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Imagination in Early Modern Theory of Knowledge

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Related Topics

Knowledge · Reason · Soul · Spirit · Thinking

Synonyms

Common sense; Fancy; Phantasy

Introduction

During the early modern period, the imagination had multiple functions, from putting together in one image the information received from the five senses to accounting for occult phenomena, from combining simple ideas into factitious ones to prophetic dreams. The association of imagination with creativity, originality, and human arts, so prevalent in current discussions, only appeared during Romanticism. However, we can already see its roots in the conception of an active imagination gaining support in the early modern period. Imagination was the intermediary between the senses and reason, with an important function in the process of thinking. At the same time, imagination also had the ability to combine images and produce new ones that never existed before. Traditionally, imagination was seen as an important source of error, and some authors were going as far as to consider it the main source of cognitive error. As a result of this, the imagination played a significant role in the debates on how to improve human cognitive capacities. Moreover, the active nature of imagination went as far as to consider that it has power not only over ideas and other mental faculties, but even upon one's own body (such as the sensation of sourness we get when seeing someone else eating a lemon) and other bodies and minds around (the evil eye).

Ancient and Medieval Heritage: The Classical Conception of Imagination

According to most philosophical traditions in the Ancient and Medieval periods, the imagination is one of the main faculties of the human mind, together with memory and reason. The imagination was located in the front ventricle of the brain, while reason (or cogitation) was situated in the middle, and memory in the back ventricle (Harvey 1975). The dependence of the mind's faculties on the brain was based on the observation that a person whose brain was damaged was having trouble thinking. Aristotle is an exception to this, considering the heart as the seat of cognition. However, most of the Aristotelians during the

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Middle Ages followed Plato and Galen in placing cognition in the brain.

For Aristotle, the imagination was the faculty that combined the information coming from the senses into one image – the so-called *phantasmata*. While the information received by the senses is present only as long as the object producing it is present and, in this sense, we can say that they are abstract copies of the object, in the imagination they can also exist when the object is no longer present. However, this faculty was for Aristotle rather passive: it was only reproducing the representation of a sensible object, already existent in memory. In this way, Aristotle clearly departed from Plato's conception of the imagination defined as a combination of sensation and judgment. But even if Aristotle downplayed the contribution of the imagination, in his *De anima* (III, VII), he still asserts that the soul cannot think without a phantasm (or an "image," not in the visual sense, but in the sense of the product of information coming from the five senses), thus making the imagination indispensable for every kind of cognition (Tuominen 2013).

This theory created a series of challenges for scholastic authors who posited the existence of an immaterial soul: "if the immaterial rational soul was dependent on sensitive knowledge in order to perform its thinking, then how could it continue to perform its cognitive functions after the death of the sensitive soul?" One possible solution, offered by Thomas Aquinas, is to say that the soul, in the absence of the bodily images, is infused by the angels themselves with intelligible species. In this way, the intellect could still perform its thinking and acquire new knowledge after being separated from the body.

Except for this passive role of combining the individual perceptions coming from each sense, imagination was also conceived as active. Instead of being subdued to reason and memory, imagination could combine images at will, creating thus new composed images, as a unicorn or a mermaid. For some authors, this led to distinguishing between imagination as common sense, which puts together the images received from the particular senses, and imagination as phantasy, which is able to combine following no rules. For other authors, it was the very same faculty with different capacities (Knuuttila and Kärkkäinen 2013). As we will see further, this active characteristic of imagination will be held responsible also for having power over the body of the person who imagines and even upon other bodies, animate and inanimate.

However, together with the Aristotelian conception of the faculties of the mind, there were other sources, influential in the early modern period: Plato and the Neo-Platonists, as well as the Stoics. In Plato we find a rather reduced use of imagination. Given that the contemplation of forms or ideas does not involve knowledge acquired through sense-perception, imagination is used for the knowledge of material things, but such a knowledge is of an inferior kind. The application of reason and intellect, able to contemplate the eternal forms, is superior and thus more desirable. Another relevant source was the Neoplatonic tradition. While for Plotinus the imagination was the intermediary between the lower and the higher soul, later thinkers made imagination akin to the astral body and which provided the connection with the divine (Cocking 1991; Funkenstein 1986). God communicated with humans through prophecies, dreams, and visions, all taking place in the imagination (Vermeir 2008). This conception had a great impact upon the hermetical arts, which in turn influenced the early modern thinkers.

