Sartre on imaginative presence

Valerie Bernard[1],[*] iD

Abstract

The question as to whether imaginative experience involves phenomenal presence is increasingly a subject of philosophical debate. In contrast to many contemporary thinkers who hold that waking imaginative experience and dreaming involve a feeling of presence, Jean-Paul Sartre (1940/2004, 1936/2012) argues that the phenomenology of presence accompanies perception only. Sartre thus rejects both that there is such a thing as "imaginative presence" and that dreaming involves the phenomenology of presence or a sense of immersion in a spatiotemporal dreamscape. This position puts him at odds with Amy Kind (2018) who holds that the imagination furnishes a sense of "presence in absence," and Jennifer Windt (2018) and Michael Barkasi (2021), among others, who hold that dreaming involves a feeling of immersion in an imagined spatiotemporal dreamscape. I argue that Sartre's position on presence emerges from his theory of perception that shares key objectives with contemporary naïve realism, and that his rejection of imaginative presence is consistent with the reasons why a contemporary naïve realist or relationalist would also reject the concept. This paper explains Sartre's theory of phenomenal presence in the context of his theory of perception and contrasts his position on why a dreamer lacks a true sense of immersion in a dreamscape with the views of Windt and Barkasi.

Keywords: Dreaming • Imagination • Naive realism • Perception • Phenomenal presence • Sartre

[1] University of Toronto

[*] Primary contact: valerie.bernard@mail.utoronto.ca

1   Introduction

Recent work in both the philosophy of perception (Dorsch, 2018; Kind, 2018; Matthen, 2005; Noë, 2004) and philosophy of dreaming (Barkasi, 2021; Revonsuo, 2005; Windt, 2015; 2018) considers what accounts for the phenomenology of presence in perceptual and imaginative experience. What philosophers mean by 'phenomenal presence' differs. Fabian Dorsch (2018, p. 1), for example, defines something as phenomenally present if it makes "a subjective difference to our experience": when we look at a landscape, we are visually presented with hills, shapes, colors and textures that feature consciously in our experience of the scene. This, on Dorsch's account, affords the experience a sense of phenomenal presence. Mohan Matthen (2005, p. 305), on the other hand, provides a more specific definition of the feeling of presence as an assertion that what is experienced of a scene is present and available for interaction. These differing conceptions have an impact on whether one thinks phenomenal presence can or cannot accompany imaginative experience. Dorsch implies that it can: a dreamscape could be understood to make a subjective difference to our experience. Matthen holds that it cannot: the assertion that an object or environment are present only occurs when motion-guiding vision is engaged to give us a sense of being in the midst of objects.

Phenomenal presence sits at the heart of Jean-Paul Sartre's account of perception and imagination: he argues that the feeling of presence is a fundamental feature of *perception* and that it is *necessarily lacking* in imaginative experience. This puts his view at odds with many contemporary treatments of the role of the imagination in phenomenal presence. There are two ways in which one might think of phenomenal or perceptual presence (both terms are used in the literature): one applies to the feeling of being immersed in a world or environment, and the other applies to the experience of individual objects (Buccella, 2021). With individual objects, there are also two ways we might think of "presence": we can be considering how the objects are experienced as available for interaction, or we can be considering the ways in which we seem to experience more of objects than we can strictly see – that a cube, for example, has an underneath

and back that are occluded from view. This paper will discuss examples of these treatments of presence, and the view that "imaginative presence" affords a feeling of presence of environments (in the case of dreaming) and components of objects (in the case of waking perceptual experience) that are not strictly speaking perceived. Sartre's account of presence is interesting and understudied in this area: he rejects all these views by holding that the imagination affords a feeling of *absence*, not presence, and thus that there is no such thing as "imaginative presence".

Sartre's two-volume work on the imagination – *The Imagination* (1936/2012) and *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination* (1940/2004) – builds upon and challenges Husserl's phenomenological account of the role of images in perceptual experience. Sartre's central claim is that perception and imagination are *sui generis* mental activities. He argues that there is a phenomenological distinction between the experience of perceiving, which involves standing in relation to objects that are present to the senses, and imagining, which involves calling to mind objects, their aspects or features that are *absent*. The work's final chapter, "The Dream," defends Sartre's argument against the charge that dreamed experience seems to be one case where the imagination can be subjectively indistinguishable from perceptual experience in that the dreamscape is experienced as present. Sartre argues that, while it may be true that the dreamer *thinks* that she is immersed in a spatiotemporal dream world, it does not follow that her experience is akin to a true feeling of phenomenal presence.

I argue in this paper that Sartre's position on presence emerges specifically from a view of perception that shares key objectives with naïve realism and relationalism. His rejection of the view that dreaming involves a feeling of presence or sense of immersion in a dreamscape – the view held by, for example, Michael Barkasi (2021) and Jennifer Windt (2015 & 2018) – is consistent with the reasons why a contemporary naïve realist or relationalist would also reject the proposal. This paper adds to the existing literature on both Sartre's account of dreamed experience and the contemporary discussion of phenomenal presence. While philosophers have analyzed Sartre's work on the imagination and its applicability to contemporary philosophy

of mind and the philosophy of dreaming (McGinn, 2004; Rowlands, 2013; Rowlands, 2014; Thompson, 2008), what has thus far been lacking is an understanding of Sartre's position from the lens of his broader theory of perception. Likewise, contemporary theorists on phenomenal presence in dreamed experience, like Barkasi and Windt, have not considered the question from the perspective of the theory of perception. Lastly, Sartre's treatment of phenomenal presence and its relevance to contemporary debates on the subject have not yet been discussed. I demonstrate in this paper that Sartre's account is in direct dialogue with the current conversation on phenomenal presence, offering a robust case against "imaginative presence" in a way that is consistent with the theoretical commitments of those who reject a representationalist account of perception.

