Summary and Outlook

As I already mentioned, two recurrent themes of this thesis have been the various analogies between imagining and perceptual experience and the exploration of the simple view of imagining as an answer to the question of what imaginings represent. These themes have guided the discussion in the last chapters of this thesis. As a general background theory I accepted a representationalist approach that explains mental states in terms of representational content. I started my investigation of visual imaginings by capturing some of our pre-theoretical opinions, which was what I called the first approach to visual imaginings (see 1.2.2 and 2.1). These basic observations were (1) that imaginings have a phenomenal character, (2) that they are about something and (3) that they are about something in virtue of their phenomenal character (see 1.2.2). In chapter 2 I added a further basic observation, namely (4) that imaginings are visual in nature. I refined this first approach to visual imaginings by singling out four of their central features. These features are perspectivalness, the quasi-observational character, the peculiar relation to the will and the non-corrigibility of imaginings. I summarised these observations in a second approach to imaginings, which I called the simple view and which specifies what imaginings represent. The simple view claims that imaginings represent what the subject is phenomenally aware of and that this exhausts the representational content. There are some challenges for this view, though. First it is necessary to clarify whether there can be cases of misimagining (whether it can for example occur that an imagining does not just represent what the subject is aware of). Secondly, the simple view is challenged by the so-called rich view of imagining, a fairly wide-spread (though mostly not specified) account of imaginings. The rich view is flanked by a certain claim about imaginings, the Multiple Use Thesis, which puts forward the idea that there is an “image” in any imagining, which can be used in different imaginings (I called this the “image/imagining” distinction). This idea nests as well at the basis of the rich view which basically claims that the content of an imagining consists of various parts, a sensory part (the image) and a non-sensory part,
which only together yield the representational content of the imagining, while
the non-sensory part specifies the image.

I met these two challenges to the simple view by discussing misimaginings and
singling out one way in which misimaginings can occur which is if the subject
misapplies concepts. However, it cannot be the case that the imagining repre-
sents something “unbeknownst” to the imaginer, which means that there is no
objective notion of what imaginings represent. The only case of misimagining
does not threaten the simple view. The second challenge, the Multiple Use
Thesis and the rich view, was averted in different steps. First, I showed that
the Multiple Use Thesis is based on a misguided and oversimplified analogy
with perception. Therefore it is to be rejected together with the rich view in
its simple form, since this faces a serious dilemma: it either yields the result
that the sensory part of the imagining (the “image”) is epiphenomenal to what
is represented or that the representational content is multiplied. After doing
this, however, I turned to further (and more sophisticated) versions of the rich
view, which I tackled in the previous chapter. I opened up an alternative
possible analogy between perceiving and imagining, which generates more ar-
gumentative room. This analogy is between imagining and seeing-as (or other
forms of concept-guided perceptual experiences) and, so I argued, it allows
us to develop refined versions of the rich view, two of which I tackled in this
chapter. The first version claims that there are different levels of imaginative
content, which represent different properties (Kung’s account is an example).
The second version of the rich view claims that there are different kinds of
content and that imaginings involve a kind of nonconceptual content (as e.g.
Currie and Ravenscroft allude to). I presented some arguments against both
positions. In the first case I argued that there is no argument at hand to justify
the assumption that there are different levels of content, representing different
properties. The second idea, that imaginings involve (at least partly) noncon-
ceptual content, I equally rejected by pointing to the fact that arguments to
defend nonconceptual content in perceptual experience do not work in the case
of imaginings.

Instead of trying to save the rich view, I suggested to give up this attempt
altogether and with it any strong analogy between perceiving and imagining.
If we wish to stick with the distinction between nonconceptual and conceptual
states or sensory and non-sensory states, it is a promising route to classify vis-
ual imaginings as conceptual states. I provided some considerations in favour of
this idea in the previous chapter: we can nicely account for misrepresentation,
certain problems such as multiple use of images vanishes and we can account for all central features of imaginings I introduced in chapter 2.

I understand the idea that imaginings are conceptual states as follows: I intend to capture the basic meaning of this term, namely that imaginings have a structured content and that one needs to possess the concepts the imaginative content consists of. By “structured content” I mean content which consists of elements, which can be recombined in typical ways (e.g. as indicated by Crane). By “possessing a concept” I allude to Evans’ Generality Constraint and Byrne’s ideas. As such, imaginings are *representational mental states* (they represent conceptually) and can therefore be established within a representationalist framework of the mind. We can even indicate their specific direction of fit as mind-to-mind. By this I mean that imaginings fit into the “holism of the intentional” that Crane is referring to (see above, p.165). Since they are conceptual states, I use my conceptual capacities consistently when imagining. Imaginings are not directed at the world in the sense that they can be “wrong” or “correct”. I indicated this in the section about misimagining (see 4.4) by introducing the term of being “congruent” with reality. What we imagine (the content of our imagining) can be more or less congruent with the actual world. However, this does not have any influence on the accuracy or correctness of the imagining itself. Imaginings are neither correct or incorrect nor accurate or inaccurate.