The rediscovery of Stoic philosophy is considered one of the most important influences that shaped early modern philosophy, and their views on the human mind in general as well as the imagination in particular can be included in this influence. In contrast to other thinkers, especially those in the Aristotelian tradition, the Stoics thought positively of the capacity of the imagination to receive the sensory stimuli coming from the body or to reject and interpret these stimuli. Not only this, but they recommended the cultivation of this capacity, which enabled humans to put themselves into diverse situations so that they can experience those feelings specific to each of these situations, increasing in this way the understanding of the world and their moral sentiments (Lyons 2005).

New Approaches to Imagination in the Early Modern Period

During the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the concept of imagination went through several transformations. The rejection of some conceptions of the Aristotelian framework, above all that of form, and the reshaping of others, such as substance, as well as the use of new sources, led to various discussions about the nature of the soul, its relations to the body, and its powers, overall about imagination and its role in cognition. Moreover, starting already in the sixteenth century, the theoretical discussions regarding the number of the inner senses was replaced by the physical examination of the organs and their functioning (Park 1998). Within these different conceptions, as a result of its two main characteristics, namely freedom and intermediary between mind and body, imagination played a variety of roles. Its main function was then to explain sense-perception, thinking, and the formation of passions and ideas. However, given its freedom in associating ideas, imagination was still considered as the source of errors, and at the same time the faculty that allows human to communicate with the divine. Even more, because of the intermediate status between body and soul, the imagination will be used to explain how they act upon one another, and its influence would go as far as the capacity to act upon other people's minds and bodies. The imagination was thus a "floating concept" used to ground very different discourses (Vermeir 2004).

In what follows I will focus on the conception of imagination in some of the early modern authors who were part of this trend of transforming the mind and its faculties, so as to fit in their broader philosophical systems.

Francis Bacon (1561–1626)

Bacon confers to imagination a rather traditional role: imagination is the messenger on the one hand between the senses and reason, and on the other between reason and the will. This is to say that the imagination transmits the sense-perceptions to reason, and the commands of reason to the will. Its function is to combine and separate. But many times, imagination, instead of being governed by reason, revolts and governs it, resulting in errors both epistemological and ethical. As one of the main sources of error, imagination plays an important role in Bacon's theory of the idols of the mind, that is, the errors, prejudices, and impediments that appear during the process of thinking, and which precludes the proper development of this process, and thus the acquisition of knowledge. In a nutshell, imagination can interfere with the process of thinking either by rushing it, which leads to false abstractions, or by obstructing it. The first is due to the agitation and impatience of the imagination and leads to false abstraction, and the second is due to the tendency of the imagination to rest upon false notions and not inquire further in order to find the correct ones. However, Bacon did not only diagnose the diseases of the human mind, he also provided possible cures for them. Being one of the faculties of the animal spirit, the imagination is affected by both bodily and mental cures. Medicines known to calm down the motion of spirits (and thus of the imagination) and mental practices, such as attention or experimental philosophy, can be used, even if the innate tendencies of the mind cannot be completely eradicated.

