

THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF IMAGINATION IN HUME AND KANT

The nature and function of 'imagination' occupy a central place in the philosophies of Hume and Kant, two great minds of all times. Kant makes a clear and very comprehensive distinction between Transcendental or Productive Imagination and Empirical or Reproductive Imagination. He puts this distinction into effective use in his philosophy, especially in his epistemology. Undeniably, he was the first philosopher to have made such a distinction between these two levels of imagination in an unequivocal manner. However, the claim that Hume comes close to drawing the same distinction in his *magnum opus*, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, and also in the simplified and condensed version of it, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, is not without merit or support. I propose to show that Hume could have made the same distinction if he had so wished, but deliberately refrained from it for reasons that will be made obvious in this paper. I shall endeavour to establish that he did not make a distinction between these two levels of imagination because this would have left him with no choice but to admit that the faculty of imagination is rational. And if he were to admit this, he could never come to the conclusion that he did, that the existence of mind, matter, and so on are 'illegitimate' products of imagination. H. H. Price is aware of this constraint in Hume's philosophy and indicates the need of a closer examination of Hume's writings in this regard. He states :

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This doctrine (of Hume) concerning two types or levels of Imaginative process deserves a fuller examination than it has commonly received from Hume's commentators.¹

This paper does not propose to be an exhaustive examination of Hume's doctrine concerning the imaginative process in his philosophy. However, it will attempt to establish, from an analysis of Hume's writings, that Hume was well aware of the distinction between the levels of Imagination.

In order to understand and appreciate Hume's concepts of 'Transcendental Imagination' and 'Empirical Imagination', it is necessary to be familiar with the Kantian distinction between them. A brief examination of the latter therefore follows.

Kant states that the synthesis of manifold of representations is the result of the power of imagination.

Synthesis in general..., is the mere result of the power of imagination, a *blind* but *indispensable* function of the soul, without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever, but of which we are scarcely conscious. (*Italics are mine*).^{* 2}

It becomes very clear from the passage quoted above that, for Kant, knowledge itself is not possible without the synthetic activity of the imagination. Imagination or *Einbildungskraft* has two kinds of functions, namely transcendental and empirical. The former concerns the form only, and not matter, and therefore it is an *a priori* principle. As such, it is independent of all experience, and is without any empirical content. The latter, on the other hand, concerns the appearances or phenomena that are given to us in experience. The transcendental function of the imagination is logically prior to the empirical function of the imagination because the empirical function of the imagination will not be possible without an *a priori* element or foundation,

namely the transcendental employment. Imagination represents the appearances in association, and such association in pure synthesis of imagination is grounded *a priori* in pure intuition. It is, therefore, inferred that without the representation of pure intuition, there would be nothing for the imagination to associate with. The synthesis of the manifold in imagination is transcendental, since the manifold is synthesized *a priori*.

The faculty of imagination is not passive, but an active one. When the action of the imagination is directed upon perception, it is called apprehension. Without apprehension, it is not possible for imagination to bring the manifold of intuition into the form of an image. However, apprehension by itself is incapable of connecting the representations since it depends on the reproductive faculty of imagination to form a whole series of perceptions by arranging them in successive order. But, such a sequence of perceptions will be nothing but accidental collocations, unless it follows a rule.** This subjective ground of reproduction, following specific rules, is called the association of reproduction. There is also an objective ground of all associations of appearances which is termed as affinity of all appearances.⁴ Such an affinity, whether near or remote, is a necessary consequence of a synthesis in imagination which is based *a priori* on rules.

Imagination itself is a faculty of *a priori* synthesis. It is, therefore, productive. The sole function of productive imagination is to establish a necessary unity in the synthesis of what is manifold. It is this transcendental function that helps the concept of objects, which, when taken together, forms a unitary experience, by relating these concepts of understanding to sensible intuition. By being the source of images and schemata, imagination is able to mediate between two radically different faculties, one homogeneous, namely sensibility, and the other heterogeneous, namely understanding. The image being particular,

has an affinity with the manifold of intuition; the schema, being general, has an affinity with the categories of understanding.

