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What is creative imagining?

Julia Langkau

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to give an account of the use of imagination at the core of artistic creative processes involving experiential imagination, and to show that this use of the imagination does not always lead to a creative output. Creative imagining is a value-guided process, where the values are essentially subjective in that they are given in the phenomenal aspects of experience or imagined experience. But creative imagining is neither sufficient nor necessary for artistic creative processes. It is not sufficient because creativity in other domains may involve value-guided experiential imagining, and it is not necessary because some art may be produced without the use of imagination, or in a manner that employs mostly other forms of imagination.

Keywords: creativity, imagination, experiential imagination, contemplation, creative process, creative product

1. Introduction

Take the following two cases. First, a painter is looking out of her window. She suddenly has an idea for a painting and sets out to paint it. In the process, she changes some aspects of what she had imagined, such as the exact colours and shapes of the objects. The painting ends up being recognized as novel and valuable in the art world. Second, a composer is sitting by the window, listening to the birds chirping outside. One particular tune catches his attention, he focuses on it and continues 'singing' it in his head, repeating some patterns and changing the tune as he goes. Eventually, his focus switches to something else.

Following the literature, only the first case is standardly regarded as a case of creativity. Many contemporary approaches to creativity follow more or less Margaret Boden's (e.g. 2010, 2014) definition of creativity as the ability to bring about an idea or artifact that is new and surprising as well as valuable, and to do so through a certain kind of conscious, intentional and autonomous process (Boden 2010: 1–27). However, some creative processes arguably do not result in creative products because the artist gets interrupted, loses interest or simply fails. The composer could have continued 'singing' the song in his head, he could have settled for the version he likes best and he

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could have written it down to share it with others – but he lost interest or got distracted. Yet, plausibly, at least some aspects of the process he was engaged in were similar to the process the painter was engaged in. It seems wrong to say that the composer was engaged in a completely different process, given that he could easily have composed a song.

In this paper, I aim to work towards an account of the use of imagination in creative processes that also applies to the second case. I will call this use of the imagination 'creative imagining' because I take it to feature at the core of artistic creative processes.[1] My argument is similar in structure to Alison Hills and Alexander Bird's (2019) defence of creativity without value. In addition to valuable outputs, creative scientists and artists often produce outputs that have no value. These outputs, so the authors argue, seem to be the result of the same kind of creative process as valuable outputs, and hence there can be creativity without value. I argue that whether there is a (valuable) product or not, the use of the imagination in both of our cases is the same (I will specify the relevant kind of imagination below). Other aspects of the process will of course be different.

I will first show how creative processes are commonly defined in relation to a creative product (§2) and present some views concerning the role of the imagination in creativity (§3). I will then suggest an alternative view according to which 'creative imagining' is a particular sort of value-guided imagining (§4). The paper ends with a short conclusion (§5).

2. *Creativity and the creative process*

Amy Kind notes that we ascribe value, novelty and surprisingness (as in Boden's definition of creativity) first and foremost to the creative product, such as a scientific theory or a piece of art (2022: 23–30). One obvious explanation of this tendency is that we can recognize creativity through the product: a scientific theory or a piece of artwork displays the agent's creativity. A creative process can be studied on the basis of the product and defined functionally, as a process that leads to a certain kind of product.[2] Gaut takes it that '[c]reative uses of imagination are … identified, not by their aims, but by their results' (2003: 161). This approach is most saliently displayed in Boden (2004 [1990], 2010, 2014). Looking at three different kinds of creative products, Boden assumes that there are three functionally different processes involved in creativity: 'combinational creativity' consists in an unfamiliar combination of familiar ideas, 'exploratory creativity' involves an exploration of conceptual space, and 'transformational creativity' means creating something within a new conceptual space.

1 I do not mean to imply that it features only in artistic processes, or that it features in all artistic creative processes; see also §4.

2 For example, Carroll 2003, Gaut 2003; according to Currie and Ravenscroft, 'creative imagination' leads to 'something valuable in art, science, or practical life' (2002: 9).