René Descartes (1596–1650)

Descartes' treatment of the imagination had a strong impact on developments in the late seventeenth century and beyond. One of Descartes' aims in the *Meditations* is to prove that, contrary to most of the Aristotle's claims, there can be knowledge which is not based on sense-perception. The contemplation of the immaterial and intelligible things is done by leading the mind away from the senses and the *phantasmata*. Moreover, Descartes claims that mathematics and geometry, the most certain disciplines, do not involve the imaginative powers of the soul. In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes concedes that we use the imagination whenever we think of a corporeal thing, but concludes that imagination, different from understanding, is not part of the mind's essence: "I consider that this power of imagining which is in me, differing as it does from the power of understanding, is not a necessary constituent of my own essence, that is, of the essence of my mind" (Descartes

1984–1991). The fact that one is part of the essence (understanding) and the other is not (imagination) is due to the fact that, when the mind understands something it turns toward itself and analyses the ideas it has, but when the mind imagines it turns toward the (exterior) body. Imagination is the seat of "corporeal ideas" and it is placed in a corporeal organ, the pineal gland.

In a detailed study on the development of Descartes' thought regarding imagination, Sepper establishes two functions of this faculty: (1) to replicate within the mind the structure and activity of extension (seen as the external substance), though in an imperfect and approximative way; and (2) to guide us in the enjoyment of our powers as a unity of body and soul, this is to say to control our passions, which arise from this unity (Sepper 1996).

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)

Hobbes' conception on the mind is dependent on his materialist and mechanist world view: he reduces reason and understanding to the senses and the imagination, and denies the existence of incorporeal substances. The human mind stops occupying a special place, and even cognition and volition are within the domain of mechanical interactions (Leijenhorst 2007). Since knowledge comes from the senses, all the images in the imagination are either copies or compositions of the sensory phantasms, corresponding to simple and respectively compound imagination. The latter, the compound imagination, is called by Hobbes "a fiction of the mind." Imagination thus comprises several mental phenomena: (1) memory is a species of imagination, (2) dreams are caused by distempers in some parts of the body giving birth to certain images, and (3) the understanding, which is more developed in humans than in any other animals. What is peculiar to Hobbes, and follows from his materialism, is that the trains of thoughts, namely what for other authors was the faculty of reason, are associations of successive images. The train of thought or mental discourse is of two kinds: the unregulated one takes place when a man is busy thinking, but without any scope or a specific desire. The second kind is the guided train of thoughts (imaginations), and it is more constant, being regulated by desire and design. This latter one is again distinguished into two: one is when we seek the causes or the means to produce an imaginary effect, and this type is shared with the brutes. The second type is when we imagine something and we seek all the possible effects that could be produced, and it is this capacity that distinguishes men and animals. Hobbes thus equates reasoning with imagining all the possible effects of a certain action, and this is why the imagination is central for this system.

Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673)

Compared to most of the early modern authors who distinguished between positive and negative aspects of the powers of the imagination (the latter being the source of error and falsity), Margaret Cavendish took the imagination to be a part of reason, which is characterized by freedom. Instead of arguing, as most of the authors, that imagination should be kept in check, so that it represents only the exterior world as perceived by the senses, Cavendish emphasizes the creative power of imagination. For her, the imagination and the fancy are what makes humans become the microcosm of God's creative capacity in that they can imitate the divine. This is perhaps a continuation of Paracelsus' view of human imaginative capacities (Walters 2014). Since Cavendish's three types of matter (inanimate, sensitive, and rational) are (according to her) completely blended, the creative capacity pertains to the entire nature, and moreover, every creation is material, including the creations of the mind. In this way, creatures create infinities of worlds, and these in turn create infinities of worlds. Not only that we can see in Cavendish the later concept of artistic creative imagination, but her view on imagination and matter break open the hierarchy of beings by endowing them all with creative divine-like capacities. Both freedom and imagination are characteristics of the rational part of matter, and creativity is the most significant capacity of the material world. Moreover, this conception has certain feminist conclusions in that, in Cavendish's view, women have the same capacity as men in creating and governing worlds.

