The Role of the Imagination in the Good Life

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How does the imagination, as the capacity for image-making and image-perceiving, relate to the visible world and the immaterial? Plato, in his Socratic dialogue, *The Republic,* Wordsworth in his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, and Thoreau in his reflective personal account, *Walden,* ideal models of society and the individual. As they address the complex relationship between the mind and the world, each provides a model of the role of the imagination in the good life, which, in conversation, give insight into how images and the human capacity for creative transcendence are capable of being a means to acquiring true understanding.

Plato's View of the Imagination

In the *Republic*, Plato contends that the highest reality is represented by a permanent world of abstract forms, or the universals of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. The Forms constitute the ultimate standard by means of which the reality of truth and value can be apprehended, and entities are worthwhile to the extent that they participate in this form (Book VI, 1129). As Plato discriminates between the sensible and the intelligible worlds, he designates certain degrees of understanding to each: of the visible world, interpretation and conjecture; of the intelligible world, genuine knowledge and soul-reasoning (Book VI, 1130.). In Plato's intellectual cosmos, the good life manifests in an intuitive state of consciousness in which one achieves true understanding of truth and existence itself by soul-reasoning.

Plato defines four levels of reality and four faculties of the soul relating to them as "understanding for the highest, thought for the second, belief for the third, and imaging for the last" (Book VI, 1132). The sensible realm is made up of a level of the images, impressions, and the reflections of things, of which imagination provides primitive and unreliable opinions, and the level of the physical entities themselves, which are based on perception and sensations. These are the lowest levels of reality. In the intelligible realm, the hypotheses and process of thought derived from visible objects is elevated to function as the intermediate between opinion and reason (Book VII, 1149). In this level, reality is known in abstraction through theorization and a disciplined application of the understanding. The final level of "pure intelligence," or true understanding of the absolute good, is only achieved through the philosophical approach of intuition, by which theories themselves are evaluated and the true nature of reality comprehended. The good is like the sun in that it is "the cause of sight itself and seen by it," and the soul is like the eye in that its vision is "illuminated by truth and what is, it understands" (Book VI, 1129).

Plato's conception of the imagination rests on his conception of knowledge. In defining the difference between knowledge and belief, he draws a distinction between lovers of wisdom (philosophers) and lovers of opinion (poets) (Book V, 1105-1107). Knowledge cannot be dynamic, because the Forms themselves are absolute and unchangeable. Plato introduces the allegory of men chained in a cave, able only to see shadows of real things and mistaking their

appearance for reality, to represent the process of moving from the approximate, deluded knowledge of the visible (senses) to the concrete, true knowledge of the intelligible realm (reason). He regards concrete experience as an inferior means of comprehending the ultimate realties, and imagination as incapable of providing access to the truth of reality because it is removed from ultimate abstractions as a mere representation or imitation of experience. For Plato, the imagination is limited to conjectures concerning the likenesses of physical things. Truth and existence itself are achieved, Plato believes, by transcending the world of concrete particulars, but he does not conceive of the imagination as a vehicle for doing so.

Because the imagination is guided by images and opinion, and because it deals with the temporal, the material, and the changing, Plato does not allow for it to be conducive of true knowledge of reality. Through the imagination, one is a maker of appearances and resemblances of material reality, “a creation which is thrice removed from reality...and truth,” an imitation which are “an indistinct expression of truth” (Book VI, 1129). Plato alleges that the activity of the imagination, rather than facilitating the contemplation of eternal ideas, is limited to producing likeness:

> If you look at a bed from the side or the front or from anywhere else is it a different bed each time? Or does it only appear different, without being at all different And is that also the case with other things?
> That’s the way it is—it appears different without being so.
> Then consider this very point: what does painting do in each case? Does it imitate that which is as it is or does it imitate that which appears as it appears? Is it an imitation of appearances or of truth?
> Of appearances.
> Then imitation is far removed from the truth, for it touches only a small part of each thing and a part that is itself only an image (Book X, 1202).

Plato’s Socrates goes as far as to censure “all poetic imitators” and their aesthetic forms for the inferiority, ignorance, and deception of imitation, which allows for “no grasp of the truth” (Book X, 1205). Images cannot relate to the higher reality of truth because they are merely copies of it and, further, because the poet does not recognize the imitation as an inferior thing. Plato argues that “a maker of an image — an imitator — knows nothing about that which is but only about its appearance” and thus “has neither knowledge nor right opinion” (Book X, 1205-1206). This comes in contrast with his later example of the geometer, who uses images rightly by using them as a reference for truths so that “their thought isn’t directed to them but to those other things that they are like” (Book VI, 1131).