However, distinguishing different kinds of creativity at the level of products does not entail that there are different kinds of corresponding mental processes – at least not from a first-person perspective. Bence Nanay thinks that a first-person perspective is crucial to explaining creativity: experiential characteristics of the creative process are the most salient features of the phenomenon of creativity (2014: 23). An explanation of the creative process should thus account for what the mental process of creating is like. Nanay takes the relevant characteristics to be that we experience the outcome of the mental process as something we have not taken to be possible before, that this experience be veridical (i.e. that the idea really is something we have not taken to be possible before) and that the outcome be experienced as something that does not come from someone else (Nanay 2014: 23–24).

Nanay's experiential account puts the creative process in the centre of our explanatory efforts. However, the creative product at the end of this process remains crucial for how we experience creativity. The painter experiences her idea of the final painting as something she has not taken to be possible before and that does not come from someone else, while the composer, due to the lack of a creative product, does not have any of these experiences.

I am interested in the role of the imagination in generating a creative product such as a painting. The suggestion is that in our second case, the case of the composer, the imagination is used in the same way, even though only the painter may experience novelty (as described by Nanay) at the end of the process. In the next section, I will look at the role of the imagination in creativity as it has been discussed in some of the literature.

3. *The role of the imagination in creativity*

It is almost uncontroversial that imagining is neither sufficient nor necessary for creativity (see Kind 2022 and Arcangeli forthcoming). Some creative ideas or artifacts might be brought about without imagination, and some uses of the imagination might be purely epistemic. In this paper, I am interested in creative processes in which the imagination is involved. Imagination, Dustin Stokes points out, is a good candidate for cognitive manipulation as required in creativity because, by its nature, it does not aim at truth, it is not world-sensitive and it is voluntary (2014: 71; see also Kind 2022: 37). Indeed, many creativity scholars have argued that imagination plays some role in creativity (e.g. Gaut 2010, Stokes 2014, Hills and Bird 2019).

One question that has been addressed in the literature is whether imagination is the source of creativity in the sense that imagination *explains* the phenomenon. Gaut (2003) distinguishes two models of the role of imagination in creativity. First is the *display model*, according to which imagination just displays the result of the creative process, which itself comes from a different source, for example the unconscious. This model works well for passive creativity, where an idea just suddenly appears in one's head (Gaut 2003: 156),

as happens to the painter in our first case. However, active creativity seems more relevant in the arts, according to Gaut: 'a painter may for instance suddenly "see" how his painting will look, but much of the subsequent work will involve scrutinizing the painting as it is being made, imagining how it could be improved by altering it in various ways, trying out these changes, observing the results, making more alterations, and so forth' (Gaut 2003: 157). A second model, the *search model*, can thus better account for the role of the imagination in creating (Gaut 2003: 156–57): artists and scientists use their imagination to try out various possible ways to develop a piece of art or a scientific theory. The creative artist or scientist has the ability to imagine particularly well; 'her imagination is capable of grasping a set of the relevant possibilities, and selecting from them the one most suitable to the circumstances' (Gaut 2003: 157). Real creativity occurs when the creator does not search blindly through the whole space of possibilities, but rather makes a pre-selection based on experience, knowledge, talent and skill (Gaut 2003: 158–59). But, again, imagination seems to just display possibilities, and the choice between the relevant possibilities is made by judgement. Hence imagination does not seem to play the main role in explaining creativity. Michael Beaney argues that a third model could assign the imagination a role as the source of creativity: the *connection model* (2005: 201–2). Bringing together different ideas in the imagination can be a source of new ideas: 'the real creativity would seem to lie in making fruitful connections' (Beaney 2005: 201).

Thinking in models, however, unnecessarily presupposes that imagination plays one (or at least one main) explanatory role in creativity. But there is no reason for such an assumption. It is more plausible to think that the imagination can have different functions that can all contribute to explaining the creative process. Before moving on to how these different functions may play together in creative processes such as in the case of the painter, we should specify what we mean by 'imagination'. So far, we have not distinguished between creativity and imagination in different domains, and it is plausible that different domains of creativity (the arts, sciences, mathematics, philosophy, everyday problem solving etc.) require different kinds of imagination. For Gaut, artistic creativity likely involves experiential imagination. Experiential imagination 'covers both sensory imagining (for instance, visually imagining [a] wet cat) and phenomenal imagining (for instance, imagining what it is like to feel soaking wet)' (2003: 153). Problem-solving creativity or 'trying out different solutions to intellectual problems', according to Gaut, likely employs propositional imagining (2003: 159).[3]

Both our cases crucially involve visual images of colour shades and aural representations of tunes as well as more complex experiential representations, likely involving emotions, bodily feelings etc., but probably also propositional aspects. This rich kind of imagination, broadly understood, is thus

3 See also French 2020 on belief-like imagination in the sciences.

what we are interested in, and for which I will use the label 'experiential imagining'. The next section addresses the question of how exactly the imagination may be used in our cases.