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677)

In his early *Tratatus de intellectus emendatione* (*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*), Spinoza sets as his goal to establish the distinction between the imagination and the intellect, and to find ways to strengthen the latter. The ideas that originate from the imagination have their causes in an external body, and this is the reason why they are false and fictitious. In the *Ethics*, the definition of the imagination captures also the more positive aspect of it: "to retain the customary words, the affections of the human Body whose ideas present external bodies as present to us, we shall call images of things, even if they do not represent the external figures of things. And when the Mind regards bodies in this way, we shall say that it imagines" (Spinoza 1994). Further, Spinoza establishes three kinds of knowledge: the first one he calls opinion or imagination, the second reason, and the third intuitive knowledge. The first is determined by all the inadequate and confused ideas and this is the only cause of falsity, while the adequate ideas pertain to the second and third kinds and this knowledge is necessarily true. Opinions or imaginations arise either from the senses or from hearsay, in a disordered manner, and reason and the intellect can correct these ideas and transform them into adequate knowledge.

John Locke (1632–1704)

In Locke's system we find a radical reduction of the cognitive process: first, he abolishes the distinction between sense-perceptions and images given that both are mental representations with the same level of interiority; and second, he abolishes the distinction between image and idea, because all representations are equally perceptual (Brann 1991). Ideas have as their source either sensation or reflection, and Locke equates idea with phantasm, notion, species, or whatever can be employed in the process of thinking. What is relevant in Locke's treatment of the imagination is that he defines madness as a disorder in the imagination. The mind is consumed by an overexcited imagination, which makes it seem as if the logical capacities have been affected, though they have not been. The excess of the imagination is the result of the natural tendency of the mind to combine ideas, sometimes in strange ways. Uday Singh notices that though associating the natural activity of the imagination and madness, Locke eliminates anything sinful or sedentary from the conception of madness, giving it a clinical simplicity (Uday Singh 1992).

Henry More (1614–1687)

In trying to argue for a strict dualism between mind and body, More comes up with an original view on the soul and particularly on how the process of forming images takes place within the human soul. More directly responds to Hobbes' materialism, rejecting the idea that matter can perform mental functions. But he also rejects Descartes' conception of animal spirits being in charge of sensation and imagination. For More, the animal spirits are not suitable for such operations as creating and altering images or inventive reason. This leads to the conclusion that it is the immaterial soul that is in charge of both imagining and reasoning. Because imagination is one of the faculties of the immaterial soul, even sensation is in fact produced by both the material animal spirits and the immaterial soul. The animal spirits place the sense-perceptions in the fourth ventricle of the brain, seat of both the material and the immaterial soul. Further, the immaterial soul imagines by making use of these sense-perceptions. It is reason that, going further than imagination, grasps geometrical, mathematical, and logical concepts as well as ideas of immaterial beings, by using its innate notions or ideas (Hatfield 1998).

David Hume (1711–1776)

In the *Treatise on human nature*, Hume states that knowledge starts with the perception of external objects. These perceptions, in turn, are of two kinds: ideas and impressions. The former have copies whence they come (the external objects), while the latter do not have copies and they can only be followed back to the stimulus that produced them. This is to say that each idea is the copy of an impression or it is made up of impressions. Impressions include all our feelings: sensations, passions, and emotions. Another distinction between ideas and impressions lies in their force

or vivacity: impressions are more vivid than ideas, and this is the reason Hume calls ideas "faint images." Further, perceptions are distinguished also into simple and complex: the complex perceptions can be separated into simple ones. Imagination is the faculty that forms ideas, both simple and complex. In the case of complex ideas, we observe that many of them "never had impressions, that correspond to them, and that many of our complex impressions never are exactly copied in ideas" (Hume 1978). The reason is that, on the one hand, imagination can join simple ideas at will and compose complex ideas distinct from our impressions, and on the other, complex impressions are too difficult to be copied exactly as they are. Hume gives the example of Paris: even though I have an idea of the city, I am probably not capable to represent all its streets and houses in their real and just proportions. Not only is the imagination capable to mix simple ideas, but it is also not restrained to follow the order of impressions (contrary to memory, which preserves their order and position). Except for this prominent role in the formation of complex ideas, the imagination is for Hume involved in the process of thinking. However, there is disagreement among scholars as to whether Hume equates imagination and reason or whether these continue to be two distinct faculties with different uses (Cottrell 2018). There is, however, agreement on the fact that Hume rejects the idea of an immaterial intellect and that the process of thinking can be reduced to the composition of ideas. This process has as its aim to discover the relational causes between objects. Arguing for a theory in which the imagination has the prominent role, Cottrell distinguishes basic and nonbasic functions of the imagination. The five basic ones are: forming faint copies of simple impressions, manipulating the parts of ideas, associating perceptions, transmitting force and liveliness among associated perceptions, and completing the union of related objects. The four nonbasic ones are: forming abstract ideas, performing probable reasoning, sympathy, and projecting the necessary connection between cause and effect (Cottrell 2018).