With this in mind, we can stick with the basic assumption I started this thesis with, which is that

(R1) Imaginings are mental states with representational content

Furthermore, I introduced in the second chapter what I called the simple view of imaginings, which claims that

(S) S’s imagining I represents what S is phenomenally aware of

Also this view can be accounted for by conceiving of imaginings as conceptual states if we accept the idea that this form of conceptual content has a specific phenomenal character. Thus, we do not have to assume that the phenomenology of imaginings stems from some nonconceptual part but that the conceptual content has its own phenomenal character. These two claims allow us to answer one of the central questions of this thesis, namely: what is the content of imaginings? The content of imaginings represents what the sub-
ject is phenomenally aware of and does so in a conceptual way. The things we can imagine comprise what Siegel calls K-properties as well as more basic properties such as colour and shape.

One initial intuition of ours I suggest to give up, though, is the one I introduced at the beginning of chapter 2 (see 2.1). This is our intuition that

4. Imaginings are *visual* in nature

I distinguished a structural from a phenomenological reading of this idea (see p.28 ff.). After the discussions of this thesis I suggest to get rid of this strong opinion we have about imaginings. It is true that the phenomenal character of imaginings has some similarity with the one of perceptual experience but this similarity is limited as the fact shows that we rarely confuse these kinds of state. Therefore, at most we can accept the phenomenological reading of the claim above but be aware of its limits. The rejection of this opinion goes hand in hand with the liberation from any exaggerated analogy between perceiving and imagining. Even if the refined analogy between imagining and seeing-as that was introduced in chapter 4 my be more appropriate than the original one, it still is not very far-reaching and limited.

After this overview of the central statements and results of this thesis, I want to end with a brief outlook and point to some open questions. First, the idea that imaginings are conceptual states certainly needs to be fleshed out further. So far, I have indicated a route but not yet presented a full-blown theory. This would involve the commitment to a specific theory of concepts and furthermore an account of how to explain the specific phenomenology of imaginings. With the idea presented here, I put myself at odds with authors who wish to argue that the realm of the phenomenal is limited to experiential and nonconceptual states. Claiming that imaginings have a distinct phenomenal character, which involves sensory elements but that they are conceptual states breaks down these strict categories.

One further consequence of the idea presented here is that it waters down, to a certain degree, the distinction between cognitive and sensory imagining (see 1.2.1). The idea that these categories of imaginings exist is very wide-spread as I indicated in the first chapter of this thesis. Cognitive imaginings are clearly classified as conceptual states. By claiming that visual imaginings are conceptual as well, I give up this feature as one which can separate cognitive
from sensory imaginings. How to meet this problem? One possible route to go, is to accept that there simply is no categorical distinction between cognitive and sensory imaginings. Instead, we could adopt the idea that the transition from what we call “cognitive” imaginings to what we call “sensory” imaginings is \emph{gradual} instead of categorical. These kinds of state may differ in their phenomenal character or in the degree of their phenomenal character but they do not differ in kind in the sense that the one is conceptual and the other one not. An alternative might be to argue that the difference in phenomenology is simply due to a difference in the phenomenal character of the concepts employed in these states. Thus, even if this is a problem which needs to be tackled, there is certainly some argumentative room for this position here.

Another question that needs to be answered (which is related to the one above) concerns the general categorisation of imaginings. As I explained at the beginning, visual imaginings are only \emph{one} kind of imaginings. There are many others such as auditorily imagining something, imagining emotions and movement or cognitively imagining something. So far I have said nothing about whether and how those states of imaginings are connected. Either one assumes that there is a unified account for all kinds of imaginings (as it is e.g. Dorsch’s aim in Dorsch 2012) or one is sceptical that all mental states classified as “imaginings” form one unified category at all (see for a discussion of this topic e.g. Kind 2013). An account of imaginings needs to answer how to conceive of the various kinds of states which are considered as imaginings and how they are related to each other.

To conclude, I want to take one step back from these observations. One might be reluctant in general about any classification of mental states into conceptual and nonconceptual ones or similar categories. However, what I am interested in, is our general intuition that there are mental states which differ in how they are connected to our conceptual capacities and how they can cognize reality, independent from how you finally spell out this distinction. Usually, we tend to classify visual imaginings as mental states which cannot cognize reality and which additionally are to be grouped with perceptual or sense experiences rather than with cognitive capacities such as thinking or reasoning. The upshot of my investigations is that this classification is not appropriate. Visual imaginings share essential features with mental states which we employ in reasoning such as thinking, for example. Imaginings do so despite of their phenomenal character, which appears to be close to the one of sense experiences.
However, I suggest not letting us be guided too much by this opinion we have become accustomed with. Doing so is paving the way for a new approach to the mental state of imagining. To do so was the aim of this thesis.