4. *Creative imagining as value-guided imagining*

In what follows, I will give three conditions on our use of the imagination in artistic creative processes involving experiential imagining. I suggest that any such process requires that we attend to or reflect on what is being presented to us or represented in one way or another. A creative process will, presumably, often start out from something we perceive or remember. The painter may start out attending to the colours and patterns in the landscape, then attend to some colours and patterns from memory, and then to how these colours and patterns are matching in the imagination. Later in the process, she may attend to (preliminary) creative products, for example in the form of a draft on a canvas or in the form of an idea in the imagination. The following is the first condition on creative imagining:

(a) We consciously attend to what is being presented or represented through our senses, in memory, in thought or in the imagination.

This condition accounts for the fact that the active creative process is a conscious process, and it accounts for what we may call the *display function* (as in the *display model* above).

Once we attend to what is being presented or represented to us, we can engage in intentional manipulation in any of the different modes of the experiential imagination. As Gaut (2003: 157) notes, the creative process may lead far away from how the painting was originally imagined, that is, how it may have appeared spontaneously in the painter's head. In the process of manipulating our representations, we build connections to other representations, for example to memories or imaginings. This often happens within constraints of various kinds. In the case of the painting, it could be a palette, a structure or an envisaged result. Here is thus the second condition on creative imagining:

(b) We intentionally manipulate what is being presented or represented and build connections to other representations, often within constraints.

This condition accounts for what we may want to call the *connection function* (as in the *connection model*) and explains that active creativity is an intentional process.

As they stand, (a) and (b) are not specific to creative uses of imagination; these conditions will apply to other uses of imagination as well. In the case of epistemic uses of imagination, some epistemic constraints will have to be added to (b), that is, constraints that regulate how we are to manipulate what is being presented or represented, and which variables we hold fixed (see

Kind 2020).[4] For instance, when imaginatively trying to figure out whether a certain lamp would look nice in our living room, we must hold the colour of the lamp and the colours of our living room fixed. This then determines what gets displayed in the imagination (a).

To distinguish creative uses from other uses of the imagination, a third condition is thus needed that specifies the way in which we manipulate what is being presented or represented in the relevant creative processes. My suggestion is that the connections between presentations and representations are made in a similar way to how they are made in what Katalin Balog (2020) calls 'contemplation'. Contemplation, as Balog understands it, does not involve reasoning but rather *associations* among 'memories, images, fantasies and thoughts'. We build connections by attending to the *sensuous values of the experience itself*, or to objects, for example to the landscape, through attending to these sensuous values (Balog 2020: 260–61).[5] Sensuous values are given to us directly through perception, or alternatively through the emotions in response to perception.[6] In either case, these values are part of our experience, and they are thus essentially subjective (see e.g. Nagel 1979 and Paul 2014):

> The flower appears to me pale blue, fragrant, with a sharply defined shape; it also appears delicate, refreshing and delightful. … Freshness or beauty is as much part of the content of my experience of the flower as is its color and shape. (Balog 2020: 257)

Balog takes the attention to subjective, sensuous values of experience as a necessary condition for creating art: 'Never having experienced the "push and pull" of colors, shapes and textures, it seems [a painter] cannot produce art – except by chance' (2020: 259). This provides us with a plausible way to specify how we attend to and manipulate what is being presented or represented in creative imagining: we focus on the subjective values of the experience or the imagined experience. The painter is attending, for example, to the freshness of the green in her experience. She then builds connections, for example to the sadness of some remembered experience. As a result, she can attend to how the freshness of the green and the sadness of the remembered experience play together in the imagination.

