



The Misadventures of the Imagination

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Abstract

In occidental culture, the dismissive treatment reserved for the imagination coincides with the implementation of a theory of knowledge based exclusively on understanding and reason. This gnoseology leaves aside any possibility of establishing a sensible, corporeal link between the subject that knows and the known object. *Res extensa/res cogitans*: with this famous dichotomy, Descartes enthrones the philosophical dualism that illuminates the whole history of western philosophy, from the myth of Plato's cave to the emergence from immanence by Husserl's intentionality. My paper tells the story of this deep-rooted desire to objectify knowledge, making it independent from the subject. This is what reflects the sacrifice of imagination.

Keywords: Theory of knowledge, Metaphysic, Heuristics.

INTRODUCTION

Imagination banished from knowledge

Here we will analyze the historical course of the imagination, relegated for centuries to the role of the "family madwoman" by Western philosophy. In fact, the importance of imagination has been underestimated: it has been assigned subaltern intellectual roles even though reason was given supremacy; the traditional notion of imagination has always remained fixed on the production of utopia and fantasy.

**"It would be necessary to make a whole history of rationalism - or, if you like, of the imagination colonized by reason - to show by what intellectual terror and torture inflicted on the imagination modern "reason" has established its empire. Imagination has been driven out of reality, its eyes have been gouged out to deprive them of the light of intelligence, and then it has been exiled to the darkness of Illusion, where sometimes it has been hunted down as a witch for the sole crime of existing."

It should not be surprising, therefore, if the word imaginary is still used today as an antonym for the real. This circumstance does not prevent us from accepting fictions as explanations of a real situation whose causes we do not know. In other words, despite the discredit brought to the imagination, fiction plays the role of a necessary evil in the acquisition of knowledge and in learning. We know almost nothing about fictions: we lack an explanation of how they function in the cognitive process, a characterization of the different types of fictions and their different fields of application.

First of all, it should be universally accepted that a fiction can be part of a non-fictional demonstration:

**" [...] The question of whether or not a representation has or does not have cognitive significance cannot be answered satisfactorily in terms of the semantic status of an isolated representation. The expression "having a cognitive scope" does not therefore refer to the truly status of an isolated representation, but rather to the role of this representation in a specific mode of operation of mental representations - the cognitive mode. [...] To put it simply, we can define the cognitive relationship as one in which we allow the world to act on us in order to develop a model that is such that our future interactions with this world are more appropriate than our past interactions. What is important is that, when we conceive the question of the cognitive relation from this angle, we move it from the field of a semantics of representations to that of a specific use of representations, thus towards a pragmatic questioning."

And yet Aristotle had exposed the cognitive role of the imagination, an intermediate stratum between sensitivity and intellect, in *On the Soul* and its Appendix, "On Memory and Reminiscence". For the Stagirite, the perceptions coming from the five senses had first to be assimilated by the imagination and then become the material for intelligible processing.

*"Imagination, in turn, is distinguished from sensation as well as from thought; but it is not given without sensation, and without imagination there is no belief." "This is why, if one had no sensation, one could neither learn nor understand anything; and, on the other hand, when one thinks, thought is necessarily accompanied by an image, because images are, in a sense, sensations, although they have no matter."

Unfortunately, with all the interest that Aristotle's principles may have had, his conception will be relegated to oblivion by the Western historical tradition. Instead of determining the place of imagination in cognitive processes, what it remained for the history was the notion of imagination as a blurred perception or prevarication of reality, leaving it permanently out of the cognitive process - the "allegory of the Cave" and other excerpts from Plato's *Republic* follow this trend.

However, several Arab authors and commentators of the Middle Ages (Avicenna, Averroes) recovered Aristotle's teachings on imagination and contributed to spreading his teachings to the four corners of the East. Here is a resonance:

*"Long ago, Western philosophy, let us say "official" philosophy, dragged in the wake of the positive sciences, admitted only two sources of Knowledge. There is the sensitive perception, providing the so-called empirical data. And there are the concepts of understanding, the world of laws governing this empirical data. Certainly, phenomenology has modified and surpassed this simplifying gnoseology. But the fact remains that between sensitive perceptions and intuitions or categories of the intellect, the place had remained empty. What should have taken its place between the two, and which elsewhere occupied this middle place, namely the Active Imagination, was left to the poets. That this active imagination in man [...] has its own cognitive function, that is to say that it gives us access to a reality of Being that without it remains closed and forbidden to us, is what a rational and reasonable scientific philosophy could not explain. [...] What characterizes the position of the [...] Ishrâqîyûn of the spiritual line of Sohravardi (12th century) is a scheme of worlds that radically contrasts with the dualism that we have just recalled. For them, imagination is a cognitive faculty in its own right. Its mediating function is to make us know as of right the region of being which, without this mediation, would remain a forbidden region [...]."

