

## “Philosophy Needs To Find A Place For Imagination Also In The Analysis Of Action”: Faculty Interview with Professor Katja Vogt

[Ayda Basaran](#)

In her recent project, *Imagination and Agency*, Professor Vogt addresses the gap between the philosophical theory and empirical research. I was curious about how this project aims to incorporate philosophical questions into an interdisciplinary debate.

She explains that there is a significant body of empirical work on mental simulation and imagination as components of agency, since philosophers have also long been interested in imagination. However, philosophers tend to focus on what are called “lofty domains”: thought experiments, science, and art. Vogt argues that philosophy needs to find a place for imagination also in the context of the analysis of action. She thinks that it’s a long-standing idea that, when you make a decision, you decide between options that you consider possible. This is why her project examines the modal scope, the study of ways in which propositions **can** be true or false, of agential thought, since decision making is concerned with what is and what is not possible. As an example, she cites Aristotle, who argued that no one deliberates about whether to become a god, because it’s impossible to become a god.

Professor Vogt, however, takes this to be a really difficult idea. She asks, “For who says what is and what isn’t possible?” In many contexts, she believes philosophers usually try to push back against the boundaries of what is considered impossible. In her research, she uses the example of flying, which, she explains, is pervasively used in action theory: You can’t decide to fly because people can’t fly. However, the desire to fly led to inventions, and with the help of machines, people are flying today. She adds, “That is, the imagined scenario of a state of affairs where people can fly was by no means motivationally irrelevant or besides the point for action. Similar considerations apply in many domains, where dreams and ideals inspire change and innovation.”

While it all sounded really interesting, I had to ask what inspired her to embark on this project as well as this interdisciplinary approach. Apparently, Professor Vogt's undergraduate education is in philosophy, biology, and psychology! In philosophy, she spent a lot of time studying the ancients, in part because she was drawn to the ambition of the ancient philosophers. Plato and Aristotle write during a time when there was not yet a formal distinction between philosophy and empirical science. When philosophers study, for example, motivation and agency, they simply want to know how it works, which she found to be very compelling. Arguably, such large-scale projects are nowadays only plausible if one works together with people from other fields. Particularly, her work on imagination and agency started out from thinking about what Plato says in the *Philebus*: The human mind is constantly engaged in anticipating future scenarios.

At that moment, I wondered her thought process that led her to bring philosophy and empirical research together. She explains that to some extent, it is obvious that a lot of what goes on in the minds of agents involves imagination. We imagine, say, whether we could have acted differently or how others may have perceived our actions. That helps us clarify situations we find ourselves in. She calls this "diagnostic imagination." Then there's "imaginative anticipation," in which we imagine what lies ahead. Finally, we imagine different choice scenarios when we make a decision. However, it seemed odd to her that so much philosophy of action is about weighing reasons. So, she was looking for literature on imagination and agency, which eventually led her to empirical studies.

Professor Vogt also expresses that one great thing about Columbia is that the professors get to teach some of the very best students. One such student, Elizabeth Balough, who is now at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons writing a dissertation in Neuroscience, became her research assistant around the time that she graduated and started to work in a lab. Elizabeth did invaluable work for her, helping her gain a better sense of what scientists say about simulation, anticipation, and memory.

Professor Vogt is taking a leave in Spring 2018, during which she plans to wrap up two papers. One of those is already commissioned for a book on practical truth, which asks how we should think about “getting things right” when we imagine future scenarios. Accordingly, some philosophers argue that belief differs from imagination insofar as belief aims at the truth and imagination doesn’t. But if imagining future scenarios is to support successful agency, this can’t be the whole story. She explains, “Suppose you imagine two options, say, studying in California versus studying in NYC. If you imagine that NYC is a place with palm trees/etc., this won’t help you make a good decision. That is, the truth—what it’s like in California, what it’s like in NYC, etc.—matters also to imagination.”

So, how does this interdisciplinary nature of the research influence the other work she is doing? Professor Vogt explains that philosophers tend to say that there’s a gulf between empirical work and philosophy: empirical work is presumably descriptive of how the mind works, while philosophers aim for normative theories, which can be defined as hypotheses about what is right and wrong, desirable or undesirable, just or unjust in society. With respect to “agency imagination,” it turns out that this isn’t quite true. Empirical studies talk a lot about what “supports” agency, what “contributes to problem-solving activity,” and so on.

Finally, I asked her: Do you foresee further integration/overlap between the fields? Professor Vogt thinks a lot of people explore questions at the intersection between philosophy and neuroscience/psychology. However, she believes it continues to be a challenge to do this well: - to find the right people to talk to, to identify the relevant literature, and so on. Fortunately, she thinks our journal is a good example of the many projects that are underway now, to address these difficulties. She ends with, “For, surely, everyone has to learn new things all the time, otherwise this kind of integration won’t work. I’m quite enjoying this.”

*Katja Maria Vogt’s project on Imagination and Agency is part of the Happiness & Well-Being Project and is sponsored by the St. Louis University and the John Templeton Foundation.*

For further information on the work of Prof. Vogt:

- <http://katjavogt.com/nyc-night-of-philosophy-and-ideas-agency-and-imagination/>
- <http://katjavogt.com/>