

> Introduction to the Significances of the Imagination in Kant, Idealism, and Romanticism

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An Overview

According to Schelling, "the splendid word 'imagination' [Einbildungskraft] actually means the power of mutual informing into unity [Ineinsbildung] upon which all creation really is based."2 This is quite an attribution: The imagination is the power of *mutually forming into unity*. It is the source of true synthesis. If that were not enough, he would have us agree that all creation is based on it, and without it nothing could be simultaneously ideal and real. He continues, "It is the power whereby something ideal is simultaneously something real, the soul simultaneously the body, the power of individuation that is the real creative power." It makes possible the unity between the necessity of reason and material existence. This, at least, is the resplendent power of the imagination according to Schelling. Surprisingly, on this point, Schelling is not alone. In fact, something very much like this view is definitive of German Idealism and Romanticism.

Such claims naturally beg for a corresponding critical account of the imagination that might begin to give a meaningful answer to the overriding question: What is the imagination in and for the philosophy of Kant, the Idealists,³ and the Romantics?⁴ One of the best ways of entering into an understanding of these intertwined philosophical accounts, their subtle insights, and important distinctions is, I suggest, by following these two questions: what is the imagination? and why is it so important for these

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² Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, p. 32. ³ e.g., Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel.
⁴ e.g., Schlegel, Schiller, Solger, Novalis, Hölderlin, and Goethe; these lists are not meant to be comprehensive. For instance, German Idealism should include figures such as Reinhold, and the categorization of others such as Schelling, Hölderlin, Goethe, and Schleiermacher in one camp or the other presents its own challenges.



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thinkers? This volume seeks to bring to light and underscore the importance of these questions and their possible answers.

Understanding the imagination is important not only because it is central to one of the most productive and influential periods in the history of philosophy, but also because it represents a topic of substantial relevance to contemporary debates in philosophy. The imagination engages directly with a range of traditional problems, from hylomorphic models of form and content to hermeneutical and ethical problems of perception, expression, and tradition. The imagination is significant not merely for questions in epistemology, but also for metaphysics, aesthetics, and, as some contemporary philosophers have shown, to current sociopolitical issues in philosophy.5

How central is the imagination for Kant, the post-Kantian Idealists, and Romantics? In the A-deduction of Kant's first Critique (Critique of Pure Reason), the imagination is front and center. If critics thought the Bdeduction was a move away from the imagination, the third Critique (Critique of the Power of Judgment) once again places the imagination at the fore. For the Idealists who, like Kant, strive for a critical system that grounds the necessity of reason, the imagination presents itself as "one of Kant's greatest services to philosophy," his most important insight, the "germ of speculation," and his "truly speculative idea."

Not surprisingly, when the Idealists' attempt to overcome apparent shortcomings in Kant's system,⁹ they do not merely retain the imagination at the level of the a priori principles and forms of judgment as Kant had done, but place it at the very core of their methods and employ it to refute skepticism about possible unfounded starting points to their own systems. As Sally Sedgwick notes, "to varying degrees, each of these later idealists believes that, although Kant's philosophy invites the charge of dualism, it also contains resources for overcoming it."10 The imagination is the Grundkraft, that fundamental force within Kant's idealism capable of overcoming his system's shortcomings. Put positively, it is that by which a system of idealism can be completed.

⁵ e.g., Martha Nussbaum's Love's Knowledge takes up something like a principle of an artistic imagination as a necessary component of perceiving well and living richly-responsible social and moral lives; and her variation of virtue ethics has deep roots in Kant's critical work. WL 12.157. 7 GW, p. 80. 8 GW, p.92.

⁷ *GW*, p. 80.

⁹ For a pivotal account of this relationship between Kant and the Idealists that is both detailed and expansive, see Paul Franks, All or Nothing. Of particular note is Franks' account of the role of skepticism in the methods and first principles developed in post-Kantian Idealism.

