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Imagination and Experience

In the last chapter, we discussed how Kant's reproductive and productive imagination categories became influential ways to think about the topic. We also noted that throughout the history of academic reflection on imagination in the West, there have been concerns about how imagination can be duplicitous or "fake" versions of reality. This chapter will explore how these concepts are connected and other ways of looking at the dynamics they describe. Let's first consider two major distinctions: how the imagination can operate in "fantasy-prone" and "reality-prone" ways.[1] In Kant's terms, both of these would be forms of the productive imagination. They are not about retrieving an image from the imagination warehouse but about remixing and making new images. However, they function differently.

I previously referred to the reproductive imagination as the "photocopy model" in that all it can do is reproduce images that already exist. This is similar to the idea of imagination as the warehouse of sense memory. Nothing new is "supposed" to be made, just perfect copies of past experiences: pristine folders pulled out of file cabinets stored in the archives of personal history. Now consider what would happen if that photocopier was broken and had a crack in the scanning glass. New copies would have cracks running across them, though the original does not. Something "new" is being made, but only because an error is being introduced into what is supposed to be an accurate copy. I refer to this concept as imagination working in a fantasy-prone way. This can be problematic because this kind of imagination can layer over our actual experience with an imagined mental veneer or outright falsehood. I don't have cracks in my forehead, even if it looks like I do in copies.

1. Loomis, "Imagination and Faith Development," 251–63.

Figure 2.1: A photo and photocopy of the author,
made with a cracked photocopier screen.

You may recall from the last chapter that Augustine referred to imagination of this sort as producing "phantasmata," which were "potentially deceptive, a contaminant of the heart, the root of idolatry, heresy, and diabolical contrivance, and capable of generating false images."[2] Similarly, consider the situation in which women are regularly portrayed in specific ways in the media and the fact that people can begin to confuse photoshopped *representations* of women for what a woman actually is or ought to be. Our imagination of what people are can be an obstacle to knowing people as *they* are. So too with our imagination of how the world works and how God works in it. What we imagine can get in the way of perceiving what is actually the case.

Conversely, another version of the productive imagination seems to be when it operates in "reality-prone" ways that envision and enable possibilities that have not been considered before. For example, we see this other aspect when Emily L. Howard, an engineer, credits her childhood days watching *Star Trek* as one of the reasons she went into science.

> I can't give all that power to a single show, but it certainly helped fuel my interest. . . . There were other things happening at the time, but at that young age to be exposed to these amazing possibilities about the future, planted a seed very deeply in me.[3]

Something within an *imagined* world of TV fiction took root and bore fruit in Howard's actual life and work. We might consider this as willfully and

2. Djuth, "Veiled and Unveiled Beauty," 88.
3. Gaudin, "50 Years of Star Trek," para. 19.

intentionally taking images from the archives and making a collage with them, combining pieces of what we've experienced before to create a map of a place we have not yet seen. In both aspects of imagination, it is clarifying to note that there is no determinism at play. They are both "prone" toward fantasy and reality, not guaranteed to go there.

We'll talk more about it later, but it bears observing that these categories are somewhat porous and overlapping. For instance, when young girls watch negative portrayals of women and attempt to become in material actuality what is represented in a film, what kind of imagination is taking place? Exposure to fantasy can shape people in reality. This is imagination's power over our inner life. Reality can shift to become more like what would have been previously considered fantasy. The cost of shifts like this means that the question of what counts as "realistic imagination" bears more scrutiny.

Working with a very similar distinction of imagination "types," the philosopher Richard Kearney categorizes one as the "representational faculty which reproduces images of some pre-existing reality" and the other as "a creative faculty which produces images which often lay claim to an original status in their own right."[4] The technical distinctions articulated within a robust philosophy of imagination are not as vital to detail here as are some of their implications. Most important among these is the claim that insofar as "reality" refers to the present material conditions in which we are embedded, imagination has the capacity both to distract us from that reality *and* to help us envision a means of transforming that reality.