2   Dreaming, imagination and phenomenal presence

The question of whether phenomenal presence is involved in dreamed experience largely centres around whether the dreamer experiences herself as immersed in a simulated environment with objects that appear to be available for interaction. Matthen (2005, p. 304–319) rejects the proposal that dreaming affords this sense of phenomenal presence. He identifies the feeling of presence with motion-guiding vision that he argues is part of normal visual perception, but that is missing in imagining, looking at pictures and dreaming. He argues that the feeling of presence *asserts*; it makes one feel that the scene being described is present. This assertion is what can prompt us to duck when an object hurtles toward us. On Matthen's account, dreaming lacks this feeling of presence because he denies that the dreamer makes use of motion-guiding vision when visualizing the dreamscape. Others disagree. They argue that what makes dreaming a unique form of imaginative activity is precisely that it can afford a sense of phenomenal presence. Antti Revonsuo (2005, p. 207), for example, understands a dream as a "carefully organized *sensory-perceptual world*, or dream setting" that constitutes a "full-scale *simulation* of the perceptual world" (emphasis

in the original). The dreamer feels as if he or she were embodied inside the dream self who is positioned in the center of the dream world. Under this account, the dream is accompanied by a feeling of presence in the sense defined by Matthen above. Similarly, Windt (2018, p. 2583) argues that what distinguishes dreaming from daydreaming and wakeful imagining is that it involves the feeling of presence. Whereas waking imaginative experience lacks a feeling of immersion in a spatiotemporal environment, dreams typically involve a "robust *here-and-now* experience" that gives the dreamer a sense of walking around a kind of virtual or simulated reality in the dream.

While Matthen's position is directly at odds with that of Revonsuo and Windt, Barkasi (2021) has sought a compromise by suggesting that the "feeling of presence" should be understood as having two components: (1) the feeling of immersion and (2) the feeling of availability for action. He argues that dreaming involves the first but lacks the second. That is, as with Matthen, Barkasi denies that dreaming involves motion-guiding vision that affords waking perceptual experience the feeling of being in the midst of objects that are available for interaction. But he agrees with Windt that dreamed experience includes the sense of *presence within a space*: it is this specific sense of spatial location that Barkasi defines as a "feeling of immersive presence" and which he argues occurs in dreamed experience (p. 2540). I return to this definition of presence in a subsequent section to contrast it with Sartre, who denies that dreaming involves the feeling of immersive presence in the way Barkasi means.

There is another way in which we can understand phenomenal or perceptual presence which applies to the experience of individual objects in waking perceptual experience. On this understanding of 'presence,' the question is how we experience objects, their qualities or features that are not strictly speaking perceived. When I look at the cup of coffee on my desk, I see only the front side that faces me. But my experience of the cup includes more than this: I am also aware that the cup has a back and underneath, and that it is half-filled with coffee that I cannot see from my vantage point. Alva Noë (2004) addresses this form of phenomenal or perceptual presence with his enactivist account of perceptual presence. On his view,

perception is not something that happens *to us*, but something we *do* (p. 1). He argues that we experience the presence of partially occluded objects – a cat, for example, that is partially blocked from view behind a fence – as a whole object but with the obscured parts "present *as absent*" (p. 61). We take ourselves to have "access" to the whole cat, with the invisible parts being *virtually* present through our possession of sensorimotor skills that allow us to change our viewpoint to gain access to those parts that are momentarily unseeable (p. 63, emphasis in the original).

Noë does not invoke the imagination in this account of perceptual presence. Kind (2018), however, in offering a rival view, does. She makes a Kantian case that it is the imagination, not availability for action or interaction, that accounts for the feeling of "present as absent". The underneath of the cup or partially occluded cat are not necessarily experienced as accessible if, for example, we are unable to move in such a way that gives us access to what we cannot see. Rather, what we visualize of occluded or absent objects is experienced as *imaginatively present*. She writes:

> This is what's distinctive about the imagination: It enables us to have an experience of something not present as if it were present. When I visualize my kids while talking to them on the phone, they become present to me in a way they weren't before. They still seem absent to me—it's not as if my act of imagination convinces me that they are now right before my eyes—but they now have phenomenological presence even in their absence. (p. 172)

Kind's account of imaginative presence could provide an important explanatory theory for how dreaming might involve the feeling of presence. In this conception, the imagination has the capacity to furnish phenomenal presence even for objects that are absent. We could extend Kind's thought further to include Windt's point that what makes dreaming distinct from normal waking imaginative experience is that, in dreaming, the imagination *does* manage to convince us that what we visualize is before our "eyes" within the dream.

We must note, however, that this kind of account will not satisfy one who holds a naïve realist theory of perception. As William Fish (2009,

pp. 21–22) explains, naïve realism holds that mind-independent objects and their qualities are essential to the presentational character of experience. Such a view has it that the feeling of presence requires mind-independent objects and thus cannot accompany imagined items, qualities or their components. Nor can phenomenal presence be part of dreamed experience since there is no "dream world" in which a dreamer finds herself. This is where Sartre's account of the phenomenology of the imagination and dreamed experience offers the contemporary theorist an alternative conception of phenomenal presence – or, rather, the lack thereof – in imaginative and dreamed experience.

Sartre's account of phenomenal presence bears some similarity to both Noë's and Kind's. Like Noë, he sees perception as "an act by which consciousness puts itself in the presence of a spatiotemporal object" (1940/2004, p. 121). Our experience of these objects involves "a mass of empty intentions" that extend beyond what is strictly seen. "For example, it is understood that this ashtray before me has an 'underneath', that it rests *by means of this underneath* on the table, that this underneath is white porcelain, etc." (Ibid., emphasis in the original). But, like Kind, he emphasizes that it is the *imagination* that allows us to draw these unseen parts to mind. However, his position is at odds with both in that he denies that there is such a thing as "present as absent," and, especially, that objects or their aspects can be "imaginatively present." For Sartre, these conceptions are oxymoronic: that an object or its aspects are not visible means that they are imagined and are thus *not* experienced as present; they are only experienced *as absent*.