The function of imagination is to represent a given object in intuition, and not to combine representations intellectually by means of understanding. Imagination, therefore, belongs to the faculty of sensibility. The synthesis of imagination is spontaneous. It is, therefore, determinative and not merely determinable like sense. Being spontaneous and determinative, the synthetic activity of imagination determines sense *a priori*. When imagination is spontaneous, it is Productive Imagination. The synthesis of Productive Imagination, being independent of all experience, is not subject to any empirical law. It follows from this that this kind of imagination belongs to the realm of transcendental philosophy. The synthesis of Reproductive Imagination, however, is entirely subject to the empirical laws of association; it does not contribute to the possibility of *a priori* knowledge. This kind of imagination therefore belongs to the realm of psychology.

For Kant, Transcendental Imagination is something which makes experience possible. Our consciousness of the phenomenal world consisting of both material objects and empirical selves constitutes experience. We cannot have experience without the synthetic and supplementative activities of Transcendental Imagination. Empirical Imagination, on the other hand, is something within the Empirical Self whose workings can be known only inductively on the basis of experience. If one accepts these Kantian definitions of Transcendental Imagination and Empirical Imagination, then one may attempt to find out whether Hume also makes such a distinction in his philosophy.

It is possible to establish that Hume does indeed make a distinction between 'Transcendental Imagination' and 'Empirical Imagination'. The primary difficulty in this regard lies in

the fact that though 'imagination' is a key term in the philosophies of both Hume and Kant, Hume does not care to give specific names to the two levels of imagination as does Kant. Kant is meticulous in keeping the two levels of imagination distinct from each other, but Hume tends to be indifferent to their separate identities. For example, Hume writes :

When I oppose the imagination to the memory, i mean the faculty, by which we form our familiar ideas. When I oppose it to reason, I mean the same faculty, excluding our demonstrative and probable reasonings. When I oppose it to neither, 'tis *indifferent* whether it be taken in the larger or more limited sense, or at least the context will sufficiently explain the meaning.⁵ (Italics mine).

For Hume it is of greater importance to distinguish between imagination and memory on the basis of the dichotomy between impressions and ideas than to separate 'Transcendental Imagination' from 'Empirical Imagination'. This is because the former distinction is crucial to the conclusions that he prefers to reach. Moreover, though he alludes to the distinction between 'Productive Imagination' and 'Reproductive Imagination' and 'the fictions of imagination', this is in keeping with his desire to prove that the concept of matter, mind, and God are nothing but fictions of the imagination.

Hume separates memory and imagination. He says that an impression becomes an idea in two different ways. One is, when the impression appears for the first time it retains a considerable degree of its original vivacity, and lies somewhere between an impression and an idea. The other is, when the impression bereft of its original vivacity becomes a 'perfect' idea. The first concerns the faculty of memory by which our ideas are repeated,

and the second concerns the faculty of imagination by which impressions are made 'perfect' ideas. This is obvious when he writes

It is evident at first sight, that the ideas of the memory are much more lively and strong than those of the imagination and that the former faculty paints its objects in more distinct colours, than any which are employ'd by the latter. (Imagination) When we remember any past event, idea of it flows in upon the mind in forcible manner, whereas in the imagination the perception is faint and languid and cannot without difficulty be perceiv'd by the mind steady and uniform for any considerable time. Here then is a sensible difference betwixt one species of ideas and another.⁶

Hume points out another fundamental difference between the faculties of memory and imagination. Imagination is capable of having an idea without a corresponding impression, but memory is incapable of having an idea without a corresponding impression,

Hume conceives two categories of principles in imagination, namely the principles which are permanent, 'irresistible' and universal, and the principles which are changeable, weak and irregular.⁷ The first group of principles are obviously the principles of the 'Transcendental or Productive Imagination', and the second group of principles are neither of the 'Productive Imagination' nor of the 'Reproductive Imagination', but of the 'wild' imagination or fancy. This is evident from the following example he uses to illustrate these two groups of principles in imagination :

One who concludes somebody to be near him, when he hears an articulate voice in the dark, reasons justly and

naturally; through that conclusion be derived from nothing but custom... But one, who is tormented, he knows not why, with the apprehension of spectres in the dark, may, perhaps, be said to reason, and to reason naturally too; but then it must be in the same sense that a malady is said to be natural.⁸

'Transcendental Imagination' can be considered as an *a priori* faculty in the Humean Scheme of things. Several passages in Hume's writings warrant such an interpretation. Let us consider a few examples.