Kant and the Imagination

At the end of the 18th century, the question of the role of imagination in the process of knowledge will acquire pathetic contours for Western philosophy. A typical example is Kant's transcendental idealism, which has a particular difficulty in situating the imagination and giving it its rightful place in the concert of the faculties of the soul and in their harmonic functioning. Thus, as S. Barberi affirms, the imagination is painfully absent from the picture of the higher faculties, in their systematic unity which Kant draws up in the introduction to the *Critique of Judgement*:

Mental Faculties	Cognitive faculties	A Priori Principles	Application
Cognitive faculties	Understanding	Conformity to law	Nature
Feeling of pleasure and displeasure	Judgment	Finality	Art
Faculty of desire	Reason	Final End	Freedom

*"As you can see, imagination is given no status. Kant makes no mention of it. Now, and this is where the scandal lies, imagination is, as we shall see, directly or indirectly associated with all the under-named "faculties" of the human being conceived as a soul incarnated in a body. Active

everywhere and located nowhere, imagination seems to be unmentionable, shameful like the *taenia* with which it is compared."

In the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), the status of imagination is treated in particular "on the Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding". This section was entirely modified by Kant in the second version of the *Critique of Pure Reason* of 1787. In this new version, the philosopher tries to renounce the characteristics he had originally attributed to imagination, relegating it to the role of a simple function of understanding. Why this reversal? Here are some hypotheses:

*"The status of this text (the first version of the Transcendental Deduction, we open the parenthesis), is quite particular. It is because Kant judged it unsatisfactory that it will be deleted in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787) to be replaced by a shorter and totally reworked version. Used forty times in this first version, the word "imagination" will only be present fifteen times in the second. These simple figures show that imagination is as such, if not the target of this reworking, at least concerned. What is the reason for this? We know that the purpose of the Deduction is to make the use of categories objective and legitimate. Now this first version begins with a psychological, subjective analysis of the possibility of categories and then analyses their objective value. It is in order not to be accused of proceeding genetically (deducting the right of fact, the objectivity of the category from its psychological possibility) that Kant has almost eliminated this psychological analysis in the second version. The latter then only appears at the end of the Deduction, in paragraph twenty-four, in which, after having founded the categories in law, he quickly addresses the psychological problem strictly speaking: how can one imagine a category?"

"It is not that Kant changes his mind, it is that he does not want (and the texts seem to corroborate this hypothesis) to accept what follows from these theses, that is, the condemnation of the primacy of reason and the commitment of the author to show that the transcendental imagination provides a sufficiently solid foundation to "determine the finite essence of the subjectivity of the human subject" in an original way, in its unity and in its totality."

"The second edition of the CRP casts the transcendental imagination into the shadows and transforms it for the benefit of understanding [...]. At the same time, however, Kant is forced to maintain, on pain of seeing the whole foundation establishment of his philosophy collapse, everything that in the first edition constituted its function as a transcendental foundation."

"We must recall here the flagship orientation of the Kantian project. Kant seeks to found the universality of the three fundamental fields of knowledge, morality and art. Fighting against the twists and turns of skeptical relativism, it is the attachment to a foundation that he aims for. His obsession is the fixed, the stable, the timeless. But the world we live in is also fluid, unstable and temporal. From this opposition is born, at the heart of his thinking, a fundamental duality to which we will often return a couple of irreducible oppositions. For a fundamental duality to exist, there must also be a link between the two entities that constitute it. This link is always murky, vague, difficult to determine. It is an in-between, a "non-frank being", without shape. We are going to see that this link, this troubled place, coincides, in the theory of Kantian knowledge, with the imagination."

Whatever the reasons, Kant sees himself in the need to rework the *Critique of Pure Reason* in the 1787 edition, where imagination is limited to the role of the "blind function of the soul". The activities of imagination and understanding seem to be perfectly delineated in the text:

*"Synthesis in general is, as we shall see later, the mere effect of imagination, that is, of a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we would never have any knowledge, but of which we are only very rarely aware. But to reduce this synthesis to concepts is a function that returns to the understanding, and by which it first provides us with knowledge in the true sense of the word."