The following sections explain Sartre's theory of perception, why I see it as akin to naïve realism, and the way this position informs his account of perceptual or phenomenal presence as it applies first to waking imaginative experience and then to dreaming. Unlike Noë, Kind, Windt, Revonsuo and Barkasi, Sartre denies both that any imaginative experience involves the phenomenology of presence, and that one experiences a feeling of immersion in a dream world. The following explains why he holds this view and how it applies to his theory of dreaming before contrasting his account of immersion in dreamed experience with that proposed by Windt and Barkasi.

3   Sartre's theory of perception

Sartre advances a theory of perception that I argue prefigures *aspects* of contemporary naïve realism. According to Fish (2017), naïve realism, which is a form of direct realism, claims that: (1) everyday material objects, such as caterpillars and Cadillacs, have mind-independent existence (the "realism" part); (2) our perception of these material objects is not mediated by the perception of some other entities, such as sense-data (the "direct" part); and (3) these objects possess all the features that we perceive them to have (the "naïve" part). Sartre is not a naïve realist in the full sense; he considers himself first and foremost a phenomenologist. But his philosophical objectives share aspects in common with the naïve realist's. He endorses the theory of transcendental consciousness – the idea that consciousness is object-directed – but he wants to modify the theory to include at least parts of (1) and (3) above. Like many iterations of the object-directedness thesis[1], Sartre denies with (2) that our perception is mediated by other entities. More controversially, he implies with (3) that objects possess the features we perceive them to have, but with a particular focus on *presence* (in the sense that, when we experience something as present, it is because it *is* present). Sartre's objective is to give the phenomenologist a reason to endorse (1): he maintains with the realist that the objects of perceptual experience have mind-independent existence.[2]

Sartre begins his investigation of the imagination like this: "I look at this white page on my table. I perceive its shape, its color, its position … But now I turn my head away. I do not see the sheet of paper anymore" (1936/2012, p. 1). He argues that the distinction between the perceived paper and the recollection of it by way of the imagination is immediately clear,

such that one cannot confuse them. In the perception case, I experience the paper as something physically present to me. In imagination, I do not *see* the paper; I experience it immediately and without confusion – i.e. *prior to* conscious reflection or "pre-reflectively" – as something that is not directly encountered but *imagined*. Here, I am using the term "present" in the way that Sartre himself does: he argues that perception and imagination are *sui generis* mental activities, and that the most fundamental difference between them is that in perception one is engaging with objects that are present to the senses, while in imagination one is thinking about objects, their aspects or qualities that are absent, fictional or non-existent.[3] Thus the imagination, on Sartre's account, is specifically the mental faculty we use to draw to mind objects, their aspects or qualities that are *not present* to the senses. Moreover, he argues that we are "*pre-reflectively*" aware that imaginative items lack the feeling of presence. That is, we intuitively and immediately recognize that what is imagined is not seen or sensed but visualized or conceptualized.

I argue that what Sartre is aiming for here is in line with the naïve realist position that when you genuinely perceive your environment, "the *phenomenal, conscious character* of your experience is constituted, at least in part, by those mind-independent aspects of the environment that you perceive" (Soteriou, 2016). As Fish (2017) describes it, the contemporary naïve realist claims that "when we successfully see a tomato, that tomato is literally a constituent of that experience, such that an experience of that fundamental kind could not have occurred in the absence of that object." This position, he notes, is sometimes referred to as *relationalism*. Relationalism and naïve realism are not identical: one need not be a naïve realist to hold a relational theory of perception (McDowell, 2013; Schellenberg, 2014). However, naïve realism implies relationalism. Typically, Fish (2017) notes, today's naïve realist will also claim that the conscious phenomenal

---

[1] This is traditionally called the *intentionality thesis*. I use "object-directness" to avoid confusing Sartre's position with modern intentional content theories of perception. It is not clear that Sartre fully endorses the idea that perception involves what today is called "intentional content," though he does endorse the position that consciousness is *intentional* in the sense that all thought is *about* something. See (Bernard, 2024) for a detailed account of Sartre's theory of perception and the way it contrasts with contemporary intentional content theories.

[2] See (Duncan, 2005) for an account of Sartre's philosophical commitment to realism.

[3] Sartre holds that perception and imagination share that they are both mental activities that involve the apprehension of objects. He also notes a third distinct kind of mental activity, conception, that involves thinking of concepts or of things without the use of visualization. His analysis of the phenomenology of the imagination largely sets this kind of thinking aside to focus on sensory imagination.

character of perceptual experience is *shaped* by the objects of perception and their features, where this is understood in a constitutive, rather than merely a causal, sense.

Sartre's view of perception does not align with everything that relationalism and naïve realism in its modern usage commits to, but it does contain elements of both theories. Sartre argues that the phenomenal character of perceptual experience is determined by the presence of a transcendent object (it is "external to consciousness," in his terms) and that the object's presence is "immediately given to consciousness" (i.e. pre-reflectively) (1940/2004, pp. 7–11). This, he argues, is what distinguishes perceiving from imagining: the former involves an actual encounter while the latter involves thinking about objects that are *not* encountered. Also like the naïve realist, Sartre rejects the representationalist thesis that the presentational character of perceptual experience is determined by representational contents or properties (Siegel, 2016). It is important to note that representational accounts of perception have evolved considerably since Sartre's writing on the imagination. He does not address, for example, propositional content theories of perception. His main argumentative target is an older form of representationalism that conceives of representational content as ideas or mental images.