Whoever has taken the pains to refute the cavils of this total scepticism, has really disputed without an antagonist, and endeavour'd by arguments to establish a faculty, which nature has antecedently implanted in the mind, and render'd unavoidable.⁹

I am persuaded that in the following passage Hume's reference to 'Transcendental Imagination' is implicit.

Here, then, is a kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas: and through the powers and forces, by which the former is governed, be wholly unknown to us; yet our thoughts and conceptions have still, we find, gone on in the same train with other works of nature.¹⁰

When Hume talks about the pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas, I am convinced that he describes 'Transcendental Imagination'. Moreover, when he says that the forces and powers which govern the course of nature are unknown to us, he has in mind the fact that it is meaningless to ask causal questions with regard to 'Transcendental Imagination' since its activities, both synthetic and supplementative, are presupposed.

Consider another instance in his writings :

As nature taught us the use of limbs, without giving us the knowledge of the muscles and nerves, by which they are actuated ; so has she implanted in us an instinct, which carries forward the thought in a correspondent course to that which she has established among external objects ; though we are ignorant of those powers and forces, on which this regular course and succession of objects totally depends.¹¹

It is obvious that here instinct refers to ' Transcendental Imagination '. Note how Hume repeats the view that the powers and forces on which this ' instinct ' operates remains unknown to us.

Reference to ' Empirical Imagination ' and fictions of imagination abound in both *Treatise* and *Enquiry*. I quote the passages which contain such references in full. These are self-explanatory, and do not require any elaborate explanation.

Consider, first, the following from *Enquiry* :

Sensible objects have always a greater influence on the *fancy* than any other ; and this influence they readily convey to those ideas to which they are related, and which they resemble.¹² (*Italics mine*) ***

This transition of thought from the cause to the effect proceeds not from reason... It derives its origin altogether from custom and experience. And as it first begins from an object, present to the senses, it renders the idea or conception of flame more strong and lively than any loose, *floating reveries of the imagination*.¹³ (*Italics mine*).

We allow, that belief is nothing but a firmer and stronger conception of an object than what attends the mere *fictions*

of the imagination, this operation may, perhaps in some measure, be accounted for. The occurrence of these several views or glimpses imprints the idea more strongly on the (Reproductive) imagination: gives it superior force and vigour... (the italics and parenthesis are mine).¹⁴

As a great number of views do here occur in one event, they fortify and confirm it to the (Reproductive) imagination, beget sentiment which we call *belief*, and give its object the preference above the contrary event, which is not supposed by an equal number of experiments, and recurs not so frequently to the thought in transferring the past to the future.¹⁵ (Parenthesis mine).

This connexion, therefore, which we *feel* in the mind, this customary transition of the (Reproductive) imagination from one object to its usual attendant, is the sentiment or impression from which we form the idea of power or necessary connexion.¹⁶ (Parenthesis mine).

Nothing but that he now *feels* these events to be connected in his (Reproductive) imagination, and can readily foretell the existence of one from the appearance of the other.¹⁷ (Parenthesis mine).

Now consider the following from *Treatise* :

We only observe the thing itself, and always find that from the constant conjunction the objects acquire an union in the (Reproductive) imagination.¹⁸ (Parenthesis mine).

Experience is a principle, which instructs me with several conjunctions of objects for the past. Habit is another principle, which determines me to expect the same for the future and both of them conspiring to operate upon the

(‘Reproductive’) imagination, make form certain ideas in a more intense and lively manner, than others, which are not attended with the same advantages.¹⁹ (Parenthesis mine). Reason can never show us the connexion of our objects with one another, tho’ aided by experience, and the observation of their constant conjunction in all past instances. When the mind, therefore, passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief of another, it is not determined by reason, but by certain principles, which associate together the ideas of these objects, and unite them in the (Reproductive) imagination.²⁰ (Parenthesis mine).

