

Imagination

BRYNHILDUR SIGURDARDÓTTIR

Imagine there's no Heaven
It's easy if you try
John Lennon

What happens when John Lennon asks us to Imagine? Isn't it like a whole new world opens up, a world where anything is possible? Imagination seems to have an aura of relief and freedom around it. It detaches us from our everyday settings and restrictions and allows us to look at the world through rosy glasses, or in whichever way we want. But is this all there is to imagination? Is it nothing more than a handy tool for daydreamers? When I started my exploration of imagination I very soon realized that the concept was much richer than I had ever imagined it to be. P.F. Strawson¹ identifies four different ways in which the word has been applied:

1. Imagination is associated with invention, originality or departure from routine
2. Imagination is linked with images and mental representations
3. Imagination plays a role in perceptual recognition and conceptualization
4. Imagination is linked with false belief, delusion, mistaken memory and misperception.

This list could be seen as a summary of existing philosophical treatments of the topic. These reveal a rich discussion, which goes far beyond considering only what is assumed in Lennon's famous song. Plato and Aristotle started the philosophical inquiry into imagination by looking at how it delivers us temporarily from concrete experience. Later, Kant makes a basic distinction between empirical and transcendental imagination, which leads the investi-

gation in quite different directions. The former is related to what the Greeks had discussed before, and evokes a free world of creation, a world where the individual can take his or her experience and twist and turn it in endless ways to build something new and different. The latter is a line of thinking introduced by Kant himself, and leads into an a priori world of perception, conceptualization and functions of the mind—a universal world of human thinking.

In this paper I will use Strawson's schema to explore some different aspects of imagination. I will look both at how imagination can lead us outward into a world of creation and inward into a world of logic. Finally, I will discuss the unreliability of imagination and how we might view the community of inquiry as a means to avoid the dead ends it can lead us into.

Imagination as a free journey through experience

Strawson's first category of imagination is one of various creative thought activities. It opens up "free spaces" in a person's thinking—spaces in which she is allowed to step out of her concrete existence and create new worlds by taking pieces from her experience and assembling them in any way she likes. This activity lifts the person out of the repetition of everyday life, sets her free from the limits of what actually happens in the world, and lets in unicorns and dragons, aliens and angels, peace on earth and happy endings, and an endless line of inventions. On this view, imagination is a fiction-making power, and it seems to me that most people experience it in their childhood. In the process of learning how to go about in the world and communicate with others children ask simple, basic questions and search for answers to them. These answers might come from other people or from what is perceived in the world. But they might also be made up. Children do not have strict rules about how to build knowledge; they will use whatever tool is available and see no problem with creating an answer when other sources fall short. They can use their imaginations to create answers to any question; how a hat got lost, why it rains, where God lives and why Little Red Riding-hood came out of the wolf's stomach alive. Children appre-



Brynhildur Sigurdardottir is an Ed.D. student in Philosophy for Children at Montclair State University. Currently, she is working as a science and philosophy teacher at a grades 7-11 school in Gardaskoli, Iceland. She is also managing the Philosophy School in Iceland, which gives courses in philosophy for children and teachers.

ciate the imaginative dimension they are exposed to when old tales, fables, and adventures. One reason for this is probably the tale's entertainment value, but I also see another reason. Isn't it possible that in the fairytale the child finds an appreciation of her own ways of understanding the world through imagination? The child spontaneously uses imagination to come up with answers. Adults often respond to this in a negative way and encourage the child to use other ways to find answers, such as accepting the adult's own explanation or trying to find the "facts" supposedly lying out there in the world, waiting to be discovered. But the fairytale legitimizes the use of imagination. It is even a necessary tool to understanding the tale itself because it was created through imagination. In this way, the tale becomes a "free space" for the child, a relief from the adult's monotonous direction, an appreciation of a method the child sees as its own.

The German Philosopher Immanuel Kant called the fiction-making imagination empirical because of its dependence on each individual's experience. "The empirical imagination depends for its working on the association of ideas which we just happen to have, but need not have. This kind of imagination is sometimes referred to by Kant as the "reproductive imagination," and he says of it that its working is "entirely subject to empirical laws, the laws, namely, of association."² Empirical imagination is thus an individual activity through which past experience is disassembled in order to reassemble it in creative ways. We can apply this kind of imagination to any sphere of our experience--nature as well as morals, ideas as well as how we communicate them. And this can be a very useful way of dealing with our experience because it helps us learn from it and anticipate the best course of action in the future.