Sartre's central claim is that perception does not involve the use of images in the sense that a Humean or Lockean representationalist account of perception holds. This type of account understands perception and imagination as differing by degree rather than kind, and understands perceptual experience as *mediated* by representational content, the latter claim of which most contemporary representational content theorists deny. Nonetheless, I identify Sartre's view as bearing similarities to naïve realism because he both rejects representationalism and endorses, to a certain extent, a kind of relationalist account of perception. In holding that perception necessarily involves a subject standing in relation to objects in the environment – this is how he defines "presence" – and that all experiences lacking such a relation also lack the feeling of presence, Sartre is endorsing a form of relationalist theory of perception that distinguishes his account

from that of both Husserl and many contemporary intentional content theorists.

4   Sartre on phenomenal presence

In challenging the Humean/Lockean representationalist account of his day, Sartre addresses the question of phenomenal presence in the same context that Noë and Kind do, as outlined above. He writes:

> It remains, evidently, that I always *perceive more and otherwise* than I *see.* It is this incontestable fact – which seems to me to constitute the very structure of perception – that [philosophers of mind] of the past have tried to explain by the introduction of images into perception, which is to say in supposing that we complete the strictly sensory contribution in projecting irreal qualities on the objects. (1940/2004, p. 120)

What Sartre disputes about other treatments of phenomenal or perceptual presence is that he sees them as introducing "images into perception" in the sense of understanding perception as involving mental representations, and that the theories of his day implied a *picture theory* of images. That is, they thought of mental images as akin to pictures in the mind that one can "see" or scrutinize.[4]

While Sartre does think that our understanding of the unseen aspects of objects has something to do with mnemonic knowledge and antepredicative inferences – we know from past experience that objects have unseen sides and we can anticipate that the underneath is probably similar to the parts we can see – he does not think this fully explains what is happening in the apprehension of the object. Sartre argues that my experience of the underneath of the ashtray is "categorically distinct" from my experience of the perceived parts. When I am directing my thoughts toward the *perceived*

---

[4] See (McGinn, 2004; Rowlands, 2013; Thompson, 2008) for Sartre's rejection of the picture theory of images.

aspects of the object, I am typically only vaguely considering the unseen aspects or taking it for granted that they are as I expect them to be. But when I am directing my thoughts to *the unseen aspects* with more attention, he argues that I am doing something different from what I am doing in the act of perceiving. Specifically, I am *imagining* them. He describes this kind of imaginative activity in the following way:

> if I wish to represent to myself the wall tapestry behind the *cupboard,* the empty intentions implied in the perception of the visible arabesques will have to be detached, to posit for themselves, to be *made explicit* and to be *degraded.* At the same time they cease to be merged in the perceptual act in order to be constituted in a sui generis act of consciousness. (1940/2004, p. 120, emphasis in the original)

This is where Sartre's account differs from the one Kind seems to suggest. Sartre argues that, when I draw to mind the wallpaper behind the cupboard, it is not that I am thinking about a mental image or a representation of the unseen parts in a way that is similar to how I am thinking of the perceived or seen side of it. Such an account has it that the unseen aspects or objects are "imaginatively present," and implies that the imagination allows me to scrutinize a mental image in lieu of the object or its aspects that I cannot see.

Sartre rejects this conception. Instead, he argues that in imagining what I cannot see, I am reaching for that which *lacks the phenomenology of presence*; I am explicitly thinking about these unseen objects or their aspects *as absences*. That is, I am not scrutinizing an image, I am mentally reaching for, remembering or imaginatively considering components of the actual object *that I am aware are absent.*[5] As such, I am experiencing

[5] Sartre uses the concept of an 'analogon' to explain what it is that I am drawing to mind when I am mentally conceptualizing something that is absent. The analogon is "a matter for imagination" (Webber, 2004). Sartre does not intend for us to think of the analogon as an image held in the mind, but rather a way of drawing to mind the actual object that is not present to the senses. Some have questioned whether there is truly a difference between an analogon and a mental image. See (Clayton, 2011) for a treatment of this debate.

the unseen aspects differently: they are more vague ("degraded"); they seem detached from the object in the sense that they are recognized as a form of thinking and not perceiving. I might be doing this imagistically or conceptually, but he argues that this is a *different way of apprehending* the object and its aspects. My thoughts about the unseen side are indeterminate, hypothetical or antepredicative. I might try to draw the unseen aspects to mind imagistically in the sense that I am trying to imagine how they might look. But the experience of doing this is phenomenally distinct from what it is like to perceive. He writes: "More exactly, the object as imaged is a definite lack; it stands out as a cavity. A white wall as imaged is a white wall *that lacks perception*" (p. 126). At its core, Sartre is arguing that the imagination is not used to make what is not present feel "present in absence." Rather, the imagination is specifically a mental faculty that gives us a way to apprehend objects that are *pre-reflectively* – that is, immediately and prior to conscious reflection – understood as *lacking* presence.

5   The dream

Sartre acknowledges that dreaming seems to present an obvious challenge to his claim that we are always aware that images lack the feeling of presence. As he himself puts it:

> This problem can be stated thus: if it is true that the dream world is given as a real and perceived world, even though it is constituted by mental imagery, is there not at least one case where the image is given as a perception? [...] And if this is so, is my theory of the image not at risk of falling apart entirely? (1940/2004, p. 160)

Dreamed experience does present a potentially serious counter-case to Sartre's claim that (a) we are always "pre-reflectively" aware of the difference between perception and imagination, and (b) all imaginative activity lacks the phenomenology of presence. Sartre's task is to demonstrate that dreaming is categorically distinct from perceptual experience, and that it

fundamentally lacks a feeling of presence that is akin to that which he argues accompanies perception only.

