine it again, it feels more detailed and complete, the eyes are now in the windshield, but the feeling is the same, it is the same object.

I find it fascinating how things in my imagination can have indeterminate properties, without causing any problems or confusion. If I would try to draw the car, the one I first imagined above, that way giving it flesh or making it concrete, it would look confused and not match what I had in mind. It would not look like Lightning McQueen: the eyes would be in the wrong place, because I would need to guess where to put them. Lightning McQueen in my mind, the way I imagined it, has a certain feeling to it, a feeling that captures its essence, such that I can recognize it in a physical picture, but I cannot paint it in my head (or on paper for that matter, unless I have studied its appearance more closely and explicitly tried to remember where which features are located and how they exactly look like). However, in my mind, the way I imagine Lightning McQueen, it does not lack anything: it feels complete and whole, as if I hold the whole object or tune into the whole idea. A question that I have, as a visual aphant, is how complete Lightning McQueen feels for someone who would paint a picture in their mind of it. I know that some visualize with more detail or more or less vividly, that is not what I am aiming at. What happens

to the parts of the image where they are not sure how Lightning McQueen looks like? For example what happens when they do not know where the eyes are exactly positioned, does the picture need to be filled out, even with an incorrect guess (like I would do if I would need to draw it), or can the image hover before them with gaps without looking strange or confused? It would be interesting to explore this question in further research, including reports by people without aphantasia.

For now, based on my intuition that creating mental pictures has some similarity with physically drawing or painting, I suspect that people who can paint pictures in their mind might run into the same problem I would have with drawing: that sometimes they are able to produce better or worse mental pictures of the thing they imagine, depending on how familiar they are with the details of that object. I also suspect that these mental images sometimes capture the imagined object better or worse, meaning that people without aphantasia also have that feeling of accessing the essence of an object besides being able to visualize it in their mind.

From this would follow that both aphants and people with normal visual imagery have something in common, namely being able to hold or tune into the idea or feeling of an object, that encompasses its whole being, and, depending on our familiarity with its visual details, being able to reproduce its image. The difference only lies in the medium with which we would reproduce it; aphants would only be able to do this with physical tools like paint or pencils, while people with normal visual imagery can also do this in their mind using an internal “canvas” and “paint”. The “paint” is the imaginary visual experience, or visual phantasms (if we would use Husserl's terminology). I think it is crucial to make this distinction between *holding the object in mind* and *reproducing the image of that object*, as it seems to me that the first one is what is preserved in people with aphantasia.

If reproducing the image of an imaginary object is done with phantasms, then maybe this holding or tuning into an imaginary object is what Husserl described as the apprehension of the appearing object. The appearing object would in this case be colorful and visible to people with normal visual imagination, while for people with aphantasia it would lack any or most visual experiential concreteness. This might make the appearing object appear less determined for aphants, however, as most aphants can still imagine in other modalities, it would still not be completely abstract, but “colored in” with phantasms from other modalities. Just like I can sense Lighting McQueen in my imagination to be on a certain distance from myself. Such an understanding of what part of imagination is preserved in people in aphantasia, supports Philips’

position I mentioned in the introduction, where aphantastic imagery, although not visual, still has an experiential dimension of for example the feeling of space and proprioception.

3.2 Knowing versus Seeing

Often people with aphantasia describe their experience of imagining as “knowing” in contrast to “seeing”. Take for example these descriptions by four different users on Reddit (emphasis mine):

> My mind *knows* the details it would see without literally *seeing* (u/doctorboredom 2025)

> I describe visualizing something in your mind is not *'seeing'* it, but *knowing* what it looks like (u/Accomplished-Rain-81 2023)

> It’s just a feeling like you *know* something is there but you can’t actually *see* anything (u/peurdge 2024)

> I can think things and just *know* how they look but I can't actually *picture* them (u/EllaBellaBarbie 2024)

These reports seem to emphasize the difference between knowing and seeing. It suggests that people with aphantasia imagine within an epistemological dimension rather than a visual, experiential, dimension. One could theorize, like the theories mentioned in the introduction, that people with aphantasia must be engaging in an alternative type of imagining, using abstract or verbal cognitive functions for example. Certainly the word “knowing” could give that impression. Often we tend to associate ‘knowledge’ with abstract propositions and facts, which are most of the time expressed verbally.

