

# 48 The Force of the Imagination

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What shines through the contributions featured in this volume is our collective understanding that many different and vital aspects of our mental life belong to the vastness that is the imagination. While each chapter emphasizes one or another facet of the imagination, it is clear that this preference is largely due to the academic traditions that typify specific disciplines, and the choice on the part of scholars to zone in on a particular focus of interest within those traditions.<sup>1</sup> So what can we glean about the imagination in general from these assorted perspectives? This final chapter briefly considers some of the implications that can be derived from these accounts of the nature of the imagination.

## Imagination is Emergent, Fluid, and Dynamic

One needs to be able to stand before one can walk. But once walking becomes a virtually effortless capacity, we are able to run, leap, and dance, traversing physical space. Fantastic feats of physical prowess, such as a basketball player springing in the air to land a slam dunk or a ballet dancer executing series of fouettés, are only possible following the development of a good sense of balance in early childhood. Acquiring a well-functioning system of balance, then, provides the necessary physiological scaffolding that allows us to push and perturb the limits of the balance system. Stability emerges from instability, and from that stability emerges the capacity to engage functionally in designed or engineered temporary instability. So the capacities we acquire for a given purpose are utilized beyond their original context in novel ways.

This manner of functional “exaptation” is a useful way to think about the imagination. Our capacity to imagine is the means by which we can bring images and ideas to mind in the absence of external input. Implicit within this action is the ability to (1) invoke, construct, and integrate concrete and abstract ideations, (2) draw on knowledge reserves that we acquire through life experience for the same, and (3) distance one’s focus from the pressures of the current context. The last enables us to move beyond the confines of a reactive space to that of a proactive realm.

Engaging beyond the limits of the active present and the ability to detach oneself from the immediacy of the now enable a wide range of corollaries, ranging from the

<sup>1</sup> Chapters 2–11

predictable<sup>2</sup> to the fantastical,<sup>3</sup> from the stable to the precarious. I can imagine my impressions and experiences of persons, objects, and events from seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, years, and decades ago.<sup>4</sup> Roaming the retrospective spaces of “what was” frees me to explore prospective spaces of “what can be” seconds later, minutes later, hours later, and so on, as well as adjoining temporal possibility spaces of “what might have been.”<sup>5</sup> Contemplating hypotheticals and higher order meta-representations opens up the exploration of atemporal spaces of “what could be” and “what if” beyond one’s own reality.<sup>6</sup>

The fidelity of my imaginings to any given reality can range from low to high depending on the level of accuracy, abstraction, and richness of the experience. My imaginings can vary enormously in their manifestation by being sparse, unimodal, and one-dimensional in some contexts and rich, crossmodal, and multidimensional in others. Regardless of how transitory or enduring the imaginings, they can evoke emotional responses, action tendencies, and conceptual insights, which are instantiated in the present, in the here and the now<sup>7</sup>. We are thus brought full circle. The point of departure begins with distancing from the present, and the point of arrival in the canvas of the imagination can extend in any direction, to any extent and even right back to (and encroaching on) the present.

This is not a new observation and has in fact been voiced in a similar form as far back as 1970 by Jean Starobinski in his extraordinary essay on the imagination (Starobinski, 2001):<sup>8</sup>

Insinuated in perception itself, embroiled with the operations of memory, opening around us the horizon of the possible, escorting the will, hope, fear and conjecture, the imagination is much more than an image-making faculty that re-creates the world that we perceive directly: it is a power of departure, thanks to which we represent to ourselves the things that are distant, and distance ourselves from present realities. Hence this ambiguity that we find everywhere: the imagination, because it anticipates and predicts, serves action, draws before us the configuration of the doable before it is done. In this first sense, the imagination cooperates with ‘the function of the real’, because our adaptation to the world demands that we leave the present moment, that we go beyond the data of the immediate world, in order to grasp in thought a future of indistinct borders. But, turning our back on the tangible universe that the present rallies around us, the imagining consciousness can also give itself space and project its fables in a direction in which it does not have to take into account a possible clashing with the event itself: in this second sense, the imagination is fiction, play, or dream; a more or less deliberate error, pure fascination. Far from contributing to ‘the function of the real’, it proclaims our existence in leading it into the region of fantasies. Thus, it contributes step by step towards an extension of our practical domination of the real, or works to loosen the restraints that link us to it. And what complicates matters even further is that nothing guarantees the success of the anticipatory imagination: it always runs the risk of not receiving the confirmation that it expects, and to have produced nothing more than a vain image of our collective hope. On the other hand, we must recognise that the most delirious imagination always retains its own reality, the same that to which all psychic activities can lay claim. It is