Kearney writes compellingly on the capacities of the creative imagination to point the way to substantial changes in actual, material conditions:

> The metaphors, symbols, or narratives produced by imagination all provide us with imaginative variations of the world, thereby offering us the freedom to conceive of the world in other ways and to undertake forms of action which might lead to its transformation. . . . The possible worlds of imagination can be made real by action.[5]

If imagination were just "fantasy-prone" and unable to be anything but cracks in our thinking of the world, it would be strange to consider it beneficial. However, understood as also possessing "reality-prone" characteristics, the productive imagination is part of how we can participate in the work of positive and faithful change in the world. Developing capacities of the generative

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4. Kearney, *Wake of Imagination*, 15.
5. Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 149.

reality-prone imagination allows for seeing new ways of being that have not yet come to be, discerning a sense of what more might be possible.

As Jesuit John W. O'Malley wrote, "inventiveness and innovation require intelligence, but beyond intelligence they entail imagination, that is, the mental agility to make a leap beyond the accepted paradigm to another and to see the relationship between them that has escaped others."[6] In this form, imagination carries with it the capacity to conceive and *re*conceive of possibility. Ultimately, imagination might not only enable one to conceive of new possibilities, but, brought into creative action, can birth new ways of being.[7] The seeds of these new possibilities can take root through the imagination at multiple levels.

I think of imagination as being experienced across a series of embedded continuums. First, there are the large distinctions between imagination's reproductive and productive aspects. Then, within the productive aspect, there is a continuum between the fantasy-prone and reality-prone aspects. Finally, within the reality-prone aspect, there is another continuum across which imagination functions and is experienced. Within this last continuum, I refer to the experiences as "hermeneutic" and "apocalyptic."
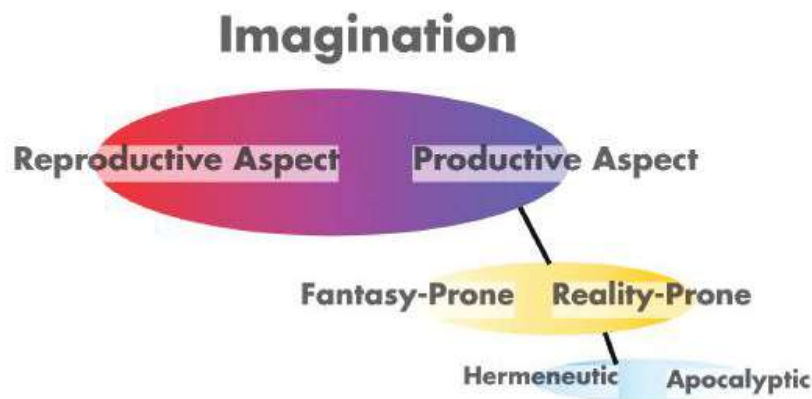

Figure 2.2: A visual representation of the imagination "types" most used in this book.

6. O'Malley, "Jesuit Schools and the Humanities," 28–29.

7. Paul Ricœur argues that the generative imagination is "connected with an ontology" and that the new possibilities seen via imaginative exploration lead to "a kind of second ontology" in which new ways of being enter the world first through the imagination and then later in substance and action. Ricœur, "Lectures," 19:13, cited in Taylor, "Ricoeur's Philosophy of Imagination," 93.

Within the spectrum embedded within the reality-prone aspect of imagination, there is an experience of imagination as hermeneutic or interpretive. These imaginative processes allow us to "weep with those who weep" even when we ourselves have not lost what has caused the tears. This is reality-prone imagination in that it helps us to be empathetic and communicate complexities to others across difference. It is how we come to derive meaning from Jesus as the vine: we can hold onto descriptions of the present that are not true but reveal truth. We act and are different in the world because we can imagine what it is like as another person. This kind of imagining often feels distinctly intentional. I say that this kind of experience of imagination gives a home to hermeneutics. We become better connected to people and ideas, recognizing that empathy and interpretation both have their roots in imagination. It feels like something we *do*, like putting on glasses to help us see differently, or speaking through an interpreter so that we might be understood.