What did these Reddit users, who gave these reports, exactly meant with ‘knowing’? This is hard to say. Their reports were not part of a phenomenological exploration and do not go into depth, describing their experience of knowing more fully. Most likely they did not perform an epoché either, so their reports might hold some assumptions about how the brain might create experience. In any case, it is impossible to say on the basis of these descriptions alone if this experience of knowing was something abstract, verbal or if it was experiential.

Actually, knowing and seeing are not that opposite to each other, they are often even intimately related to one another. Knowing is often done through concrete experience, like seeing. I know that it is not raining outside, because I looked out of the window and saw no rain.

Sometimes people call themselves visual learners, because they acquire knowledge most easily that way. Maria van der Schaar sums up many different types of acts that produce personal knowledge, which she calls cognitive acts (van de Schaar 2011, 396). Some of these acts she mentions seem more abstract like *an act of insight* or *an act of judgement*, some seem verbal or symbolic like *an act of demonstration*, others are more concrete like *an act of perception*. The only insight that we can take from the fact that someone says they know an imaginary object, but cannot see it, seems to be that their way of knowing it is at least not the result of having a visual experience (but it could be another experience).

That people with aphantasia know their imaginary object by another means than seeing, does not necessarily mean that they employ a special, different, cognitive function for imagination than people with a regular visual ability to imagine. Just saying that I know that the car is red in my imagination, does not tell you if my imagination is aphantasic or not. People with normal visual imagination also know which color the car is in their imagination. The interesting question is *how* people with aphantasia (and without aphantasia) know their imaginary object.

An assumption one could make is that people without aphantasia know how their imagery looks like, because they can see it literally in their mind, and by performing a kind of act of perception, they produce the knowledge about this object. However, in this case we would still need an explanation of how people with aphantasia can know their imaginary objects. It would make more sense to flip it around. Maybe people with normal visual imagery know the object of imagination in the same way as people with aphantasia know, but on top of that they also have the ability to create an internal image. In this case they would use their knowledge of the object to inform their mental pictures of it.

I argue that a more simple way of interpreting the above reports from people with aphantasia (knowing versus seeing), is that the knowing part of imagination is common to both people with aphantasia and without aphantasia, both can access their object of imagination epistemologically, both can tune into or hold the imagined object in mind (possibly in an abstract or maybe in an experiential way) and consequently know it. Aphants might be, however, more aware of this part of imagination, because they are less distracted by the colorful visual experience of the second part of imagination where a mental image of the object is hovering before them.

Still, there are other descriptions that one might take as an affirmation of the intuition that people with aphantasia might engage in an alternative, abstract or verbal, type of imagination.

These descriptions bring to the foreground the high level of abstractness the object of their imagination has. Take these following descriptions for example:

> When I am told to imagine an abstract apple, I know that its appearance is round and it has a stem. But if I was questioned for more detail than that, I would get frustrated. (u/Working_Traffic_7705 2025)

> Someone says “picture your dad’s face.” I “picture” my dad’s face. They ask me “what color are his eyes?” I tell them what color his eyes are. They ask “how big is his nose? What shape is his face? What color is his skin? Is his skin oily or dry?” I can answer all of those questions. Those are just inherent features of my dad’s face. The minute I “picture” his face, I know all of those things. Then they ask me “is he smiling?” I have no way to answer this. Because his facial expression isn’t an inherent feature of his. When I “pictured” his face, I never actually pulled up a specific picture in my mind, either from memory or a new creation. I cannot answer this question. (u/charlottebythedoor 2025)

These descriptions suggest that the imagery of the user seems to have a higher level of abstraction, than that of the visual imagery of people who literally picture an apple or the face of a loved one. If you would take a photo of your father, he would have a certain facial expression on that photograph. The idea is that people who can visualize normally would create something in their mind akin to a photograph, complete with facial expression, maybe also the clothes the person is wearing and other details like a background. This is not the case for people with aphantasia, their imagined object can be unproblematically abstract.

Does this mean that people with aphantasia have a completely different type of imagination, one that is highly abstract or only verbal? Not necessarily. The fact that their object of imagination is less determined might just say something about one part of imagination, namely what it is like to apprehend an appearing object, before a lot of experiential content is added which would make it more concrete.

Indeed, it seems to me that picturing something visually in mind, might be a way for people without aphantasia to make the experience of an imagery object more tangible. I know I do this with imaginary music or voices. If I receive a text from a friend, I read it in my mind in their voice; it is as if I hear them say the words in their own unique voice and way of conversing. I could read their message without doing this, just grasping the meaning of the words and sentences,

however with the audio effect in my mind it feels richer and in a way more real. The same goes for thoughts, I like to pronounce them “out loud” internally to make them less “slippery” and to help myself be more aware of what I am thinking. This process of making thoughts more concrete is sometimes referred to as crystalisation (see Ratcliffe 2017, 89).