Scientists use imagination in this reproductive way when they come up with hypotheses and try to build theories. They look at the information they have available, separate details, and assemble them in different ways. They imagine the outcomes of different associations and try to find the most reasonable one. Without imagination we wouldn't have science--we probably wouldn't even have the wheel.³

Empirical imagination is also applied in the field of ethics, when we are dealing with our relations with other persons and our moral decisions in their regard. Moral imagination is a term used to describe the ability to see things from other peoples' perspectives as well as anticipate the consequences of our actions, and their effects on ourselves and others. Building on Henry James, Martha Nussbaum says that moral knowledge "is not simply intellectual grasp of propositions; it is not even simply intellectual grasp of particular facts; it is perception. It is seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling."⁴ The moral imagination we use in order to reach this knowledge is an activity where we "imagine alternative viewpoints as a means of understanding and transforming the

limits of [our] own convictions and commitments."⁵ Imagination provides a space where we can experiment with possible actions before we act them out. We can even enter various possible worlds and put ourselves in the shoes of the most fortunate -- and the least advantaged. In this way moral imagination enhances empathy, which becomes the basis for a theory of ethics which values caring and respect for persons.

I have talked about how imagination works as a creative force within various fields of human activity. The fields I have chosen are just examples; the creative value of imagination can be found in any aspect of our experience. It leads us to something new-- discoveries, creations and inventions. In all cases the imagination nourishes our minds, leads us beyond routine. By means of it our activities become more than mechanical, we find genuine interest in them.⁶ And often the imagination bears concrete fruit in the form of new tools or ideas with which to deal with the world. A computer, music, the idea of gender, and the theory of gravity are all derived from imagination in one way or another. They are the outcome of thinking that has been set free to look for new dimensions in the world. These tools in turn expand the horizons of those persons who learn through them, help them to make life more comfortable and to increase the resources they have available to make their lives meaningful. John Dewey stresses the role of imagination in giving meaning to our experiences. According to him "[t]here is no limit to the meaning which an action may come to possess. It all depends upon the context of perceived connections in which it is placed."⁷ By using our imagination to open up new views and see new possibilities in the world we are creating new connections in our lives, and building and expanding our web of meaning. And there doesn't seem to be a limit to, or restriction of, the form of empirical imagination that I have been describing because "the reach of imagination in realizing connections is inexhaustible."⁸

The connection-making force of imagination works on many levels. I have looked at examples of connections that people make between themselves and other people. At this level the imagination helps us to make sense of our existence in the communities which we happen to live in. It becomes a tool which I can use to explore my relationships to various groups (described in terms of gender, race, class, employment, age, education etc.) and find out with which of them I identify myself. At another level, imagination is a means for exploring connections between the person and the rest of the world. We use it to come up with explanations of the phenomena we see around us; balls falling to earth, birds flying in the sky, people dying from diseases. These imaginations can then be treated in a variety of ways; in science they are explored empirically, in myths and religion they are declared true by a god or other powerful sources.

But we do not use imagination only to create connections between ourselves and the rest of the world. We can also use it to create our own thoughts or images. Here I am

referring to Strawson's second class in the imagination schema, whereby imagination is linked with images and mental representations. In this aspect, imagination is the "image-producing faculty, the faculty, we may say, of producing actual representatives (in the shape of images) of non-actual perceptions."⁹ I now have an image of a strawberry in my mind. It is a clear image, bringing water to my mouth. I can see no strawberry in my room but the image popped into my mind as a memory of the sweet and sour taste I felt when eating one of these fruits earlier today. To the taste is added a red color, the wet and hairy feeling of holding a strawberry between my fingers and the thrust between my teeth when a fiber or seed from the berry gets stuck between them. I do not actually perceive any of these sensations but by means of my imagination I can bring them up from my past experience, and connect them into a perfect image of a strawberry. It seems to me that Dewey is right that the connection-making force of imagination is inexhaustible. But does this mean that there are no limits to imagination?

Finding the limits of experience through imagination

As we have seen, imagination can open up the most marvelous worlds of adventure and ingenuity. But these worlds seldom surprise us. We can always make sense out of them because they are made up of connections among things we have already experienced. In fact material reality is much more likely to arouse surprise than my own imagination. I can imagine fierce dragons, but then nature shows me shocking skates swimming gracefully through deepest waters. When I imagine elves living in a rock, keeping themselves busy reading peoples minds, nature gives me a world where material dissolves into energy and space melts into time. Nature will probably always be more surprising to us than our own imagination because no matter how creative we are in our imaginative reassociations, their source will always be nature and our experience within it.¹⁰

Being surprising does not mean the same thing as being incomprehensible. The fact that we can always discover new things in nature does not mean that nature sets limits to our imagination in such a way that we can no longer use it to make sense out of our experience. Whenever we do discover something, our imagination can immediately start working on building this new experience into its web of connections. We can see nature and our experiences as the stuff which imagination works with. Whether we have more or less stuff to feed our imagination in no way restricts our imagination's ability or propensity to act on this stuff. It's a bit like having more or less money. If I have five dollars in my pocket, that means that I can buy a sandwich for lunch. If I have thirty dollars, I can go to a restaurant and have a full meal. The amount of money I have doesn't affect the way money works--I can always use it to buy food. In the same way, the amount of experiences I have had determines a field which my imagination works within, but it doesn't

affect the fact that my imagination actually works, or how it does. I pointed out earlier that imagination works by way of making connections. If I want to pursue my question about its limits, it seems to me that I have to look at these connections and the possible rules that underlie them.