The general principles which associate ideas and unite them in the (Reproductive) ‘Imagination’, according to Hume, are resemblance, contiguity and causation. Both Hume and Kant hold parallel views on the laws to which ‘Empirical Imagination’ is subject. Consider what Kant says :

In so far as...to distinguish from the *reproductive* imagination, whose synthesis is entirely subject to empirical laws, the laws namely, of association, and which therefore contribute nothing to the explanation of the possibility of *a priori* knowledge.²¹

Hume holds that ‘the flights of the imagination’ are the main sources of the mistakes committed by philosophers. He writes :

This deficiency ..proceeds merely from an illusion of the imagination; and the question is, how far we ought to yield to these illusions. This question is very difficult, and reduces to a very dangerous dilemma, which ever way we answer it. For if we assent to every trivial suggestion of the fancy; beside that these suggestions are often contrary to each other; they lead us into such errors, absurdities

and obscurities, that we must at least become ashamed of our credulity. Nothing is more dangerous to reason than the flights of the imagination, and nothing has been the occasions of more mistakes among philosophers.²²

Not only Hume but Kant also makes a distinction between the Empirical Imagination and the illusions of imagination, as is obvious from Kant's writing :

From the fact that the existence of outer things is required for the possibility of a determinate consciousness of the self, it does not follow that every intuitive representation of outer things involves the existence of these things, for their representation can very well be the product merely of the imagination (as in dreams and delusion).²³

Both Hume and Kant distinguish between not merely two, but three levels of imagination, namely 'Transcendental Imagination', 'Empirical Imagination', and fancy or 'wild' imagination. Kant stresses the synthetic function of the imagination whereas Hume emphasises the supplementative function of imagination. The distinction between transcendental function and empirical function of imagination is crucial to Kant's philosophy. Hume is indifferent to such a distinction between 'Transcendental Imagination' and 'Empirical Imagination'. What is central to Hume's philosophy is the distinction between empirical function of imagination and the illusions of imagination. Moreover, he is keen to point out that beliefs in matter, mind, etc. do not have any primary recommendation to imagination. Though he is aware, perhaps not as keenly as Kant, of the distinction between the two radically different sorts of imagination, he does not care to put it to any effective use, because doing that would not

permit him to arrive at certain concepts that he greatly valued, and which were dear to him.

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NOTES

- * Both Kant and Hume agree that imagination is a blind function of the soul. The difference is that, for Kant, imagination *per se* is blind in the sense of being empty of content, but its sythetic and supplemerative activities are not blind as they are performed according to certain rules. For Hume, on the other hand, not only is imagination *per se* blind, so also are its synthetic and supplementative activities. Though both maintain that imagination is indispesnsable, they do so for different reasons. For Kant, experieene is not possible without imagination. Hume categorises imagination as a principle of human nature and therefore indispensable.
 - ** Kant distinguishes a rule from a law :
The representation of a universal condition according to which a certain manifold can be posited in uniform fashion is called a *rule*, and, when it *must* be so posited, a law.³
 - *** Hume uses the term 'fancy' to signify both 'Reproductive Imagination' and fictions of the imagination. Such imprecise terminology is not uncommon in Hume's writings. In this passage, he uses 'fancy' to refer to 'Reproductive Imagination'.
1. Price, H. H., *Hume's Theory of the External World*, (Oxford University Press, 1967) p. 58.
 2. Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, Translated by Norman Kemp Smith, (The Macmillan Press, 1980) A 78, p. 112.
 3. *Ibid.*, A 114, p. 140.
 4. *Ibid.*, A 113, p. 139.

5. Hume, D., *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, (Oxford University Press), p. 113.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 225-226.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
10. Hume, D., *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, (Oxford University Press, 1972) pp. 54-55.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 58-59.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 75-76.
18. Hume, D., *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 93.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 265.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
21. Kant, I., *Op. cit.*, B. 152, p. 165.
22. Hume, D., *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 267.
23. Kant, I., *Op. cit.*, B. 279, p. 247.

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