Going back to Husserl’s distinctions and the idea that in aphantasia what is preserved is the apprehension of the appearing object, without the (visual) phantasms, above descriptions suggest that this appearing object without phantasms holds all essential information of the object and that this information is known by the person imagining, but that the object lacks tangibility and concreteness which in normal imagination would have been provided by phantasms.

3.3 Seeing-but-Not-Seeing, a Quasi-Visual Experience

The last question that I would like to explore concerns the experience of just the appearing object without phantasms. If there are no phantasms at all, does it become something purely abstract or does it still have some experiential quality to it? How does the apprehended object appear, before it is made more tangible either visually or audibly or in any other modality?

Probably the ones who could answer this question the best would be total aphants. Fox-Muraton, for example, describes her imagination as merely conceptual (Fox-Muraton 2020, 11). However, she does not provide an in-depth phenomenological exploration of how this conceptual imagination is experienced. Because I am not a total aphant, I unfortunately cannot describe the experience of an imaginary object without any phantasms. However, I can describe my experience of an imagined *visual* object without any *visual* phantasms. This visual object could be a photograph or even just a color. I can hold that object in mind or tune into the idea of it, without being able to recreate a mental picture of it. I hypothesize that if holding this object in mind is purely conceptual, I would have no experience of it at all: I would think “yellow”, without pronouncing it internally, and there would be no further experience.

For the last 30 minutes I have been trying to think of a color without pronouncing it internally, without searching for it with my eyes in the room and without thinking about an object I already know with that color. This proved to be extremely difficult. Especially to come up with just a name of a color without any external or internal inspiration. I was tempted to think of a box of pencils, such that I could pick a color from it. However, doing this I would already have an experience of the pencils and their color, even without seeing it as an internal picture. To help

myself with the task I asked chatGPT to say a random color. That way I would not have to cheat to come up with a color myself. The first color chatGPT wrote down was “teal” and immediately, as I saw the word, my mind went to memory of a movie I had seen where someone bought a teal car, this made me immediately understand or know what teal looks like. The next word was “coral”, again immediately my mind grasped the idea of a piece of jewelry that you can buy on tourist markets, and I knew what coral looks like. Same happened with “aubergine”, immediately I thought about the vegetable, I “saw” it in a flash and then knew the color. The only time when I had no imaginative experience at all, was when chatGPT wrote “chartreuse”. I never (consciously) heard of the term and did not know what it referred to; the only experience in that moment was seeing the word on the screen of my laptop.

The result of this experiment makes me inclined to think that when grasping a meaning, or holding an idea or object in mind, it is (at least for me) not completely without experience, even if it concerns a modality that I am aphantasic in. It is very similar to recalling memories. One way for me to remember a memory would be to do so verbally, as a story, especially if I have told it before or written it down. In some instances, however, I can also remember a specific scene, including the way it looked like in that moment. For example, I can recall the way a cute guy looked at me a few weeks ago, what color shirt he was wearing, the mischievous sparkle in his eyes, the positions we were in relation to each other. It is like a 3D snapshot of the moment with visual elements. With some effort I can recreate the scene more tangibly, the spatial layout of the furniture and other people around us, the breeze of the wind and the warmth of the evening sun, the tiredness of my body after an active day full of activities and the feeling of a brief moment of mutual curiosity. However, the visual elements are elusive, subtle and fleeting. Not in the sense of vividness or fluidity; it feels like I know them and can even “see” them in a way; I can tune into the image briefly, but I cannot draw or recreate it in my mind, like I can with the other modalities.

The distinction between *seeing an image in a way*, but also not *really seeing it* or being able to mentally draw it, is also described by others on Reddit:

> I find that I HAVE images in my head, but I don’t SEE them (u/Away-Ad-1210 2025)

> If you asked me to imagine a cup of coffee, I can see it in my head but I can't "see" it if that makes sense (u/Nice_Difficulty7110 2023)

> I describe visualizing something in your mind is not *'seeing'* it, but *knowing* what it looks like (u/Accomplished-Rain-81 2023)

That last description is very interesting—"knowing what it looks like". I already quoted this report before, but now it is relevant again. The expression 'what it is like' is often used in philosophy to refer to a special kind of personal knowledge that results from experience. You know through experience and some of this knowledge is not possible to fully express in words or abstract facts. You know what it feels like to feel water running down your body when showering, or you might know what it is like to be depressed or to experience grief. If people with aphantasia know what it is like to see an image in their imagination (one they have not seen before in real life) there must be some experience in their imagination to initiate this knowledge of what it is like to see that image.