Contemplation, according to Balog, occurs 'without a particular goal in mind' (2020: 260). Similarly, Gaut emphasizes that, as part of the phenomenology of creating, creative uses of imagination do not necessarily aim at anything extrinsic. It is even 'likely that consciously aiming at being creative will to an extent be self-undermining, leading to a frenetic striving after shallow effects' (Gaut 2003: 161). However, we can distinguish between

4 However, Stuart (2020) argues that epistemic uses of the imagination in the sciences sometimes require scientists free themselves from such constraints. See also Murphy 2022.
5 We do not need to commit to one view.
6 We do not need to commit to one view; see Balog 2020: 258.

different kinds of aim. Antti Kauppinen (forthcoming) argues that it is distinctive of aesthetic creative processes that they have an *aspirational* aim such as creating a beautiful painting. In contrast to guiding aims, aspirational aims merely motivate us but do not provide us with anything like a blueprint. An aspirational aim guides the creative process indirectly, without giving the painter instructions on how to proceed, and it motivates her to explore value and search for value in the imagined or realized experience.

One may object that while creative processes sometimes start with attention to an experience, they then take place mostly in the imagination, because they crucially lead away from mere attention to the given experience (contemplation, in contrast, does not necessarily move away from the given experience). But note that attention to experience and attention to imagined experience often take turns in creative processes. The painter realizes her preliminary ideas as she is developing the painting: for example, she applies colours to the canvas, which she then attends to. Attention to what is given in the experience and attention to what is given in the imagination can be more or less in the centre of the process, depending on the particular kind of creative process, and probably also depending on the creator.[7]

Recall that, according to Gaut, we decide on the best possibility by way of judgement. Experience, knowledge, talent and skill can narrow down the options between which we choose (Gaut 2003: 159). If, however, the creator does not proceed by considering relevant possibilities, but rather by exploration and association as suggested above, they might sometimes miss the best option, even the option they would in fact value most. But very likely, experience, knowledge, talent and skill – abilities that often make a creator's ideas and artifacts successful – will have an impact on exploration and association as well.

Both our attention to and reflection on what is being presented or represented (as in (a)) as well as our manipulation of and connecting with other representations (as in (b)) are thus guided by an interest in, exploration of and search for subjective value in our experiences and imagined experiences. Here is the last condition, qualifying the first two conditions:

(c) We search for subjective value in the attending to, manipulating and building of connections between presentations and representations (i.e. in (a) and (b)).

This last condition accounts for the *search function* (as in the *search model*) and distinguishes creative imagining from other uses of imagination: creative imagining is a value-guided process, where the values are essentially subjective (in that they are given in the phenomenal aspects of experience or imagined experience).

7 Some creators may work out ideas in the imagination, some may try them out, for example on a canvas.

I take this use of the imagination to be at the core of artistic creative processes. However, I do not mean to imply that creative imagining is necessary or sufficient for artistic creative processes. It is not *sufficient* because creativity in other domains may also involve experiential imagining based on attention to subjective values. It is not *necessary* for artistic creative processes because some art may be produced without imagination, or in a manner that employs mostly propositional imagination.

Coming back to Nanay's desiderata: the impression of novelty concerns the product at the end of the imaginative process. The account I have given of the imaginative process itself not only applies to the case of the painter who ends up with a creative product – it applies equally to our second case, of the composer who loses interest or gets distracted. The way the painter and the composer use their imagination is just the same, that is, not all instances of what I have called 'creative imagining' lead to a creative output. Other aspects play a role in creative processes and contribute to explaining why there is a creative product, such as the aspirational goal, the ambition and motivation of the creator to reach that goal and to realize or share their idea, as well as situational and social aspects.

5. *Conclusion*

In this paper, my aim was not to explain how creative processes lead to a creative output, but rather to identify a particular use of the imagination that I take to be at the core of artistic creative processes. I have suggested a particular way in which three functions of the imagination play together to constitute what I have called 'creative imagining': we search for essentially subjective values in attending to and manipulating what is presented in the experience or represented in experiential imagination. Creative imagining thus understood does not always lead to a (valuable) idea or artifact, and it covers how both the painter and the composer use their imagination.[8]

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