Imagination instead of Reason?

Yet imagination escapes this limit of the conceptual and, by adopting the name of Reason, contributes to create fictions that accompany and regulate knowledge:

*“Concepts of reason are, as has been said, mere Ideas and have in truth no object in any experience, but do not, nevertheless, point to imagined objects that would at the same time be accepted as possible. They are thought out only in a problematic way, in order to found, in relation to them (as heuristic fictions), regulatory principles for the systematic use of understanding in the field of experience. If we go beyond this, they are no more than beings of reason whose possibility is not demonstrable, and who consequently cannot be placed at the basis of a hypothesis, either, for the sake of a hypothesis, at the foundation of phenomena that are actually real.”

Kant name heuristic fictions die Ideas of Reason. Heuristic, because without regard for its truthful content they serve the realization of the knowledge on which they operate. Fictions, because these ideas do not and cannot have an experimental confirmation: they do not lead to any sensible intuition.

*“This is tantamount to saying, for example, that the things of the world are to be regarded as if they had a supreme intelligence. In this mode, the Idea is strictly speaking only a heuristic concept, not an ostensive one, and it indicates, not how an object is constituted, but how, under the guidance of this concept, we should seek the constitution and linking of the objects of experience in general.”

Freed from any pretension of experimental verification, the Ideas of Reason are articulated pragmatically and determine precise directions to be followed for the practical realization of knowledge.

Kant distinguishes between heuristic (transcendental) fictions, those who are valid for us and for the others, and mere fictions, those that remain totally anchored in subjectivity.

Heuristics fictions frame knowledge by giving it a finality, a systematics, a totality where particular cases subsist. This is the case of the regulatory principles of reason that we have just explored. This help that fiction lends to knowledge is due to the fact that the elements of value of the latter (good or bad knowledge), as well as all the other global considerations that concern it, fall beyond its own determinations:

*“[...] the understanding that is simply preoccupied with its empirical use and does not reflect on the sources of its own knowledge can certainly be very successful, but there is one thing it is not at all capable of, and that is to determine for itself the limits of its use and to know what may well reside inside or outside its entire sphere. [...] He is unable to distinguish whether or not certain questions are within his horizon, he is never sure of his pretensions and of what he possesses, and he must therefore expect to be often and shamefully called to order as soon as he oversteps the limits of his domain (as is inevitable) and wanders among chimeras and illusions”.

These kinds of fictions determine a point of reference, a direction to follow, a waiting horizon on which knowledge does not act directly, but without which it cannot justify its existence. The cooperation between fiction and knowledge is the basis of an objective approach in which, among other things, the developments of all scientific approaches are framed.

Hans Vaihinger, father of Fictionalism, says about this:

*“Kant wants to clear up the very frequent misunderstanding that considers the Ideas of Dialectic to be invalid, because they would give rise to confusion and equivocation; they would therefore be worthless, harmful. But no, they have an application with a precise purpose. The finality of these Ideas, characteristic of true fictions, will be emphasized [...] It will be shown here that these Ideas "are not only empty associations of content".

Now, it must be stated here that the only function that can produce heuristic fictions such as noumena, the soul, the purpose of science, the focus imaginarius, the totality of knowledge, the principle of regulation, God, the purpose of Nature, as well as the whole long list of or principles of regulation attributed to pure Reason, is, in the first term: imagination. It is, of course, transcendental imagination as Heidegger conceives it; between pure Reason and transcendental imagination there is no detectable difference. The concepts or Ideas of Reason, on the one hand, and the fictions of

imagination, on the other, are the same thing. When it comes to the production of heuristic fictions, pure reason and transcendental imagination seem to duplicate their work.

Apart from the Ideas of Reason, it is important to note that Criticism abounds in fictions on which sensibility and understanding operate, which are not recognized by Kant as fictions:

**"In Transcendental Aesthetics and Analytics one can, if one wants, also find a form of theory of fiction. Space, time, and in particular, categories, are representations whose fabric helps to systematically elaborate the perceived material; each of these representations, despite the fact that they are subjective and therefore not true, is necessary in order to be able to grasp what is given. From this point of view, they can be considered as fictions; but the majority of them lack the awareness, the acceptance of their fictitious nature [...] It can be concluded that they are fictions, but this "at one's own risk". For Kant himself, the fictions are found only in his doctrine of the Ideas of the Transcendental Dialectic."