Sartre examines what it means to say that the dreamer *thinks*[6] *(croit)* that she finds herself immersed in and at the center of a dream world. He distinguishes between "thinking that *x*" and "taking *x* to be real." He does not deny that the dreamer *thinks* that what is happening to her in the dream is as she experiences it to be. However, he argues that, while the dreamer *thinks* she finds herself in the midst of a dream world, it does not follow that she is in a mental state in which she is taking the dream world or her experiences as *real*. Sartre argues that the dreamer is in a mental state in which she credulously accepts that what she visualizes is the case or is occurring. In this sense, she "thinks" (*croit*) that she finds herself in the center of a dreamscape, surrounded by objects or people. However, in a typical nonlucid dream, she is thinking this in a way that does not involve reflection or rational thought about whether what is happening is true.[7]

To clarify, Sartre equates perception with judgment: he argues that an inherent part of perceiving is making assessments about the nature of an

[6] The term Sartre uses is the verb "*croire*" or the noun "*croyance*." The standard English translation of this term, and the one Webber's translation of Sartre's text uses, is "belief." However, there is a difference between the anglophone usage – and especially the anglophone philosophical usage – of the term 'belief' and the francophone usage of 'croyance.' As (Schwitzgebel, 2024) notes, anglophone philosophers of mind generally use the term "belief" to refer to the attitude we have when we take something to be the case or regarded as true. But the French "croire" can be used to express a level of doubt or mere subjective opinion, similar to "to think" in English (Drouard, 2024). To avoid confusion, I use the term "think" as opposed to "believe" because it is in this latter sense of mere subjective opinion that Sartre uses the term "croire."

[7] There is recent empirical research to support Sartre's claim that this kind of reflective and logical thinking is not active in most dream experiences. (Hobson et al., 2011, p. 2) analyze the level of logical thinking in REM sleep dream reports and find that: "dream thinking is not only infrequent but ... its logical basis also appears to be markedly impoverished as already suggested (Kahn and Hobson, 2005). While some explicit inferences are logical, the almost complete absence of reasoning in dreaming, compared to waking, is dramatic. Dream thinking, then, appears to be not so much illogical as it is nonlogical."

experience, whether it is real or not, and whether what we see is really as it seems. In his terminology, "consciousness" refers to mental activity, and "attitude" refers to the way one directs one's thoughts to or experiences objects. "Perceptual consciousness" is the activity of thinking about objects that have presence (in the sense that objects are present to the senses); the "perceptual attitude" is rooted in the capacity for reflection and thus an ability to *judge* whether one's experiences are real. "Imaging consciousness," in contrast, is the activity of thinking about "irrealities." Nevertheless, the imaging attitude does include a desire to take imaginative objects as presences or as real: the mind can attempt to apply, incorrectly, the "perceptual attitude" to imaginative items. Consciousness, Sartre argues, wants the freedom that would come from being able to live in its own version of reality and so desires to *believe* or *think* (*croire*) that what it imagines could really be true. However, in normal waking imaginative experience this effort is doomed to fail; perceptual consciousness, accompanied by reflection, forbids it. To perceive is to be confronted with factuality, or "facticity" in Sartre's terms; it is a limit on the freedom of consciousness to invent its own reality. So, for a moment, we might imagine that our long-lost friend has walked into the café (via the imaging attitude), but perceptual information, accompanied by reflection and judgment, dash these hopes with the realization that we have misinterpreted what is actually the case.

Dreaming, he argues, is a "closed" or "captive" consciousness: it is entirely taken up with the imagination. Lacking perceptual consciousness and the capacity to reflect, the dreamer enjoys the freedom of inventing her own world of experience, but she is also trapped in a mental activity that can only deal in images. The (nonlucid) dreamer[8] is thus incapable of

[8] A lucid dream is a dream in which the dreamer is aware that he or she is dreaming, often allowing the dreamer to consciously influence dream content (LaBerge et al., 1986). Lucid dreaming can be triggered when the dreamer becomes aware that the dream is not real (Stumbrys et al., 2014). Sartre presumes that such awareness always results in the dreamer either waking up or micro-awakening before falling back into a nonlucid dreaming state. Since Sartre's concern is whether a dreamer takes the dream as being real, and a lucid dreamer is understood as having awareness that the dream is merely imaginary, and also since Sartre himself doesn't

accessing reflective consciousness that would allow a judgment on whether or not the experience is real, until she wakes up and regains that capacity with perceptual consciousness (1940/2004, p. 162). He writes: "The dream is a consciousness that cannot leave the imaging attitude" (p. 165). It is entirely taken up with images; the dreamer's *attitude* toward those dream images is wholly one of simple acceptance (*croyance*). But this is not like the experience of perception: in the act of perception, I do not have to posit a table's existence as something to be entertained (*crue ou croyable*). The perceived table "presents itself (*se découvre)*, uncovers itself, it is given to me (*m'est donnée*)" (Sartre, 1940/2005) p. 162, my own translation). That is, in perception, we intuitively and pre-reflectively recognize that the table is real in the sense that it has presence or is present to the senses. Dreaming lacks this function, it is "deprived of the faculty of perception," such that consciousness cannot affirm the existence of the dreamed table. The dreamer is not experiencing the table as "present" in this sense: she is not taking it as "real" or as an external object that she is encountering, but rather only unreflectively thinking about or accepting that there is a table for only as long as her dreaming mind thinks of it.

We might wonder whether the dreamer is not still experiencing herself as immersed in a dream world that has at least partially a feeling of presence in the sense that Barkasi means: she may not be experiencing the table as an object that is present for interaction, but she is nonetheless having a subjective feeling of being embodied in the center of a spatiotemporal dream world. Sartre does not deny that the dreamer *thinks* (in the sense given above) that she is in the midst of an imaginary world. However, he argues that the dreamer is merely captivated by a series of images or thoughts and *presumes* that they are part of a world. In that closed imaginative state, the dreamer is not doing any of the things that perceptual consciousness does when it engages with a real world:

> We do not scrutinize [the dream] world as imaged, do not presentify details to ourselves, do not even consider doing so. In this sense, the

images remain isolated from one another, separated by their essential poverty, subjected to the phenomenon of quasi-observation, '*in the void*'; they do not sustain between them any relations other than those that consciousness can at each moment conceive in constituting them. (1940/2004, p. 167)

What Sartre argues is happening when the dreamer presumes that she is in the midst of a dream world, is that she is projecting her knowledge, memories and "even that necessity of being-in-the-world" onto the thoughts she is entertaining while dreaming. But this is happening "in the imaginary mode," meaning that the subject cannot engage in reflection and lacks the capacity for grasping what is real. She is fully immersed in her imagination. Sartre's point is that the "feeling of immersion" of the dreamer is not a feeling of being present in an imaginary "external world" because the dreamer cannot take an external perspective on the experience. Rather, she is *presuming* that her imagery is part of a spatiotemporal world, and that she has found herself in a space that is more or less like that of her memories of waking experience.