2 Chapters 12–18 3 Chapters 44 and 45 4 Chapters 19–22 5 Chapters 8, 26, 27

6 Chapters 9, 21–25, 28–33 7 Chapters 7, 30, 34–39, 46 and 47

8 Unpublished translation by William Glover (reproduced with permission). Excerpt (pages 154–155) from Jean Starobinski, *L’œil vivant* (Tome 2) – *La relation critique*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard (digital edition published in 2013).

a fact among facts. If there is necessarily, in all practical life, an imagination of the real, we see in the greatest disordering of images a reality of the imaginary.

The latter reflections highlight how the imagination can change shape or be biased under conditions of disinhibition, immaturity, instruction, and injury.<sup>9</sup> And the association between the particularities of these conditions and the type of the distortions in our imaginings (be it temporary or permanent, specific or generalized) speak to the flow and force of the imagination. The essence of imagination is this: It is fluid, it is dynamic, and it is emergent.

### Issues to Bear in Mind Within this Discourse

The way the authors positioned their argument sometimes diverged in interesting ways and sometimes in relation to factors held to be critical or central to understanding the nature of the human imagination. Some of the noteworthy points that beg further consideration are briefly mentioned:

- (i) **Focusing on the inner world ≠ Ignoring the outer world:** The undeniable relevance of societal, cultural, political, and historical contexts to the patterns and directions of our imaginings was frequently highlighted.<sup>10</sup> While the social is often implicit in our understanding of the workings of the imagination, there is a clear need to emphasize and study these relations more explicitly.
- (ii) **Distinctions between imaginative and non-imaginative thought:** The viewpoints put forward tended to differ in this respect, with some emphasizing the separateness or differences between the two<sup>11</sup> and others highlighting how intricately interwoven they are.<sup>12</sup>
- (iii) **Flexibility in the forms and processes of the imagination:** The categories of imagination framework (Figure 1.3), as it stands, suggests that the nature of the representation form (e.g. visual image, episodic memory trace) determines patterns of processes that are afforded in relation to that form (e.g. visualization, constructive simulation). Such default relations may not necessarily hold and/or can be overridden in contexts in which a novel perspective is being forged.<sup>13</sup>
- (iv) **The impact of the ever-changing environmental factors on the imagination:** The world as we perceive it and act within it is in constant flux owing to political, sociocultural, and technological developments.<sup>14</sup> An awareness needs to be cultivated of how changes in these respects within the outer world influence our day-to-day imaginings.

### Concluding Note: A Metaphor that Captures the Imagination

Metaphors are a useful semantic tool to wield in order to grasp, represent, and communicate our ideas about complex phenomena. And there can scarcely be

9 Chapters 40–45 10 Chapters 1–3, 10, 37–39 11 For example, Chapters 5, 8 and 47  
12 For example, Chapters 6, 7, 21 and 27 13 Chapters 9 and 46 14 Chapters 4, 11 and 39

any doubt that our understanding of a construct as complex as the imagination would be abetted by the same. So which metaphor would fit this context?

An apt one to apply may be that of water, owing to the somewhat uncanny similarities between the features, forms, and forces of the human imagination and the properties of water. Imagination can manifest in wildly different forms from the tangible to the intangible. Its workings range from calm and predictable to volatile and unpredictable. It is a fundamental part of our physiological make-up, permeating our very being, and it is essential to our mental life. It is nourishing and constructive yet can also be overwhelming and destructive. It is quiet. It is dogged. It shapes. It wilds. It fits. It flows. It pushes against fault lines. It breaks away. It lacks definition, yet it is formidable.

This is what we have been granted as a species. A true force of nature within ourselves. The force of imagination.

### Bibliography

Starobinski, J. (2001). *La relation critique*. Paris, France: Editions Gallimard.