George Berkeley (1685–1753)

Berkeley's idealism cannot be understood without first understanding his concept of the imagination and its role in creating ideas. Berkeley classifies ideas into ideas of the senses (impressed on the senses), of reflection (perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind), and of the imagination (formed by the help of the imagination and memory through combining, dividing, and representing the ideas acquired in the first two ways). The ideas of the senses can be distinguished from those of the imagination in that the former are more lively, strong, and distinct, having likewise order, steadiness, and coherence. Moreover, ideas of the senses are not excited at random as the ideas of the imagination seem to be. This distinction is for Berkeley the basis for the distinction between real things and imaginary things (Flage 1987). The ideas of the senses produce coherent wholes and behave in predictable ways, while the ideas of the imagination depend on the active spiritual substance. Different from the earlier tradition, the imagination is, for Berkeley, an immaterial faculty of the mind.

Voltaire (1694–1778) and the *Encyclopédie* (1751–1777)

In the prodigious project of the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot and d'Alembert introduce several entries related to imagination: *imagination* (in logic, metaphysics, literature, and arts), *fantaisie* (different entries for grammar and morals), *fascination* (two entries, one in the section on history and philosophy, and one in medicine), and *génie* (in philosophy and literature) to mention the most relevant ones.

The entry on imagination, authored by Voltaire, starts by presenting the classical view on imagination: it is the power held by sensitive beings to represent sensitive objects in their brain. The same faculty performs what seem to be different acts: sensing, remembering, imagining, and judging. Put differently, perception, memory, imagination, and judgment are not separated, even though the effects through which we know them seem to be distinct. Moreover, imagination is probably the only instrument with which we compose ideas, including the most metaphysical ones. Voltaire

goes on to argue that the process of thinking cannot take place without imagination because whenever we think, we think in images. What might be striking is his classification of the two types of imagination. The first type, the passive imagination consists in retaining the impressions of objects. It is independent of reflection and consequently the source of our passions and errors. The images it creates are gross, disturbed, and false. Moreover, not only that it does not need the assistance of the will, it determines the will to react to things in the way it represents them. It is the cause of fear, violent desires, fanaticism, the diseases of the spirit, and it makes people believe they have been enchanted or that their body has been changed. It is this passive imagination, says Voltaire, that was used as an instrument by certain people with a strong imagination to dominate the ignorant (Voltaire 1765).

The second type, the active imagination, works together with reflection and memory. It brings objects closer; it separates, composes, and changes them. Voltaire further distinguishes this type of imagination into the imagination of inventions in arts and the imagination of detail (what is commonly called imagination). The first, called "genius" in some cases, is opposed to the vulgar imagination. It corrects its errors and everything it builds is according to order. The second type of active imagination presents new objects to the spirits of men, makes everything more vivid, and uses the more astonishing circumstances. This imagination is used above all in poems, where it creates metaphors, allegories, or picturesque expressions.

Imagination in Magic and the Occult Sciences

The intermediary role between the corporeal senses and the immaterial soul, and its conceptualization as an active faculty, led to the use of imagination in magic and the occult sciences, where it was used to explain a wide range of events, affecting both the body of the imaginant as well as other bodies and minds around. For example, dreams were the creation of the imagination, but dreams were at the same time divine and prophetic. Imagination could transform the fetus in the mother's womb by impressing images on it. Moreover, imagination was supposed to work at a distance and influence bodies and minds. Evil eye and fascination were working by means of the transmission of corporeal effluvia from the imagination of the active person to the imagination of another, where it was infesting the latter. Not only the evil eye, but other kinds of diseases were transmitted through a contagion of imaginations. Besides, the opposite was also possible, when someone's strong imagination could help another one recover from a disease.