To this list should be added the unprovable Ding an sich, the intuition a priori so harshly criticized by B. Bolzano, the scheme, halfway between imagination and understanding, etc.

The Critique of Pure Reason, a Heuristic of Knowledge

Admitting that these constitutive principles of understanding and perception are also fictions, forces us to reconsider the role of imagination in the cognitive process. Thanks to imagination, knowledge can no longer be seen as a passive set of judgments or interpretations about the truthfulness of facts. It is transformed into a use, a concrete and effective use that allows the optimal response of a subject to a given situation. In short, knowledge is not a passive hermeneutic according to Kant, but a heuristic. This is the reason that explains the importance of the "Schematism" by the Critique of pure Reason, as Alain Renaut tells us:

**"Any schematization of a concept consists in temporalizing it, and this temporalization itself lies in our capacity to transform it into a method, that is to say, into a series of operations following one another in time, that the subject can practice [...]."

The existence of fictions that run through the entire architecture of the Critic transforms his traditionally recognized theory of knowledge into a generalized heuristic. This is Yves Bouchard's thesis. According to his reading of the Critique of Pure Reason, whenever Kant envisages a totality that can serve as a framework for the diverse of sensibility and the diverse of understanding, he confronts us with a heuristic system of representation that acts as if the totality of the experiences he presupposes were already manifested. This order constitutes a timeless and infinite continuum on which the individual experiences take shape and will be actualized. Thus, Criticism is organized around two distinct and fundamentally heterogeneous orders, that of pure knowledge and that of its implementation:

**"The recognition of a difference between these two orders of unity constitutes an important moment in the epistemological undertaking of the first Critique. While the results of Aesthetics and Analytics compete to bring to light the unity of understanding, which is realized in the object of a concept, the results of the Dialectic reveal a higher order of unity, that of reason, without which the diverse conceptual of understanding would remain chaotic. [...] Thus we could assert that by unifying the diverse of sentience (intuitions), understanding provides an object to know (erkennen), and that by unifying the diverse of understanding (concepts), reason provides an object to act (handeln). Understanding appears to be doubly conditioned, on the one hand by sensibility, which gives it a diversity of representations, and on the other hand by reason, which gives it a unity of action"

The systematization of knowledge, so necessary for the development of science in general, is an Idea of pure Reason in which concepts and categories of understanding subsist; but, as Kant explicitly states, systematization is not in itself knowledge. This means that it acts "from outside" on knowledge, so to speak, and determines a hierarchy, a necessary research direction to follow, which will allow the realization of a corpus organized according to its methodological imperatives. That is to say, collaboration, the interpenetration between the constitutive principles of the diverse

phenomenal and of understanding, on the one hand, and the regulatory principles of reason, on the other, constitute the basis on which the architectonics of Kantian epistemology is built.

It is from this approach that Yves Bouchard elaborates his research, by analysing the relationship that Ideas of infinite magnitude, applied in turn to sensitivity, understanding and reason, have with the particular cases that fit into them. The superimposition of two correlated systems of representation, α and ω , operational throughout Aesthetics, Analytics and Dialectics, is detected in this way.

*"While the representations of the type α have the property of being constitutive and ostensive, in that they show a unit realized in the given diverse phenomenal (gegeben), the representations of the type ω are regulatory and heuristic, in that they indicate the way to realize a given unit for task (aufgegeben). By establishing an a priori order of unity, ω representations of order confer articulation, cohesion and order to the conduct of research. They do not have a strictly theoretical function, but are nevertheless essential to the theoretical order. Thus, the system as such has only a heuristic value and only the propositions that constitute it have an ostensive value."