It is ironic that Plato’s *Republic* would have no room for a Socrates, as it is the mimetic nature of his dialogues that makes them enduring and transcendent of limitations such as time and culture. This contradiction inherent in the text — that Plato is dependent on analogies and myths to construct his philosophy and yet interdicts the activity of the imagination — suggests both the consequence of becoming fettered to one’s faculty rather than using it as a vehicle towards the dialectic and the necessity of imagination in moving from the realm of becoming to

that of being. Plato recognizes the potential of the imagination to undermine one's ability to recognize the universal reality and compromise one's understanding of the abstract truth underlying all things. The subjectivity of imagination keeps one from being able to "distinguish between knowledge, ignorance, and imitation" (Book X, 1203).

Plato's desire to curtail and direct the imagination reflects a desire strictly to limit its role so that it can influence reason and actions only for the Good. He restricts the imagination's influence out of awareness of its power to orient one's thoughts, influence one's actions, and "shape their souls" (Book II, 1016). Further, his predilection to curtail the imagination suggests that there can be two types of imagination: one that is truth-directed, and another which deceives by false appearances. Plato himself admits that if one "truly had knowledge of the things he imitates, he'd be much more serious about actions than about imitations of them" (Book X, 1203). Can the imagination be redeemed? Must the products of imitation remain far removed from the truth? Might there be a form of the imagination in which one understands that he is looking at shadows and is guided by images to truth of the Forms? In rejecting the distinction of superior and inferior forms of the imagination, Plato makes the mistake of condemning the imagination entirely.

Wordsworth's View of the Imagination

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth conceives of the imagination as the active force that works alongside the senses, reinterpreting reality and the self. He defines the imaginative faculty as "Another name for absolute power/And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,/And reason in her most exalted mood" (218). Wordsworth begins his poem in the "unknown modes of being," describing this state as one with "no familiar shapes" and "huge and mighty forms," language that alludes to Plato's realm of shadows and reflections (11-12). The introductory image of the opening of the clouds is a metaphorical opening of Wordsworth's mind, from which the imaginative faculty constructs and sustains a new manifestation of reality (10). The power of the mind is central to transcendence. The imagination gives access to higher forms of experience and understanding. Wordsworth seeks elevation through "a mind sustained/By recognitions of transcendent power,/In sense conducting to ideal form" (215). In his conceptualization, the imagination is a state that transcends the visible and propels the soul to rise "up to the height of feeling intellect" (219).

Wordsworth defines knowledge as "invisible" (30), "great truths" (203) to be "sincerely sought and prized/For its own sake" (43). The imagination does not constitute the highest reality for Wordsworth, but functions as a means towards that end. He finds "elevation" in the "abstractions" and "immaterial" of nature and its "geometric science," the source from which he draws a profound, universal belief and recognition of "supreme existence" (84-85). This model of transcendence parallels a Platonic ascent from the visible to the intelligible by using images "to see those others themselves that one cannot see except by means of thought" (1131). Wordsworth combines the material and the intelligible, "poetry and geometric truth," not to become limited to the senses but to access what is "beyond the reach of thought/And human

knowledge, to the human eye/Invisible, yet liveth to the heart" (30). His imagination grasps for the totality of things.

Like Plato, Wordsworth distinguishes between a world of images perceived through the senses and a world of ideals and ultimate meanings, but goes further to position the imagination as the relation between them, acting as a channel towards universal truths. Nature is the image, but rather than taking its imitative forms for themselves, Wordsworth — like Plato's geometer — allows them to refer him to the higher Forms through use of the imagination (2, 58, 84). In this way, he achieves "palpable access of knowledge" by applying the imaginative faculty to the sublime "transitory qualities" (27) of nature, which Wordsworth refers to as "Forms" (84, 210) in allusion to the Platonist ideals of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

In the same way that Plato recognizes a "dialectic" — or that movement from the actual to the ideal necessitates understanding that goes beyond the visible and one's impressions of it, Wordsworth understands the relation between image and truth as a motion from the visible to the invisible, from the transitory to the universal (1148). He attributes his ability to recognize "what is truth,/What reason, what simplicity and sense" to the process of thought derived from visible objects, from "watch[ing] the forms/Of Nature" (84). Like Plato's philosopher, who "doesn't give up until he grasps the good itself with understanding itself" (Book VII, 1148), Wordsworth applies his imagination to the images in nature in pursuit of "universal things," seeking "highest truth—A track pursuing, not untrod before,/From strict analogies by thought supplied/Or consciousnesses not to be subdued" (36). This movement is later framed using the Platonic metaphor of a "blind cavern," from which the imagination, accompanied by "the ways of Nature," leads one "to light and open day" and to "the sustaining thought/Of human Being, Eternity, and God" (218). Nature, or images, thus function as "creator and receiver both" (26), as both the reflection (of higher truths) and the stream (towards higher truths). Wordsworth recognizes that nature is only "A shadow, a delusion...Whose truth is not a motion or a shape," but he also realizes its ability to set the soul in motion toward the sublime truths which it imitates (133).