Legacy: Kant and Beyond

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the imagination kept this double-faced role: on the one hand, it was necessary in the process of acquiring knowledge because of its intermediary status between the senses and the intellect, and on the other hand, it was still able to overcome reason and create things which were not in nature. However, the fact that during the seventeenth century the power of the imagination started to be limited to the body of the person imagining and not to the objects and people around it can be fully seen in the eighteenth century. The imagination still had a negative role, but it was restrained to monstrous creations in the mind of the person imagining, and not to material creations in the exterior world. "Insane" imagination was driving people mad, cure the ill, and distort the truth of nature. As earlier, it had to be kept in check by reason and self-control.

Another inheritance of the seventeenth century, which became more explicit during the eighteenth century, is the connection between imagination and art. Artists were perceived as having a strong imagination, hence their creativity. It is during the Enlightenment when the concept of genius is born. What is noteworthy, however, is the fact that at that time the attitude of both artists and scientists regarding the use of imagination was very similar. Artists and

scientists were seen as facing the same attacks concerning the imagination: in the same way in which scientists can produce false interpretations when the imagination in not controlled, artists can produce monsters and prodigies. Both arts and sciences have the same aim: to reveal nature as it presents itself to our senses.

Lorraine Daston showed that between 1780 and 1820 the attitudes of scientists and artists regarding imagination and its use in revealing the truth of nature changed drastically: "facts hardened, the imagination ran riot, and art and science diverged in their terms and their collective personae" (Daston 1998). It was Immanuel Kant who took the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity to its extreme. Objectivity, reason, and science started to form a group opposed to subjectivity, imagination, and art. Imagination acquired the sense of genius, which we still find today. In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant makes a distinction between genius and the spirit of imitation, opposed to one other: "So all that Newton has set forth in his immortal work on the *Principles of Natural Philosophy* may well be learned, however great a mind it took to find it all out, but we cannot learn to write in a true poetic vein, no matter how complete all the precepts of the poetic art may be, or however excellent its models. The reason is that all the steps that Newton had to take from the first elements of geometry to his greatest and most profound discoveries were such as he could make intuitively evident and plain to follow, not only for himself but for every one else" (Kant 1952 [1790]).

In post-Kantian theories, this gap between art and science (grounded in their relations with subjectivity and objectivity, respectively) grew bigger. During Romanticism, art started to be seen as the domain of a wild and individual imagination. Art was not supposed to represent truth any longer, as it had been considered before, but beauty. It is significant that beauty and truth were seen as opposed. At the same time, science had as its aim to achieve a universal commensurability and communicability. This required standardizing instruments, clarifying concepts, and depersonalizing the scientists' writing styles. The process of eliminating the imagination and subjectivity from science went as far as to aim at eliminating human intervention altogether: judgment was replaced by data-reduction techniques, observations by self-registering instruments, and handmade illustrations with photographs (Daston 1998). It is nevertheless ironical that the solution to human subjectivity in science was to eliminate human intervention and replace it with human artifacts and human conventional measurements.

Cross-References

- ▶ Cavendish, Margaret
- ▶ Dreams and Dreaming
- ▶ Emotion and Early Modern Science
- ▶ Genius, as *ingenium*
- ▶ Hume, David
- ▶ Intellect
- ▶ Judgement
- ▶ Locke's Philosophy
- ▶ Madness, and Mental Psychology
- ▶ Magic
- ▶ Mental Faculties in Early Modern Philosophy
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- ▶ Sensation, and Perception
- ▶ Soul, Seat of the
- ▶ Spinoza
- ▶ Spirit
- ▶ Sympathy
- ▶ Voltaire, Francois-Marie d'Arouet

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