¹⁰ Sedgwick 2007, p. 1.



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This is why when Fichte takes up the principle of "the I," for example, he does so first by proving what he takes the I to be. He does not *posit* the I as a version of Kant's transcendental unity of apperception, as he is sometimes depicted as doing. Fichte's uniqueness consists in the very *proof* that he gives of the identity of the I. This proof, in the 1794 Wissenschaftslehre, places the twofold productive power of the imagination at the heart of the identity of the I. The I, far from being simply posited, is the result of a proof that depends on a principle of the imagination. Similarly, for the early German Romantics (who, drawing on Kant's third Critique, sought to emphasize the necessity of aesthetics for a rich form of reason and life) the "free play of the imagination" and "free lawfulness of the imagination" become key insights grounding "genius" and "Bildung." These principles yield, on their accounts, possibilities for meaningfully unifying philosophy with art and unifying rational form with organic growth. 13

In what follows, I will briefly identify some of the most significant roles that the imagination plays in Kant's critical Idealism and in post-Kantian German Idealism and Romanticism. There are two major limitations to this effort. The first is that such an introductory overview is necessarily not comprehensive and leaves out multiple functions and nuances of the imagination. The second weakness is that even those points of significance that I do identify must necessarily remain merely suggestive. This means that I will give reason to think that the imagination is central in the ways I suggest, but each one of these points is itself a thesis pregnant with full-fledged accounts. The contributions to this volume will go some way toward addressing this second weakness, but even the volume as a whole should not be seen as an exhaustive account of the significances of the imagination. Instead, it is a step toward motivating and grounding a comprehensive account of the imagination.

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¹¹ *KU* 5:286–7. ¹² *KU* 5:240–1.

For a helpful introduction to early German Romanticism in compatible terms to the account I am giving, see Dalia Nassar, *The Relevance of Romanticism*: "to make philosophy poetical and poetry philosophical, to introduce poetic insight into ethical norms, to bring art and science together – these were the aims of the movement that has become known as *Romanticism*" (2014a, p. 1).

To be clear, there are many excellent isolated accounts of the imagination. That is not new. In the last hundred years, however, the imagination has not been viewed as a foundation of this philosophical family of thought. *That* is a matter of emphasis with wide reaching effects on most sub-conversations within these systems. In other words, the standard lack of emphasis on the imagination is tantamount to scholars treating the synthetic unity of apperception as a matter on par with Kant's account of imperfect duties in the second *Critique*. The status of the thing in question matters. Plenty of scholars talk about the imagination, but the status and totality of the



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Section 2 of this introduction offers an introductory overview of the significances of the imagination in Kant's critical philosophy and Section 3 glosses its significances in German Idealism and Romanticism. I suggest that Kant's use of the imagination is the source of or context for the use(s) found in the works of the post-Kantian German Idealists and Romantics. Section 4 then provides a brief sketch of the contributions to this volume.

2. Kant and the Imagination

2.1. The Imagination and Synthesis in General

In his well-known book, Von Kant Bis Hegel, Richard Kroner writes, "How is synthesis possible? That is the central question of transcendental idealism" [Wie ist Synthesis möglich? Das ist die Kernfrage des transzendentalen Idealismus]. 15 I take the answer to this question (and, by extension, the question itself) to be at the heart of Idealism. I suggest that the imagination is the explanatory key and answer to Kroner's "Kernfrage." In particular, I suggest that one way of understanding the coherence between Kant's three Critiques - and between the variations of Idealism and Romanticism that take inspiration therefrom – helpfully begins with the four major roles of the imagination in Kant's Idealism. There is not space to go into detail, but I suggest that the following four functions of the imagination are compatible with each other under a single, coherent term "imagination." Bringing these four functions of the imagination into view not only prepares the way for understanding the underlying relation of the contribution to this volume, but also to refuting a range of incoherency claims concerning Kant's tripartite critique of pure reason.