What kinds of connections does the imagination make? I will address this question by giving a couple of examples. They are by no means intended to exhaust the topic but should provide us with illustrations from which we can draw a general idea which will be presented as an answer to my question.

First example:

I imagine that all frogs are princes under a spell. The connection being made here is contained in the word "all." Now what does this connection do to my imaginary world? Does it establish something, set restrictions or exclude anything from being experienced? Let's say that I am walking around in this imaginary world and meet a frog. Then I would immediately know that this frog was a deformed prince because if all frogs are princes that must mean that any single frog is a prince. Can I still in my imaginary world imagine that the frog I meet is not a prince? Not without leaving this world and jumping into another one. If it is true in an imaginary world that all frogs are princes, then it is true in such a world that any single frog is a prince, and I cannot imagine otherwise.

But what about the princes who are under a spell in my imaginary world? Are they all frogs? Well, that depends, doesn't it? If the group of princes under a spell is made up of exactly the same members as the group of frogs, then all princes would be frogs. But princes and frogs seem to be different groups--there is no necessary link between them other than our original all-connection. And it seems to me that it would be a remarkable coincidence if it so happened that the two groups were in fact just one group of frogs that were princes under spell. What about the princes that had been relieved of their frog-spell but changed into rabbits instead? They would definitely not be frogs. And I think it would be a cruel world in which princes under spells couldn't really get rid of their spells because there was no room in such a world for princes that had the potential of falling under a different spell. Now of course some imaginary world-makers are cruel, so this world is a possibility, but it isn't necessary. A sympathetic world-maker would not deny her frog-princes the right to transform. Therefore I cannot, without more information, tell if all princes under a spell in this world are frogs.

The all-connection seems to restrict our imagination when it comes to the frog part of it, but not in regard to the princes or whatever else might be in the imagined world. If my imagination allows all frogs to be princes under a spell, then my imagination has no way of excluding any frog from that characteristic.

Second Example:

I imagine a world where the following sentences are true:

1. If I shave all my hair off, then I will become bald.

2. I shave all my hair off.

What happens in this imaginary world? My intuition immediately tells me that I become bald. Is it still possible for me to imagine that I do not become bald? This question sounds almost ridiculous. When trying to find a positive answer to it, in all cases I find myself changing the two original sentences in some way and thus changing the imaginary world. My intuitive conclusion seems to be an absolute necessity--so rigid that my imagination can in no way bend it.

The connection we are dealing with here is more complicated than in the first example. First comes a claim that *if* something happens, *then* something else will follow. If, then, the *if*-part is fulfilled, we find it necessary for the *then*-part to follow.

The connections dealt with in the two examples above have been analyzed by logicians for centuries. Logic is a discipline which describes and prescribes how we make connection between or within statements. In our thinking and communication with others we are constantly making inferences and necessary connections between statements, in order to try to show the meaning of the topic at hand. It seems that our thinking is determined by certain rules of logic--that is, rules of how we can make connections between statements. In order to get in touch with these rules we can try to read the work of logicians and try to deal with the problems they have come up with. But another possibility, much closer at hand, is to explore the limits of our connection-making capacities through imagination. By setting up different possible worlds, trying to imagine anything and to explore what seems to be possible and what is bound by necessity, we move beyond the contingent sphere of nature to the necessary sphere of logic. Gilbert Keith Chesterton¹¹ has suggested that fairytales, because of their vivid use of imagination, are the ideal landscapes in which to search for reasonableness. The fairytale shows you how the empirical part of experience can be played with endlessly, while certain ways of connecting the empirical parts are completely necessary. Those necessary connections are what makes for reasonable thinking.

There seems, then, to be a factor of necessity built into imagination: it is not only the free and creative force of empirical connection-making. Kant gave this factor an im-

portant role in his philosophy and called it transcendental imagination. In Strawson's schema, this is described by the third category--how imagination plays a role in perceptual recognition and conceptualization. Kant argued "that we must use imagination in order to connect the chaotic deliverance of the senses to the orderly rules of the understanding, formed a priori to be applied to the world."¹² Here again the imagination is described as a connection making force but in this case it is not an individual process of meaning making. The transcendental imagination has a universal function. It is an active, spontaneous power, fundamental to our perceptual understanding of the world because it makes available the tools by which we organize our perceptions.¹³

These tools are what Kant called schemas, which are:

a product of, and also a rule for, the imagination, in accordance with which, and by means of which alone, the imagination can connect the particular image or the particular object with the general concept under which it falls... [This schematism] is 'an art concealed in the depths of the human soul, whose real mode of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover and have open to our gaze.'¹⁴

This secret art of the soul, its a priori factor, makes necessary combinations among our chaotic stream of perceptions. These connections are dependent on certain concepts, and if the imagination didn't provide these concepts, "then our sensory impressions would not be combined in this sort of way"¹⁵ at all.