6   Sartre versus Barkasi and Windt on phenomenal presence

Sartre's position on the dream's lack of a true feeling of immersion is at odds with the arguments of both Windt (2015 & 2018) and Barkasi (2021). Windt (2018) argues that all dreams are immersive. Even passive observer dreams in which the subject has no sense of interaction with the dream scene, she argues, "involve a phenomenal *here* and are experienced from an internal first-personal perspective in a more robust sense related to the phenomenology of presence. Like dreams, daydreams are mental simulations, but daydreams are typically also experienced as such and lack the immersive character of dreams." (p. 2583). She also notes (2015, p. 306) that empirical evidence shows that approximately 90 percent of dream reports involve the experience of a dream self as a present and active participant in

address this kind of dream, I set aside for the purposes of this paper the extent to which lucid dreaming presents a challenge to Sartre's argument.

dream events. She sees dreams as "world-simulations centered on the self" that are closely linked to the sleeping body's muscular activity, illusory own-body perception and vestibular orientation in sleep (2018, p. 2577). While she acknowledges that the dream's simulation of a self-centred world is different from waking perceptual experience, she nonetheless argues that dreaming involves the phenomenology of presence. Dreams provide a sense of immersion in a simulated spatiotemporal environment that includes a feeling of being able to reach out and manipulate objects furnished by the dream's accompanying proprioception, stemming from the cortical registration of muscle twitches caused by brainstem activity.

Barkasi (2021) rejects Windt's claim that dreaming involves motion-guiding vision in the sense that the dream scene appears to be reactive to bodily feedback. He argues that, contra to Windt, there is no reason to suppose that motion-guiding vision is online during REM sleep. He makes the case for Matthen's theory (2005 & 2021) that the feeling of presence only arises when the action of physically looking feeds information into motion-guiding vision, and that this does not occur in imaginative visualization or dreaming. But he does endorse Windt's position that dreaming involves the phenomenology of presence in the sense that it includes the feeling of *presence within a space*, which is Barkasi's definition of "feeling of immersion" (p. 2540). He agrees with Windt that the dreamer experiences herself as self-located in the centre of a spatiotemporal world and that this affords a sense of immersion in the dreamscape. The dreamer, he finds, can have a sense of "here and now" in which she is surrounded by objects, even if he thinks the dreamer lacks the capacity to feel that those objects are available for interaction. In this sense, he argues, dreaming does include a certain kind of phenomenology of presence, but one that is limited to a feeling of immersion and that excludes the sense of physical engagement and reactivity that characterizes waking perceptual experience.

For the purposes of this paper, I accept Barkasi's argument that dreaming lacks motion-guiding vision and therefore also the kind of feeling of presence Matthen identifies with perception. Barkasi notes that, according to Windt's proposal, the subset of dreams that seem to involve an awareness of and response to bodily feedback – what he calls "bodily dreams" – are

ones in which "visual representations are built on the basis of body representations, as a way of filling out an [imagined] environment around the body" (p. 2536). However, he shows that research suggests that the function of sensorimotor processing requires engagement not with an internally generated, but actual external environment. This, he argues, places what is happening at the brain's sensorimotor predictive processing level in "bodily dreams" more along the lines of *visual imagination* than motion-guiding vision. Sartre would likely endorse a view like Barkasi's and Matthen's that places the dreamer's seemingly physical response to the dream environment in the realm of visual imagination. While Sartre does not deal with what is happening at the neurocognitive level in perceptual and imaginative experience, he does have an account of the way in which the dreamer experiences herself as an "imaginary me"[9] who is acting on behalf of the dreamer in the imaginary environment that suggests he would broadly agree with Barkasi's reasoning. What is more pertinent for this paper is the way that Sartre is at odds with Windt and Barkasi in rejecting the idea that dreams involve a feeling of immersion in a spatiotemporal environment.

For Sartre, the point that the dreamer is in an unreflective state of imaginative conjuring must give us pause as to what we are claiming in saying that the dreamer has a "feeling of immersion" in a spatiotemporal world. Dreams are typically experienced as a *story*, that is, they have a temporal structure in which a series of things seem to happen. The example he gives is of a hypnogogic image of a fish that becomes a dream: "Now I am dreaming and this abrupt belief (*croyance*) is enlarged and enriched: I am suddenly persuaded that this fish has a story, that it was caught in such a river, that it will appear on the table of the archbishop, etc. River, fish, archbishop are all equally imaginary, but they constitute a world" (1940/2004, p. 167). Sartre argues that it is not really that the dreamer experiences herself in the midst of a spatiotemporal environment, but that she has entered into a sort of game where imagery builds upon imagery to create a "world" in the way that a story takes place in a fictionalized world. The loose narrative structure of the dream gives the impression of a linear

---

[9] See (Thompson and Batchelor, 2014) and (McGinn, 2004) for a detailed account of Sartre's case for the imaginary self in the dream.

series of events that are happening in a sort of world. But this experience is distinct from that of the phenomenology of presence or immersion in a perceptual environment because the dreaming mind cannot take a critical stance toward what it imagines and lacks the power to present the dream's objects as transcendent. Thought and dream objects are merged such that a thought like "does he have a gun?" becomes imagery of a man with a gun.