How does Wordsworth respond to Plato's concerns about the delusions produced by images? He attributes to nature both passion and reason, recognizing her dual function and capacity to mediate the two: "these two attributes/Are sister horns that constitute her strength" from which one "receives/That energy by which he seeks the truth" (202). For Wordsworth, truth-oriented application of the imagination is the synthesis of the actual and ideal; as the link between the two, it steers the mind towards "the absolute presence of reality" (109). Wordsworth "deem[s] not profitless those fleeting moods of shadowy exultation" (17) by which the mind constructs and sustains a new manifestation of reality and substitutes "a universe of death/For that which moves with light and life informed,/Actual, divine, and true" (217). By applying a truth-oriented imagination to the material, one is directed towards universals which transcend the physical reality. Wordsworth's key contribution is that the imagination can facilitate the realization of the sublime through an experience of transcendence in which "The soul...retains an obscure sense/Of possible sublimity, whereto/With growing faculties she doth aspire,/With

faculties still growing, feeling still/That whatsoever point they gain, they yet/have something to pursue" (27).

Plato identifies the Forms ("the Beautiful itself") with what is and what is intermediary with their concrete, perceptible manifestations ("the many, beautiful things") (Book VI, 1128). While Plato assumes that the imitative is not real and is proportional only to the visible things, Wordsworth goes further to frame the imagination as a channel from which the soul is moved from the inferior to the "highest reason in a soul sublime" (65). This relationship posits that while the imaginative faculty can lead one to be "concerned with the opinions and desires of man" (Book V, 1105), it can also move the soul to turn from the shadows and come out of the cave by trying "to find the being itself of each thing and [not giving] up until he grasps the good itself with understanding itself, [and] he reaches the end of the intelligible just as the other reached the end of the visible" (Book VII, 1147-8). In such a state, Wordsworth "scorned indifference; but, inflamed with thirst/Of a secure intelligence, and sick/Of other longing, ...pursued what seemed/A more exalted nature; wished that Man/Should start out of his earthy, worm-like state,/And spread abroad the wings of Liberty" (185). So he becomes like "Those who in each case embrace the thing itself," which, as Plato affirms, must be called "philosophers, not lovers of opinion" (Book V, 1107).

The unity of poetry and philosophy in *The Prelude* is "the dangerous craft of culling term and phrase...To carry meaning to the natural heart;/To tell us what is passion, what is truth,/What reason, what simplicity and sense" (84). The poem is didactic in modeling *how* to think rather than *what* to think, playing the role of the 'narrative' that mediates between the 'narrator' and the 'narrated.' Poetry is no longer a mere copy, or a "mirror" held up to reality, but the thought which Plato recognizes as "the intermediate between opinion and understanding" (Book VII, 1132). Wordsworth asserts that "Nature lodged/The Soul, the Imagination of the whole," and that through exploration and meditation, "The unity of man, one spirit over ignorance and vice/Predominant...one sense for moral judgments...The soul when smitten thus/By a sublime 'idea'...feeds/On the pure bliss, and takes her rest with God" (143). Wordsworth's poetic form itself imitates the structure of the imaginative experience, demonstrating how the mimetic relates to truth through the way the imagination functions within and mirrors the natural world.

Thoreau's View of the Imagination

In *Walden,* Thoreau reinforces the use of the imagination as a link between the material and immaterial: "I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor" (73). His "conscious endeavor" incorporates the active use of his imagination in pursuit of truth (268-269). The imagination, as for Wordsworth, facilitates access to the higher truths embedded mimetically within the material world, but rather than limiting it to the poetic form, Thoreau lives it out, seeking to experience and apprehend the truth of a higher reality beyond the material (79, 81). He thus goes further than Plato and Wordsworth in proposing that the good life is one lived in a deliberate practice of transcendence

and awakening to the sublime through the application of the imaginative faculty to the material world.

While Plato separates the senses and the subjective experience from knowledge of the highest and most abstract categories of things, Thoreau views the two as mutually necessary. He holds that universal truths are embedded in the sensible world and are apprehensible through deliberate, direct interaction:

> Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before dam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us (78-9).