2.2. The Imagination as the Power of Synthesis in the Critique of Pure Reason

There are at least three formal distinctions to be made regarding the imagination as the source of synthesis. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*,

imagination makes all the difference in where we go from such discussions. Since we began the work of developing this volume and hosting conferences and sessions on the subject beginning in early 2015, the literature on the imagination has expanded rapidly. The key now will be finding a coherent framework by which to draw these developing conversations into a systematic whole. I trust that this volume meaningfully aids such an effort.

¹⁵ My translation, Kroner 1921, p. 77; cf. pp. 80–1.



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Kant differentiates between the "empirical synthesis,"¹⁶ the "figurative synthesis,"¹⁷ and the "intellectual synthesis."¹⁸ How we understand intellectual synthesis will depend to a large degree on the story we tell about the coherency between the A and B-deduction accounts of the imagination. That matter is controversial and must be left to the side in this introduction. Kant, however, sums up all types of synthesis in what he terms "synthesis in general," and of this he says, "synthesis in general is, as we shall subsequently see, the mere effect of the imagination."¹⁹ The empirical synthesis of the imagination is that whereby a manifold is synthesized into an intuitable whole (i.e., an empirical intuition) and is most typically identified with the function of sensibility. ²⁰ The figurative synthesis of the imagination is that whereby the pure concepts of the understanding are schematized and so capable of being applied to "objects of experience" or empirically synthesized wholes. ²¹ The intellectual synthesis of the imagination is that whereby pure representations arise, and of this, Kant says:

The unity of apperception in relation to the synthesis of the imagination is the understanding, and this very same unity, in relation to the transcendental synthesis of the imagination is the **pure understanding**. [Die Einheit der Apperzeption in Beziehung auf die Synthesis der Einbildungskraft ist der Verstand, und eben dieselbe Einheit, beziehungsweise auf die transzendentale Synthesis der Einbildungskraft, der reine Verstand.] In the understanding there are therefore pure *a priori* cognitions that contain the necessary unity of the pure synthesis of the imagination in regard to all possible appearances. These, however, are the categories, i.e., the pure concepts of the understanding. (A119)²²

The intellectual synthesis of the imagination as a quality of pure understanding, and not of sensibility, presents itself to many as either a problematic reading of Kant or as an accurate reading but a problematic move by Kant, a discrepancy that he tried to address in his changes from the A to B-edition. It seems to me that *that* story is itself a highly problematic reading, but such matters must wait for the contribution chapters and scholarship outside this volume. In any case, the imagination reoccurs for

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¹⁶ B164, A101, B129-30, B151. 17 B151. 18 B151.

¹⁹ A78/B103–4; to say that "a mere effect of the imagination" can be replaced with "a function of the understanding" is not a counter point. On one story of the coherency between the A and B-editions, it is precisely necessary that if the imagination is constitutive of the understanding (not just sensibility), then it is right to describe certain functions of the imagination as nothing but a "function" or "application" of the understanding. There is no necessary problem there (regardless of the fit between the A and B-editions).



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Kant in both editions in a variety of ways as the source of synthesis in the understanding and sensibility.

2.3. Free Lawful Synthesis of the Imagination

By the time of the third Critique, Kant introduces a new power of synthesis under the principle of a "free lawfulness of the imagination" ²³ or "purposiveness without an end."²⁴ This form of synthesis is an indeterminate play, a harmony and disharmony, a synthesis that proves troublesome for standard cognitive determinations of the understanding. The judgment structure of "free play of the imagination and understanding"25 is itself grounded in a synthetic principle a priori.26 However, instead of the synthetic unity of apperception (which grounds determining judgments in the first Critique), the relevant principle is the "principle of purposiveness"²⁷ or the "free lawfulness of the imagination."²⁸ This new principle of synthesis makes possible the deduction of synthetic, a priori aesthetic judgments, which result in indeterminate concepts or ideas.²⁹ The key difference to note in this new form of synthesis made possible by the principle of the free lawfulness of the imagination is that the synthetic unity afforded takes an indeterminate, productive, and reflective form.³⁰ Because the unity is a free yet lawful synthetic whole,31 the only form adequate to such a content is an (aesthetic or teleological) "idea." In such

²³ KU 5:340; Cf. KU 5:244.