> [When we dream] consciousness is fascinated by a swarm of impressions, it grasps them *as* being this or that object as imaged, as *standing for*, this or that, and then, suddenly, it is entirely in the game, it apprehends these shimmering impressions as *standing for* an object that is at the extreme point of a world whose contours are lost in the fog. (1940/2004, p. 167)

Sartre denies that dreamed experience can ever truly amount to a feeling of presence because the dream's "imaginary world" is internal; it is impossible to take a step back from the imagined dreamscape in order to experience the variables and possibilities that a real world offers. The dreamer has no capacity to foresee, deliberate or properly choose: "I cannot hold back, conceive another ending, I have no respite, no recourse, I am obliged to tell myself the story: there are no 'trial runs'" (Ibid.). While the subject might, while dreaming, lack the capacity to distinguish this from a true feeling of presence and thus *thinks* that she is immersed in a world, Sartre argues that it is nonetheless an engagement with irrealities, a fact that becomes obvious as soon as the subject regains the capacity for reflection upon awakening.

It needs to be noted that Sartre is operating with a different definition of "presence" than Windt and Barkasi. He understands phenomenal presence as the feeling that one is standing in relation to transcendent items that are "external to consciousness" and are present to the senses. On this understanding, dreaming by definition cannot involve a feeling of presence. Proponents who think that dreaming or other imaginative experience *can* involve phenomenal presence might allow that thinking that one is situated in a spatiotemporal world is enough to constitute a subjective feeling of

presence. Sartre's objective is to show that this type of account is wrongheaded: he seeks to prove that there is a phenomenal difference between the experience of perceiving and the experience of imagining, specifically because the experience of truly standing in relation to objects in one's environment *feels different* from the apprehension of objects that are absent (i.e. imagined).

Other treatments of Sartre's theory of dreaming have missed the larger theoretical argument he is defending when he maintains that dreaming only involves thinking that one has a feeling of presence. Windt (2015, p. 260), for example, understands Sartre's case that dreams are not characterized by the phenomenology of presence as motivated by the claim that perception is conceptually tied to waking consciousness: "Dreams, in this view, cannot be percept[ion-like][10] because while we are asleep and dreaming, we are not aware of our current surroundings." She argues that this position, shared with McGinn (2004), creates a strawman argument that suggests that those who hold that dreaming bears similarities to hallucination or perceptual experience are "impervious to common sense" that knows that dreaming does not involve the apprehension of one's actual surroundings. I think this misses the deeper point Sartre is making: the reason why he defines the feeling of presence as awareness of one's actual surroundings emerges from his defense of a kind of relational account of perception. His insistence that dreaming cannot furnish this feeling is part of a larger case that there is a phenomenological distinction between standing in relation to an object that is present and the apprehension of what is absent via the imagination.

I argue that we can better understand Sartre's argument if it is seen as part of his defense of a view of perception that has similar objectives to that of contemporary naïve realism. Naïve realism claims that the phenomenal character of an experience is its property of acquainting the subject with a

---

[10] The literature in the philosophy of dreaming (Ichikawa, 2009; McGinn, 2004; Windt, 2015) uses the term "percepts" as a contrast to images, debating the extent to which dreaming involves "percepts." Sartre himself would likely object to this term as it suggests that perception involves mental objects, "percepts." I avoid the term and use instead "perception" or "perceptual experience" to remain consistent with the literature in the philosophy of perception.

particular worldly object or property. Given the nature of the acquaintance relation, if an experience is to have that character, that object must exist or that property must be instantiated (Fish, 2009). The critique of this view has it that dreaming, illusion and hallucination are experiences in which we seem to see things to be a way that they are not: they can be experiences that have the character of an acquaintance relation, but the object does not exist, or the property is not instantiated. This is called the "problem of hallucination": it is used by representationalists to argue that the naïve realist thesis cannot fully explain the phenomenal character of perceptual experience and the reasons why it bears similarities to hallucinatory and illusory experience. The alternative to the naïve realist position that perception and imagination are distinct is the "common kind thesis": it holds that genuine perception, hallucination and illusion are experiences that are similar in kind, or that involve similar kinds of mental states (Crane and French, 2021). This is the argument Sartre seeks to deny when he emphasizes that neither the waking experience of occluded parts of objects nor the dreamed experience of apparently finding oneself in a dreamscape are similar in character to perceptual experience. He is making the case that a true feeling of presence only occurs through the "acquaintance relation," defined in the same sense as that held by contemporary naïve realism and relationalism.

7   Conclusion

While the purpose of this paper has been to elucidate Sartre's account of phenomenal presence, and explain its theoretical underpinnings, it is worth noting that Sartre's treatment of dreamed experience is strained at times. Elsewhere (Bernard, 2024) I have argued that Sartre's theory of perception suffers from his attempt to combine the Husserlian phenomenological method and theory of intentionality with the objectives of realism and a form of relationalism. This unusual coupling, one that contemporary theorists tend to see as incompatible, forces Sartre to rest his argument against a representationalist account of perception on phenomenology alone. That

is, he must show that perception and imagination always *feel different* in experience. I think that Windt (2015) and others (e.g. Globus, 1987) who find that Sartre's account of dreaming does not necessarily match what we normally think dreaming is like do have a point. The above explanation of Sartre's account for why dreaming lacks the phenomenology of presence sets this problem aside in order to show how it is compatible with a contemporary naïve realist or relationalist account of perception. However, it should be noted that a contemporary theorist has other theoretical tools than phenomenology (namely, disjunctivism) to make the case that perception and imagination are separate mental activities, a point I explore in forthcoming work.