The imaginative faculty is central to how Thoreau interacts with the present, material world in order to apprehend the "true and sublime." Without it, there would be no Walden. Like Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Thoreau's text, as a whole, can be understood as a model of the practice of the imagination in living the good life. At the onset, his use of metaphorical, hyperbolic, and metonymic language establishes Walden more in the imagination than in a physical location. He alludes to a change in "place and time," describing Walden as "far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers" and associating the distance and separation with "rare and delectable places in some remote and more celestial...part of the universe...at an equal remoteness from the life which I had left behind" (71). Thoreau relies on "work of the imagination" in his isolation, inasmuch as he "conjures" imaginary company for himself (111) He further conflates real individuals with the imaginary by refraining from using proper names when referring to them or by rendering them mythical (e.g. Alex Therien described as a Homeric hero, Emerson christened the "Old Immortal," and a reference to "the Visitor who never comes") (111). The metaphysical nature of his real and invented characters indicate that the real individual, for Thoreau, is not the person with a name, but the transcendent soul behind the external persona. Together, the locale and the imaginary companions that populate Walden are somewhere between fact and fiction, suggesting that the Walden in Thoreau's mind is more important than the Walden in reality.

In the interaction between Walden and Thoreau's imagination, one can see the upward motion from the material to the immaterial. Thoreau recognizes that "the imagination, give it the least license, dives deeper and soars higher than Nature goes" (234). As such, he uses the analogy of spring as a creation story and the physical reactualization of nature's rebirth to depict the reformative work of the imagination in a person. This "sudden springing into existence" is contrasted with the "sleepers" in deriving enlightenment and truth (257). "What is man but a mass in thawing clay?" he asks, alluding further to the "things unseen" at the essence of being (250). The imagination functions as a link between the immaterial and the material because the inherent transcendental quality that exists in man. In a later anecdote, Thoreau observes "the halo of light around [his] shadow," which induces him to identify himself as "one of the elect"

(165). He notes that this phenomenon, which issues from a sunlike body, is "constant" but "not commonly noticed." The image of the penumbra parallels Plato's vision of the form of the Good, in which the light emits from a transcendent source beyond being. For Thoreau, also, the notion of election suggests an ontologically indeterminate source, though in his model, the body of light is his own and the shadows are not repudiated for the sun, but held together in conversation with the light. A penumbra can only be apprehended by "drenching" the self in the material of the present and penetrating what is seen. As though an emergence from a Platonic cave, one encounters truth and existence itself. "All things must live in such a light," Thoreau concludes (257).

For Thoreau, the relationship between the material and the imagination makes evident how "the very globe continually transcends" itself and how we ourselves are made capable of realizing "the infinite extent" of our being (249). As the sensible world points to the source within it that transcends it, we come to apprehend and access "sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like," the virtues and ideals of which physical and temporal entities are imitative of (134). Thoreau uses his senses and imagination to perceive the material world as Plato's geometer regards images — "to look at the divine images in water and shadows of the things that are, rather than, as before, merely at shadows" (Book VII, 1148) — and, like Plato's philosopher, he "loves the sight of truth" (Book V, 1102). He does not frame imagination as an end, but as the means to an end: "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there … I had several more lives to live" (262). He refers to imagination without fruition as "building castles in the air" with "no worthy foundation" (220), so that "our vision does not penetrate the surface of things" and "we think that that *is* which *appears* to be" (78). To emphasize this exchange, Thoreau develops his own economics, reframing work as a source of spiritual fulfillment, wealth as spiritual and intellectual gains, and affordability as the capacity for transcendence. The role of the imagination is to redirect the aim of one's existence from the acquisition of wealth to the elevation of mind and for acquiring meaning and fulfillment, so that one "will live with the license of a higher order of being" (263).

Thoreau anchors the imagination to a practice of living so that "we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence," and that what constitutes the material world is "but the shadow of the reality" (78). The lens through which Thoreau experiences and examines Walden is the capacity which facilitates the reading of the material world's true significance and enables access to the intelligible truths of existence. As Thoreau's account demonstrates, in the good life, it is used to comprehend truth and realize its end in one's day-to-day existence.

Conclusion

Plato's skepticism gives us reason to question the role of the imagination, which he positions in association with the lowest level of understanding, furthest removed from and unable to access higher truths. Wordsworth's understanding and use of the imagination provides a depiction of the faculty as truth-directed, and Thoreau provides an example of the imaginative

faculty applied to the good life. As Plato originally holds, one must be devoted to revealing the higher truths present in the images and entities of the sensible world. While the imagination can be limited to the opinions, conjectures, and illusions of the sensible world, it is also capable of functioning as a vehicle towards the levels of the intelligible world, as Wordsworth and Thoreau demonstrate to different degrees. In the good life, thus, the imagination functions as a truth-directed instrument for transcending the material world and ascertaining understanding of the higher reality which it imitates.

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