Some Reddit users describe this experience of seeing-but-not-seeing as 'quasi-visual' imagination:

> I think I have that "quasi-visual"/ not visible picture as well. I'm really confused by the questions in the BBC (I think it's BBC) article that ask you to rate the clarity of the image because I can't see my mental image so there's no hazy to clear scale, it just is so I can't rate image quality. so i feel like my answer is "no image" but that's not accurate either because it's not nothing. It's like a full colour picture that I can't look at. I'm not seeing flashes of it. it's completely out of view but I know exactly what it looks like. (u/mtnka 2017)

There seems to be, thus, some kind of "visual" experience in people with aphantasia, but different from normal visual imagination, without real visible colors or shapes (not even very vaguely).

3.4 Seeing-but-Not-Hallucinating

One could argue that this quasi-visual experience is actually exactly how people with normal imaginative ability visualize, like one Redditor has suggested. Although I am no longer able to retrieve the exact quote, the comment captured an argument relevant to the discussion. In their comment they reacted to the description some people gave of their aphantasia, as not being able to *actually see* their imagined object. The redditor remarked that, of course you do not actually see the imagined object like you would see in real perception, otherwise that would be a hallucination. Does this mean that I and the other Reddit users that identify as aphants and

describe their experience this way, do not actually have aphantasia, but actually just describe our experience of visualizing differently: distinguishing normal perception from imagination more strictly?

To answer this question I want to, again, turn to my auditive imagination. A few times, in stressful moments, I have experienced auditory hallucinations. These hallucinatory experiences were radically different from having a song stuck in my head for example. One clear difference was that they appeared external: they appeared coming from the outside world, as if I perceived an external sound. The second difference was that I did not feel in control over the sound. Even though a stuck song in your head can also feel somewhat out of your control, you can actually manipulate it with focused attention: slow it down or pause it briefly, or start playing another song. Placing the experiences I had on a spectrum from indeterminate, vague and non-existing to concrete, vivid and actual, first we would have (1) an non-auditory elusive thought, (2) a bit more tangible but still non-auditory thought verbally crystallized, (3) an auditory thought pronounced in my head with my own voice or in any other voice, (4) an auditory hallucinatory voice that appeared coming from the external world but knowing that the there was no actual source and (5) perceiving real audio from the actual world. Number 3 would be the auditory equivalent of what I, and presumably other visual aphants, seem to be missing on the visual spectrum, not number 4.

So indeed, it seems like there is some type of visual experience in visual aphantasia, however very different from mental pictures as normally understood. A question that remains, however, is if that quasi-visual experience would be part of the experience of the appearing object without phantasms, or if this experience suggests that there might be some kind of, possibly less conscious, phantasms involved in aphantasia after all. The latter would namely support the theories of unconscious imagination I mentioned in the introduction. This would be an interesting avenue for further research as well.

One argument that could be made for the latter position, is that phantasms, at least according to Husserl, are needed for consciousness for the construction of the appearing object. An apprehended imaginary object without phantasms would need an alternative explanation of how it can be created. However, the same can be said about phantasms, where do they come from? I argued that it seems just as plausible that phantasms are based on the information that the imagery object provides in the first place. Such an interpretation would be more inline with

our tendency to make less determined ideas tangible by giving them a concrete experiential quality.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I embarked on a phenomenological exploration of (visual) aphantasia, trying to answer the question of what part of imagination is preserved in people with aphantasia, using Husserl's distinction between the appearing object and phantasms. What I have found in my own experience and through the analysis of the reports of other people with aphantasia I found on the internet, it seems not far fetched to place the difference between normal imagination and aphantasia to lie in the presence or lack of phantasms, meaning that in both the part of imagination that concerns the apprehension of the appearing object is preserved.

I theorized, partly in line with Husserl, that possibly phantasms in normal imagination are used to give the appearing object more flesh and concreteness, thereby making it more tangible. This interpretation would explain why the experience of aphantasia still includes imaginary objects, however appearing less determined or concrete and often just capturing the essence of the object. Lastly I also described how the experience of this object in aphantasia can include a quasi-visual experience which cannot be confused with normal mental imagery. This quasi-visual experience can either tell us something about how the appearing object is experienced and known without phantasms, or it could mean that there might actually be some other type of phantasms involved in aphantastic imagination after all.

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