Nonetheless, seeing Sartre's rejection of the idea of "imaginative presence" in both waking and dreamed experience as part of his larger defense of a naïve realism-like theory of perception is useful, I argue, for the contemporary theorist. It allows us to see Sartre's argument in contemporary philosophy of mind terms, and as contributing to very recent debates on phenomenal presence in both the philosophy of dreaming and the philosophy of perception. For the contemporary naïve realist or relationalist, Sartre offers a case for rejecting claims that one can have a feeling of immersive presence in the absence of a true acquaintance relation. His position directly challenges and offers an alternative to those held by Noë (2004) and Kind (2018) on waking perceptual presence and those held by Windt (2018) and Barkasi (2021) on phenomenal presence in dreamed experience.

References

Barkasi, M. (2021). Does what we dream feel present? two varieties of presence and implications for measuring presence in VR. *Synthese*, *199*(1–2), 2525–2551. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02898-4

Bernard, V. (2024). Sartre's relationalist(-ish) theory of perception. *Sartre Studies International*, *30*(2), 20–39. https://doi.org/10.3167/ssi.2024.300203

Buccella, A. (2021). Enactivism and the "problem" of perceptual presence. *Synthese*, *198*(Suppl 1), S159–S173. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02704-1

Clayton, C. (2011). The psychical analogon in sartre's theory of the imagination. *Sartre Studies International*, *17*(2). https://doi.org/10.3167/ssi.2011.170202

Crane, T., & French, C. (2021). The problem of perception. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The stanford encyclopedia of philosophy (fall 2021)*. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/perception-problem/

Dorsch, F. (2018). Phenomenal presence: An introduction to the debate. In F. Dorsch & F. Macpherson (Eds.), *Phenomenal presence* (pp. 1–36). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199666416.003.0001

Drouard, A. (2024). Penser que/croire que = to think that/to believe that in French. https://french.kwiziq.com

Duncan, J. (2005). Sartre and realism-all-the-way-down. *Sartre Studies International*, *11*(1 & 2), 91–113.

Fish, W. (2009). *Perception, hallucination, and illusion*. Oxford University Press.

Fish, W. (2017). Naïve realism. In *Oxford bibliographies*. https://doi.org/10.1093/OBO/9780195396577-0340

Globus, G. G. (1987). *Dream life, wake life: The human condition through dreams*. State University of New York Press.

Hobson, J. A., Sangsanguan, S., Arantes, H., & Kahn, D. (2011). Dream logic—the inferential reasoning paradigm. *Dreaming*, *21*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022860

Ichikawa, J. (2009). Dreaming and imagination. *Mind & Language*, *24*(1), 103–121. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0017.2008.01355.x

Kahn, D., & Hobson, J. A. (2005). State-dependent thinking: A comparison of waking and dreaming thought. *Consciousness and Cognition*, *14*(3), 429–438. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2004.10.005

Kind, A. (2018). Imaginative presence. In F. Dorsch & F. Macpherson (Eds.), *Phenomenal presence* (pp. 164–180). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199666416.003.0007

LaBerge, S., Levitan, L., & Dement, W. C. (1986). Lucid dreaming: Physiological correlates of consciousness during REM sleep. *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, *7*(2/3), 251–258.

Matthen, M. (2005). *Seeing, doing, and knowing: A philosophical theory of sense perception*. Oxford University Press UK.

Matthen, M. (2021). Objects, seeing, and object-seeing. *Synthese*, *198*(4), 3265–3288. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-019-02279-6

McDowell, J. (2013). Perceptual experience: Both relational and contentful. *European Journal of Philosophy*, *21*(1), 144–157. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12005

McGinn, C. (2004). *Mindsight: Image, dream, meaning* (Vol. 115). Harvard University Press.

Noë, A. (2004). *Action in perception* (Vol. 102). MIT Press.

Revonsuo, A. (2005). The self in dreams. In T. E. Feinberg & J. P. Keenan (Eds.), *The lost self: Pathologies of the brain and identity* (pp. 206–219). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195173413.001.0001

Rowlands, M. (2013). Sartre, consciousness, and intentionality. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, *12*(3), 521–536. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-013-9333-z

Rowlands, M. (2014). *Externalism*. Routledge.

Sartre, J.-P. (2004). *The imaginary: A phenomenological psychology of the imagination* (J. Webber, Trans.) [Original work published 1940]. Routledge.

Sartre, J.-P. (2005). *L'imaginaire: Psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination* [Original work published 1940]. Gallimard.

Sartre, J.-P. (2012). *The imagination* (K. Williford & D. Rudauf, Trans.) [Original work published 1936]. Routledge.

Schellenberg, S. (2014). The relational and representational character of perceptual experience. In B. Brogaard (Ed.), *Does perception have content?* (pp. 199–219). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199756018.003.0008

Schwitzgebel, E. (2024). Belief. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The stanford encyclopedia of philosophy (spring 2024)*. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2024/entries/belief/

Siegel, S. (2016). Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy. http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/perception-contents/

Soteriou, M. (2016). *Disjunctivism*. Routledge.

Stumbrys, T., Erlacher, D., Johnson, M., & Schredl, M. (2014). The phenomenology of lucid dreaming: An online survey. *The American Journal of Psychology*, *127*(2), 191–204. https://doi.org/10.5406/amerjpsyc.127.2.0191

Thompson, E. (2008). Representationalism and the phenomenology of mental imagery. *Synthese*, *160*(3), 397–415. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-006-9086-0

Thompson, E., & Batchelor, S. (2014). *Waking, dreaming, being: Self-and consciousness in neuroscience, meditation, and philosophy*. Cambridge University Press.

Webber, J. (2004). Philosophical introduction. In *The imaginary: A phenomenological psychology of the imagination*. Routledge.

Windt, J. M. (2015). *Dreaming: A conceptual framework for philosophy of mind and empirical research*. MIT Press.

Windt, J. M. (2018). Predictive brains, dreaming selves, sleeping bodies: How the analysis of dream movement can inform a theory of self- and world-simulation in dreams. *Synthese*, *195*(6), 2577–2625. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1525-6