²⁴ For various accounts of purposiveness and the free lawfulness of the imagination, see Makkreel 1990, pp. 45-65; Allison 2001, pp. 319, 59-60, 30-42; Longuenesse 2003; Zuckert 2007, pp. 280–3; Kneller 2009, pp. 3, 76, 51–3; Gorodeisky 2010; Ginsborg 2015, pp. 82–93. 25 KU 5:286–7, 5:217–8, 5:380; For more on the free play as a law, see both Gorodeisky's and my

own contribution in this volume, and Allison 2001, pp. 49, 187-8; C.f., Förster 2012, pp. 127-8.

²⁶ KU 5:197–8; 20:225–6, 20:202.

²⁷ For Kant on the synthetic *a priori* principle of purposiveness – which he sometimes calls the "free lawfulness of the imagination" (5:240) and a principle of "lawfulness without a law" (5:241), see: KU 5:286, 5:288, 5:376, 5:417; C.f., his correspondence concerning the "discovery" of this principle, *Philosophical Correspondence*, pp. 127–8.

KU 5:240-2.

 $^{29}\,$ See the KU "Resolution to the Antinomy of Taste" for more on the way in which aesthetic ideas serve as indeterminate unifiers (i.e., aesthetic determiners).

³⁰ KU 5:340; cf. KU 5:244.

- 31 This synthetic play still takes the form of "subsumption" (KU 5:286–7; cf. Gorodeisky 2011, p. 420), where this subsumption is not under determinate concepts of the understanding but rather under "aesthetic ideas" (KU 5:314) and "faculties" themselves (KU 5:286-7).
- ³² A common view is that only concepts can serve as unifying forms for some sensible matter, but Kant is not quite so strict with his logical and transcendental hylomorphism. In addition to a wide range of hylomorphic terms at work in the third Critique, Kant elsewhere defines "form" (the unifying term or concept for a manifold) as the "matter" of the judgment itself (so in "S is P" both S and P are



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judgments, an idea is united with the aesthetic or teleological content in a universally necessary way.³³ Much more would need to be said about the imagination in the aesthetic realm, but there is no obviously problematic relationship between Kant's conception of the imagination in the first and third Critique as I've glossed them,34 nor even with his (non-transcendental) psychological account, such as that found in his Anthropology.35 Above all, what should be clear is that the imagination is at the heart of Kant's critical revolution and its handling deserves the complexity and fidelity toward which this volume serves merely as a propaedeutic.

From Kant to the Post-Kantian Idealists

At the very least, we have strong textual and conceptual reasons for taking seriously the relevance and interpretive worth of the Idealist's claim (as we will see shortly) to be inheriting Kant's system and emphasizing his notion of the imagination in their own accounts. For example, Hegel identifies in Kant precisely those three theoretical forms of synthesis just discussed. On Hegel's interpretation of Kant, the "original synthetic unity of apperception," like the "principle of figurative synthesis," is "spontaneity, the absolute synthetic activity of the productive imagination, [and] is conceived as the principle of the very sensibility which was previously characterized only as receptivity."36 Not only does Hegel interpret Kant's first Critique as attributing three forms of synthesis to the imagination, he further argues that in precisely this "triplicity" of the imagination "alone" exists an "authentic a priority" and "the very possibility of a posteriority." 37 Whether or not we agree with Hegel on that point, his is a well-considered view that demands careful consideration.

the "matter" and the copula the "form." Kant's hylomorphism does not just concern sensible objects): "in every judgment, subject and predicate constitute matter, and the relation of both the form," whereby, "matter is the determinable - form the determination" (29:847). For more on Kant's transcendental and logical hylomorphism see MacFarlane 2000, p. 54 and Longuenesse

³³ Because this is an indeterminate unity, it does not yield cognition. While it is universally necessary for the judging subject, it cannot determine the external world.

