As the title of his book suggests, McGinn presents an account of the human imagination and its role in such phenomena as mental imagery, dreams and the meaning of language. As he sees it, imagination is a central part of what distinguishes human beings from other animals—we are, as it were 'Homo imaginans' [5]. At the same time, however, contemporary analytical philosophy of mind has devoted little attention to the imagination, something McGinn seeks to rectify. Even if Mindsight fails to convince every reader as to its conclusions, it raises any number of interesting points for consideration, and certainly points out many areas where our understanding of a central human ability falls short.

The first part of McGinn’s project is to distinguish mental images from visual percepts, while at the same time arguing that such imagery should be seen as a variety of 'mental seeing', an idea which yields the title of the book. The primary target of the early argument is the idea, found in the empiricist philosophy of David Hume, that mental images differ from perceptions by a matter of degree. Hume argued that a mental image should be thought of as a less clear, somehow less intense, version of a percept; McGinn, on the other hand, thinks that no such intensive difference is possibly correct, and argues that we must see the two types of image as fundamentally distinct types of things. Here, his line of reasoning is largely successful. Certainly, the simplest version of the Humean distinction can not be supported, and McGinn's analysis, based on straightforward demonstration of the criterion's failure in common experience, is strong. While Hume's work may seem a rather easy target, especially given its somewhat dated nature, this is perhaps justified insofar as McGinn is correct about the lack of more contemporary theories of mental imagery.

After this early conceptual work, the book further explores the nature of mental imagery, before turning to more subtle forms of imaginative thinking, as found in such diverse areas as dreams, belief formation, insanity, and logical or semantic understanding. In all of this McGinn follows a common methodology, based primarily upon personal introspection. As he puts it in the introduction, he wants to utilize "any resources that seem to help -- phenomenology, conceptual analysis and ordinary language" [2]. Later, he notes that this sort of inward-turning technique may be frowned upon by those more concerned with behavioral or cognitive sciences, but insists that "introspection is still the best route to the nature of imagery(…)although not its sub-personal mechanisms" [168]. This is a common approach in much of the author's work, as he tends to favor conceptual arguments over empirical [or at least conventionally scientific] methods. As such, the work is most successful when it seeks to draw out differences between various ideas, or to show the inadequacy of prior attempts at analysis [such as in the case of Hume], rather than when it attempts to establish substantive new facts on its own. In addition, as the concepts get murkier, and the arguments tackle more and more complex applications of the imagination, the grip of analysis alone weakens.

Much of what a reader will accept in this book will depend, at times, upon whether or not one agrees with McGinn about certain phenomenological statements. For instance, he claims that one can not attend to a percept while also retaining an image, or "focus on part of an image while keeping the rest intact; the best you can do is replace the first image with an image of the part in question" [27]. Another such claim comes when he argues that one can not imagine the Eiffel tower while also maintaining distinct focus upon one aspect of the well-known duck/rabbit illusion [52]. Unfortunately, how persuasive these arguments are, and how firm one finds the conclusions drawn from them, often depend upon how well one's own internal phenomenology accords with the author's. At least in some cases, these sorts of arguments lead the book astray. In particular, chapter 8, on mental illness, argues that an insane person is possessed of fundamentally melodramatic, inauthentic emotional states, somehow less "real" than those of a person
judged sane. While McGinn is careful to point out that the suffering caused by these mental states is still just as real, his argument nevertheless seems particularly weak, especially since it is based on the claim that "it is hard to characterize this difference precisely, but one knows it when one sees it" [117]. Here, one wishes that McGinn had more to support his arguments than commonplace observation and introspection.

This said, the book is likely to provide the fuel for any number of further philosophical discussions, as the various phenomena noted, and their interconnections, are debated and delineated. McGinn is clearly right that the ability to think imaginatively forms a key component in many more human abilities than is immediately apparent. A reader who is comfortable with primarily conceptual arguments will find much of this bracing. Those who would be happier with a more scientific treatment can at least benefit by noting the wide range of questions that are raised here, and which any such treatment must answer. Finally, it must be noted, McGinn writes in a clear and engaging style, which at the very least makes considering his claims potentially seductive.