On the other side of the spectrum from hermeneutic considerations of imagination is an aspect of reality-prone imagination which I call "apocalyptic." These are experiences of an event or catalyst. These experiences of encounter or "opening" can profoundly shift how we see ourselves and our surroundings, revealing new ways of seeing and being in the world. I think about what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus and how afterward he not only experienced the world differently but experienced *himself* differently in relation to it. What he imagined to be possible had radically shifted. We'll talk about this at length in chapter 4, but this is similar to the theologian Garrett Green's claim that imagination is the "point of contact" (*Anknüpfungspunkt*) where human experience encounters revelation.[8] The experience of imagination as "apocalyptic" feels less like it is something under your control and more like something you encounter.

Just as there is an overlap between fantasy-prone and reality-prone qualities of imagination, there is a connection between hermeneutic and apocalyptic experiences of imagination. I've named them as separate because they feel different to me, but I also want to be clear that I don't think they exist as wholly separate and discrete "types." That is why I talk about them as ways we might *experience* imagination rather than as a particular kind of imagination. I think about—and name—aspects of imagination in terms of their consequences.

Let's say that God's Spirit is still at work in the world and gifts of the Spirit are still poured upon us today. But . . . let's also say that I've been told that God ceased offering gifts of the Spirit after the apostles. In this case, my

8. Green, *Imagining God*.

capacity to see God at work around me might very well be diminished. How I imagine the world to be (one *without* current gifts of the Spirit) interferes with my ability to see it as it is (one *with* current gifts of the Spirit). When imagination is doing that, it is functioning in a "fantasy-prone" way. My imagination is misleading me, making me think things are true that are not. This would also be the case if the situation was flipped around and I imagined it was possible there were gifts of the Spirit, but, in fact, God stopped handing those out thousands of years ago, or never did in the first place.

However, consider a situation where I'm encouraged to think about God's gifts being present today and that God *is* at work around me. As a result, I can better interpret God at work for myself and communicate how I see that happening to others. To some significant degree, what imagination is doing is the same in both cases; it is just that the surrounding circumstances have changed. This is an important distinction.

It isn't as if there is one "type" of imagination that is fantasy-prone and a separate one that is reality-prone. Instead, depending on how imagination is at work and the actual circumstances of the world, we *experience* it as pointing us toward different things. This will be discussed quite a bit in the book, but it is worth briefly acknowledging now: imagination can produce challenging and problematic interpretations just as well as it can reveal new and healing ways of seeing. This is one of the reasons that discernment is so important to conversations about faith and imagination. Something other than imagination needs to assess the rightness (or usefulness) of imagining. This book is mainly about imagination as a source of what *is* possible rather than as a fantasy overlay on top of things without change.[9]

Within that play of the possible, I refer to the difference between hermeneutic and apocalyptic experiences of imagining. As with the "fantasy-prone" and "reality-prone" imagination discussed before, I am not suggesting that these terms point to separate capacities or faculties that produce distinct kinds of imagination, simply that it can be helpful to name different ways in which we can experience imagination. This chapter explores these distinctions and how they can be part of the life of faith.

9. I should note that many atheists would claim that the entirety of the religious imagination is "fantasy-prone." This is a major thing to think through and has been an important idea to wrestle with since Ludwig Feuerbach (and then later Karl Marx). This idea will come up again in chapters 3 and 4.

Why Hermeneutics?

The hermeneutic function of imagination helps us interpret the people and events around us, shaping our views and providing interior sketches of the results of our actions. It helps us to create metaphors to explain our experiences *to* others and is part of what allows us to understand the views *of* others. It helps us to have empathy and is a vital part of our capacity to connect with other people and bring ourselves to an understanding of how they might feel even though we don't have the same perspective.

While I'm unlikely to get it exactly right, I can imagine what another person might think or feel. This is a reflective "What if . . . ?" capacity of imagination: I use it to consider what it might be like to see and feel things from another person's perspective. A related function of the imagination is when I consider the future consequences of action. What if I take a job that pays less but feels more aligned with my values? What might happen?