³⁴ See Gorodeisky, Chapter 4 in this volume, and 2010 for more on this.

See Zöller, Chapter 3 in this volume, for more on this. GW, 69–70; Hegel retains this threefold work of the imagination but integrates it into the very method of reason. Nevertheless, it is distinguishable at specific moments in his Encyclopedic system, such as: EG 209-11.

³⁷ *GW*, p. 80.



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3. Tracing the Imagination in Post-Kantian German Idealism and Romanticism

3.1. The Imagination as a Productive Power of the Mind

The imagination is a term of the time and its casting includes prominent works such as Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Spinoza's *Ethics.*³⁸ Because of this we might be tempted to reduce the term "imagination" to a mere psychological trope from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, employed as a vague catch-all for unexplained or inexplicable functions (whether related to memory or one's capacity to form fictions). To some degree, this is right. Nor is the matter always clarified by turning to Kant or the other Idealists. After all, Kant gives vague reference to the work of the imagination as a "hidden art in the depths of the human soul," which has struck some critics as precisely his way of identifying an unknowable or mystical function of reason.³⁹ Such statements can make the imagination seem opaque and non-essential. To the contrary, however, from Kant through Idealism and Romanticism, the imagination takes on a close-knit family of meanings that are at the very heart of these systematic and fragmentary movements.

For the most general and all-encompassing definition, I suggest that we start by viewing the imagination as a *productive power of the mind*. It is as *the* or *a* productive power of the mind that it is at the heart of what unites and distinguishes the traditions of thought from Kant to the post-Kantian German Idealists and early German Romantics.

Where for Kant the imagination becomes associated most closely with a productive power of synthesis, ⁴⁰ for the post-Kantian German Idealists, this productive power of synthesis becomes a fundamental feature (or principle) structuring the very method of reason and the logical relation by which they ground their systems. For the early German Romantics, this productive power of synthesis becomes a fundamental function of the reflective life and growth of individuals in a community. It is the unifying term identifying the proper relationship between organic and aesthetic production in life on the one hand, with the necessity of reason on the other. In each case, however, the imagination is far from some mystical

pp. 9–16; and Kneller 2009, pp. 38–42.

39 A141/B181; For more on Kant's conception of the imagination as the "hidden art in the depths of the human soul," see Matherne, "Kant and the Art of Schematism," 2014, pp. 181–2, 200.

⁴⁰ And, I will suggest later on, he identifies it with three distinct kinds of synthesis.

³⁸ Hobbes 1982, p. 87; Spinoza 2018, Part V; cf. Wolff's *Ontologia*. For more on Wolff, Baumgarten, and Lessing's accounts of the imagination and their influence on Kant, see Makkreel 1990, pp. 9–16; and Kneller 2009, pp. 38–42.



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function of the mind. Rather, it is consistently employed as one of the most important principles grounding the systematic or fragmentary accounts of rational life.

This productive power of the mind will find unique specification in each of these diverse movements. For Kant, as we saw, it was central not only to sensibility and the understanding in cognition, but also to an indeterminate, aesthetic necessity of reason. For the Romantics, it will suggest a fundamentally aesthetic and organic quality to rationality. It will structure the artistic Bildung found from Goethe to Hölderlin and even Schlegel.⁴¹ For the Idealists, it will suggest the possibility of grounding a unity between the supersensible and the sensible domains, of overcoming a perceived problematic dualism remaining from Kant, and will make possible a grounding of the otherwise free-floating *a priori* principles of reason.