We have cited Kant's Critique of Pure Reason because his critical idealism gives rise to a theory of knowledge that uses the imagination to assert itself in heuristics, on the one hand, while, on the other hand, it denies imagination without daring to draw all the consequences that emerge from its use. This is a typical example of the misadventures and misfortunes that the imagination has had to endure at the expense of understanding and reason. Let us summarize: in the reworking of the Critique of 1787 fictions were prohibited from knowledge, at least in form. In substance, they were maintained, either admitted as fictions, as principles regulating reason, or not admitted as fictions, but admitted as principles constituting perception and understanding. In any case, fictions determine a heuristic that is indispensable for attributing a purpose to a given knowledge, a presupposed purpose that is not part of the knowledge itself but which justifies its existence and value. Indeed, Kant's first Critique not only answers the famous question of the content of knowledge, but at the same time questions its systematics, its finality, its utility. For Kant, knowledge, far from being a static reflection, constitutes a dynamic function to be realized according to the systematic application of rules and Principles, the correct use of which determines its correction. When the transcendental imagination finds its way to the realization of a project or the explanation of a state of affairs, it crystallizes into a practice, within which theories, hypotheses, truths or fictions play the role of parts of a whole. It is because they contribute pragmatically to this realization by being part of the whole, and not by their value in isolation, that these elements take on their value. These are the salient features of any heuristic, defined in one stroke.

Heidegger, drawing on the Critique in its first version of 1781, elaborated an interpretation that was a subject of confrontation with Cassirer in the Davos meetings of March 1929.²² He sees the Kantian imagination as the basis of a new metaphysics that is intended to replace traditional metaphysics. For Heidegger, the Critique of Pure Reason is much more than a theory of knowledge; it is a fundamental ontology. By answering the question "What is Man?" this ontology poses transcendental imagination as the temporal transcendence of Dasein. Thus Heidegger sees in the first Critique a direct relationship with his own work *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time) which, as its title expresses it, links temporality to the problematic of the meaning of being. Heidegger tries to demonstrate that Kant's original project was to replace scholastic metaphysics with another, this time posed in a Purely Sensible Reason, which carries with it the understanding of the problematic of being. To support his interpretation Heidegger links imagination, temporality and transcendence in the same metaphysical project:

*"In the logic of his interpretation, Heidegger insistently suggested that Kant himself could only have retreated from the enormity of the event that took place in 1781: not only did the second edition of 1787 fail to make explicit the theory of transcendental imagination, but much of the modifications and rearrangements it introduced into the Critique would even have been due, according to Heidegger, to the need to plug the breach in the age-old domination of reason."

The Radical Imagination

What we concretely know is systematically mixed with what we hypothetically assert and also with what we desire; giving rise to a representative - affective - intentional flow that is the basis of all realisation and behaviour. Cornelius Castoriadis calls this flow radical imagination.

*“The representations of an individual at any moment and throughout his life - or better: the representative (affective-intentional) flow that an individual is - are first and foremost magma. They are not a set of defined and distinct elements, and yet they are not pure and simple chaos. One can extract or locate such and such a representation - but this operation is obviously, in relation to the thing itself, transitory (and even essentially pragmatic and utilitarian), and its result, as such, is neither true nor false, neither correct nor incorrect.”

What is really new in this perspective is to consider imagination independently of any utilitarian polarization, before it can crystallize into particular images or representations. Depending on the needs, it can remain as fuzzy as a fantasy, configure a hypothesis applicable to the elucidation of a particular phenomenon, or solidify into concepts and reasoning. This representative/affective/intentional flow, this creative magma that exists above all, involuntarily and spontaneously, explains why the being that we are is in perpetual construction:

*“[...] the representation is not a painting hung inside the subject and accompanied by various trompe-l'oeil, or a huge trompe-l'oeil; it is not a bad photograph of the "spectacle of the world" that the subject holds in his heart and can never lose. It does not belong to the subject; it is, to begin with, the subject. She is what makes us light in the darkness, what the dream itself is light for. It is what makes us always, even if "we think of nothing", that thick and continuous flow that we are, what makes us present to us only by being present to something other than ourselves even though no "thing" would be "present", what makes our presence to us can never be anything other than the presence of what is not simply us.”

Conclusion: A light at the end of the Tunnel

To think of imagination as a creative magma that exists before any determination places its problem in its true scope. It is not, as has been asserted for twenty-five centuries, a supplementary manifestation of our consciousness. As the supreme organ of survival and adaptation, imagination is a magma that creates forms in our consciousness and our unconscious, the origin of all our sensitive and intellectual manifestations. It specializes in the form of perception, volition, understanding, reason, etc. to configure the most adequate response to the challenges of the external world, to put into action the most correct and adapted use that we can make of a specific knowledge.

Conceiving the imagination as a creative magma allows us at the same time to give a particular validity to heuristics, understood as a strategy for realizing what the imagination proposes. Indeed, heuristics is the implementation of radical imagination, of the representative/affective/intentional flow.

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