If imagination is the capacity to bring things that are not observably present into consciousness, then one way to think about "what may be" is to consider it an imaginative interpretation of the present. Future possibilities are definitionally not observably present, so when we consider what is *possible in the future,* we necessarily need to use something more than sense perception.

For those of us that believe there is reason to see God still at work and moving in the world, the hermeneutic function of imagination is vital and routine. The fact that interpretation, empathy, and reflection on the future are a regular part of life is amazing! Rather than think about its dailiness as a mark against its noteworthiness, I am inclined to think about how incredible it is that there are many days when our present actions are decided based on their consequences in the future. This can be as mundane as when I save up money with hopes to buy something in the future, act with kindness and empathetic mercy imagining what life as another is like, or as work to change some social issue, the impacts of which I may never live to see.

In these examples, the imagination draws on other experiences and knowledge to explore what *might* be. Imagination does not pluck possibility from the void and point toward ways of being radically and wholly disconnected from the present. Instead, it is a capacity which works with what is and has already been to surface what might yet be. This is part of why I think there is something to be gained by thinking about the hermeneutic function of imagination.

Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation, the academic investigation of how people make meaning (usually from texts). Related to theological conversations, the phrase "biblical hermeneutics" is often used, suggesting

that how we interpret the Bible isn't straightforward but needs contextualization and nuance. I find that it helps me to remember that within the word "hermeneutics" there is a clue as to its nature.

The root word inside hermeneutics comes from the Greek verb *hermeneuein*, which means to "make something clear, to announce or unveil a message."[10] The "*herme-*" part of the word comes from "Hermes," the Greek god associated with messengers, travel, and language.[11] He's the one who helps to pass notes between the gods on Mount Olympus and mortals; is able to bop back and forth between hells, heavens, and the earth; and is the patron and protector of travelers, inventors, and poets. Oh, and also thieves, those who take from others for their own purposes . . .

I often envision the study of hermeneutics as an interview with Hermes about the various techniques he uses when he's transporting meaning from the texts to the minds of readers. What happens to meaning in transport? When you pick up a fresh delivery of meaning how long before it spoils? Are certain vehicles better than others? Do you ever have a hard time finding someone to sign the slip to accept the shipment? Do some goods get marked "undeliverable"? What do you do if there isn't any parking available?

Going further back, the word "hermes" itself predates the god, stemming from the Greek *herma*, the word for a "cairn, pathmarker, or boundary stone."[12] Some part of hermeneutics is about how we find our way along the roads of meaning. Boundaries can keep others out just as well as keep us within what we think of as safe. Hermeneutics asks questions about how we interpret texts, how our surroundings and assumptions influence our understanding, and how we want to proceed once we know that the path from text to meaning isn't always straight.

10. Thompson, "Hermeneutics," 360–61.

11. Harper, "Hermeneutic."

12. Grau, *Refiguring Theological Hermeneutics*, 83.

**Figure 2.3: A cairn on the summit of Brown's Law
in Northumberland National Park, England.**

In public domain. Photo by Geoff Holland.

If you knew—asks hermeneutics—that someone was a career criminal who had been found guilty of financial fraud, wouldn't you make sure to listen with a bit of a filter when that person was giving investment advice? Well—says hermeneutics—every person and every text has a story like that, some helpful framing and background that it would be good to know about as you take text on the page and try to make meaning out of it for your life. Learning about the contexts and backstories helps us to make more informed "filters" through which we can read and interpret.

If I headed to the Atlantic Ocean and filled up a liter container with seawater, I could boil it away until I was left with nothing but a small pile of salt weighing about thirty-five grams. I could also replicate this experiment in the Pacific and up and down the coasts of most places in the world. I would get the same result every time. The thing is, meaning does not work like salt.

Texts do not contain meaning in such a way that there is a process (boiling) that removes all the extraneous material (water) and leaves behind a consistent quantity of meaning (salt) that anyone can find. To be sure, some things reveal themselves if you know more about the context or

can read the original language in which something was written. However, there is a slipperiness to meaning and interpretation that often requires the interpreter to do some imagining.