3.2. Iohann Gottlieb Fichte

Kant's first Critique account of the productive imagination had a particularly significant impact on Fichte's Idealism. While the supreme principle that Kant identifies with the theoretical "I" is the synthetic unity of apperception, Fichte thinks that Kant's principle is inadequately grounded. Following Reinhold but striving to avoid an infinite regress, 42 Fichte seeks a principle of self-consciousness that can simultaneously establish its own ground. Seeking such a self-grounding ground of both theoretical and practical reason, Fichte turns to the non-real imagination as the methodological structure of the I whereby reason is justified and whole.

Put differently, when Fichte reaches for a single, self-grounding ground for his own system of Idealism in the 1794 Wissenschaftslehre, he does so not through a simple identity of the I, as interpreters often suggest.⁴³ He does not assert a principle of immediate self-consciousness, but rather strives to prove a very specific kind of identity of the I, where this identity is defined and proven in terms of a twofold movement of the *imagination*. It is this twofold (i) outward determination and, through self-limitation, (ii) reciprocal reflection⁴⁴ of the productive imagination that simultaneously structures and makes valid the "identity" of the I, which, in turn, grounds both theoretical and practical knowledge⁴⁵:

⁴¹ For more on the various conceptions and significance of *Bildung*, see Pinkard 2008, pp. 7–9, 222. 42 For more on the Idealists answers to the problem of an infinite regress, see Franks 2005, pp. 219–29.

43 Cf. Kroner 1921, p. 449; cf. Sedgwick 2007, ch. 1.

⁴⁴ W pp. 202, 211, 214, 142–3, 194–5; EW, p. 244.

⁴⁵ W pp. 190–3, 185, 150, 268. Cf. W p. 194.



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This interplay of the self, in and with itself, whereby it posits itself at once as finite and infinite – an interplay that consists, as it were, in self-conflict, and is self-reproducing, in that the self endeavors to unite the irreconcilable, now attempting to receive the infinite in the form of the finite, now, baffled, positing it again outside the latter, and in that very moment seeking once more to entertain it under the form of finitude – this is the power of *imagination*.⁴⁶

Fichte unabashedly employs the productive imagination to prove the ground of the science of knowledge. Interestingly, a common move in scholarship on Fichte is to speak of the principle of the I as "posited," where being posited is taken to mean "assumed" or "presupposed." What is not typically attended to, however, is that the 1794 Wissenschaftslehre takes itself to prove the identity of the I as an adequate ground for theoretical and practical knowledge. Whether we find fault in that proof is another matter, but that he gives such a proof is paramount. For Fichte, the I is not a presupposition, but rather a *result*. To be sure, it is the ground of theoretical and practical knowledge,⁴⁷ but it serves as a valid ground for Fichte because he takes himself to have proven the identity of the I in a way that justifies its use as a ground of all knowledge.⁴⁸ Since it is through this principle of a twofold movement of the imagination that Fichte takes himself to prove the identity of the I, an adequate critique of Fichte's selfgrounding ground of knowledge must involve a critique of his account of the imagination. Surprisingly, however, his proof, via the imagination, is regularly bypassed in favor of discussions of the resulting identity of the I. But just as no one attempts to deny a logical proof by taking the conclusion in isolation from the premises, so also such a move cannot be a valid means of critiquing Fichte's proof in his Wissenschaftslehre. A critique of Fichte's conception of the imagination must be at the heart of any adequate rejection or retention of the ground of his Wissenschaftslehre.

3.3. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling

In contrast with Fichte's inheritance of the productive imagination from Kant, Schelling sees a more auspicious system of Idealism in a deeply aesthetic principle and method of reason. Put differently, because Fichte's system of knowledge begins with the necessary form of reason, he drew more deeply on Kant's first *Critique* account of the imagination. By contrast, Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* takes nature as the priority for

 46 W p. 193. 47 W p. 193. 48 W pp. 202, 211, 214, 142–3, 194–5; EW, p. 244.