The transcendental imagination works in two dimensions:

1. It connects perceptions of different objects of the same kind
2. It connects different perceptions of the same object of a given kind.¹⁶

Thus it provides our perception with a belief that the objects perceived have a continuous existence, and that this existence is distinct from the perception itself.¹⁷ If I sit in my garden and see a hairy animal on four feet running in the street, it is by means of my transcendental imagination that I make a causal connection between this stimulus to others of similar kind I have had in the past, and I link the perception I have to the concept of a dog. The a priori schemes of imagination also provide my perception with a belief in contiguity through space and time and therefore, when a few moments later I see a hairy, four-legged creature run into my garden, I perceive it as the same dog as I saw in the street.

The transcendental imagination is a constructive function which frames our perception and thinking. It is universal and fundamental to our perceptual understanding of the world. This kind of imagination expands our immediate sensations and impressions and brings order to their chaotic world. By looking at this universal function of imagination we get an insight into the logic which guides our thinking.



When we realize that we cannot imagine something, we have found a limit of our possible experience.

Imagination and inquiry

I have been talking very positively about the imagination and its value in our thinking and experience. What we can imagine opens up a world of creativity, originality and innovation. What we cannot imagine opens up a world of logic and basic structures which our minds seem to depend on. But a word of caution is in order, and it is derived from Strawson's fourth and final class of imagination, where it is linked with false belief, delusion, mistaken memory or misperception. Mistaken connections are possible on all levels of our imagination. If we let our creative impulses have their own way they run the risk of losing touch with empirical facts and leading us astray. Ryle gives the following example:

A mother, distraught with anxiety for her child who is missing from home, imagines all sorts of possible and impossible contingencies. Too distraught to consider evidence or probabilities, she is the passive victim of dreadful fantasies, which pursue one another without rhyme or reason, and are quite outside her control.¹⁸

When trying to imagine reasons and causes for the perplexities of the world, our dead-ends outnumber our successful attempts by far. I can imagine that a rash on my skin is caused by a demon, or my going too late to bed, or stress, or something else. But unless these hypotheses give me a tool with which to take action and get rid of the rash, their value is limited and they could actually lead me astray and delay the possible healing of my skin.

We also make perceptual mistakes. The transcendental imagination doesn't always hit on the right connection between a perception and its appropriate concept. I may see a hairy four-legged animal in my garden and think it is a dog, when after a closer look I discover that it is a cat.

We can avoid these imaginative mistakes in our daily lives by being critical of our own perceptions and hypotheses. But all cases, four eyes see better than two, and communication with other people--listening to different perspectives--seems to be the best way to avoid imagination's dead-ends. When it comes to building knowledge and understanding of the world and learning how to go about it, the ideal way is to do it in communities in which individuals share their imaginings and analyze them together. But the community itself can also become locked up in its own perspective, and in order to avoid this it has to commit itself to openness and fallibilism. It has to let in all imaginings and to explore them openly, relating them to the facts of experience and always keeping open the possibility of older ideas being overruled by new ones. In communities of inquiry, devoted to enlarging their members' experience

and understanding and to helping them find meaning in their existence, imagination is a powerful tool, which both opens up new possibilities and shows us where the limits of those possibilities are.

Endnotes

1. 1974, p. 45.
2. Warnock, 1976, p. 30. Her quotes from Kant are taken from chapter B 152 of *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp-Smith and published 1929 by Macmillan.
3. AAAS, 1990, p. 5, 141-142.
4. Nussbaum, 1990, p. 152.
5. Johnson, 1993, p. 203.
6. Ryle, 1979, pp. 62-63, and Dewey, 1916, p. 236.
7. Dewey, 1916, p. 208.
8. Dewey, 1916, p. 208.
9. Strawson, 1974, p. 53.
10. I derived the general idea for this argument from Chesterton, 1979.
11. Chesterton, 1979, pp. 14-15.
12. Warnock, 1976, p. 97.
13. Warnock, 1976, pp. 26,30.
14. Strawson, 1974, p. 47. His quote from Kant is taken from chapter B 180-1 of *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp-Smith and published 1933 by Macmillan.
15. Strawson, 1974, p. 52.
16. Strawson, 1974, p. 47.
17. Strawson, 1974. P. 50.
18. Ryle, 1979, p. 51.

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