Seawater boiling breaks down as a metaphor, at least in part, because the experiment works independent of the experimenter. No matter who collects the water, who sets up the hot plate, or what ocean is used, the result is a bit of salt. The salt-finding process happens regardless of the person doing it. This is not how meaning is found in the texts we identify as Scripture. Even when it is useful, adding context and providing reason and rationality is not like adding heat: meaning is not saturated in texts like salt in water. Even if the neurological processes of sensual perception (visual, auditory, tactical, etc.) were precisely identical between all people, what we imagine them to mean could differ.

I don't want to wade far into the debates of whether or not there is inherent meaning in text, the role of authorial intent, and reader-response criticism, but I do think it is worth noting that very few contemporary scholars have a strictly "positivist" approach in which all meaning is like an ore that can be mined from the ground of text.[13] Meaning cannot be extracted like salt or silver. It is contingent—at least usually—on the circumstances in which it emerges. That being said, there are limits, and context plays a huge role.

Monthly bank statements with increasingly smaller balances likely means that less money is available. To the extent that this is a kind of numerical reasoning, it is, in fact, pretty straightforward. The *implications* of what this might mean regarding how I plan to pay bills require some contextualization and imagination, but some meaning (I don't have much money left) can be pretty clearly "pulled out" without much interpretation. This kind of clarity is not limited to numbers either.

For example, if my wife texts me, "Please get some milk on your way home," and I interpret it as "Feel free to invest our life savings in cryptocurrency," she'd be well within reason to question my skills of interpretation. Why? Partly because the circumstances surrounding a text message like that are not usually ones that merit such a stretch of the imagination: there doesn't seem like there is a good reason to imagine that it needed such intense interpretation to be understood. Also, an interpretation like that should raise some serious questions about whether or not I am acting in good faith and attempting to understand the content. I might just be using the act of "interpretation" as a cover for seeing whatever I want in

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13. In terms of good work on the nature and development of biblical hermeneutics I highly recommend both Vanhoozer's *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* and Schneiders's *The Revelatory Text.*

the text. Another way to say this is to ask whether or not my interpretation is "reasonable" given the context. Asking it this way shows one of the conundrums of thinking about the interpretive and hermeneutic function of imagination.

Viewed from one perspective, reasonableness seems an entirely appropriate category for reflection on my "interpretation." Barring some pre-established system in which we've agreed that "Please get some milk on your way home" is actually code for "Feel free to invest our life savings in crypto-currency," it is not reasonable to interpret one as the other. Viewed another way, it seems that using "reasonableness" would have a pretty limiting effect on one of the positive things productive, reality-prone imagination should be good at: allowing for new viable, creative ideas. In fact, imaginative innovations that have had significant ramifications often were first seen as profoundly *un*reasonable and worth dismissing.

Critics were brutal when the painter Claude Monet first started to paint in a new hazy style in the 1860s. His work was considered "formless, unfinished, and ugly."[14] He is now widely regarded as a founder of the French Impressionism movement and an influence on Vincent van Gogh and Henri Matisse.

In the early 1900s, German geophysicist and meteorologist Alfred Wegener first proposed the theory of continental drift, that all the continents were once connected. He was literally laughed out of an academic conference with his work referred to as "Germanic pseudo-science." He was accused of falsifying evidence, spinning himself into "a state of auto-intoxication."[15] Today the concept of "Pangea" is universally accepted among established geologists.

Madeleine L'Engle, now widely revered as a pillar of fantasy literature, received twenty-six rejections from publishers before someone was willing to publish her most famous book. In her memoir, L'Engle remembers feeling "I was, perhaps, out of joint with time . . . my books for children were rejected for reasons which would be considered absurd today: publisher after publisher turned down *A Wrinkle in Time* because it deals overtly with the problem of evil, and it was too difficult for children."[16] One editor rejected the book saying he loved it, but "didn't quite dare do it, as it isn't really

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14. Getty Museum Collection, "Claude Monet," para. 2.
15. Conniff, "Continental Drift."
16. L'Engle, *Circle of Quiet*, 20.