

HUMAN DIGNITY AND THE IMAGINATION

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Abstract

The Enlightenment's exaltation of human reason as the supreme cognitive function for knowing reality marginalized human imagining by sequestering the imagination and beauty to a world devoid of objectivity, leading to the aesthetic humanism of the Romantic period. In doing so, the imagination was said only to be concerned with felicity and feelings, with fascination and emotion, rather than the exactitude of human reason, thereby *leashing* the imagination's cognitive operations to the non-real. This aesthetic humanism, though, coupled with the "will to power" of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche led to an unfettered imagination unleashed to play with culturally instantiated signs *ad infinitum*. Surely, such an empowered imagination would finally take its seat next to king reason.

Richard Kearney, in his *Wake of the Imagination*, sees the irony of the situation: "One of the greatest paradoxes of contemporary culture is that at a time when the image reigns supreme the very notion of a creative human imagination seems under mounting threat." There is no reality, only vain imaginings, for "we are at an impasse where the very rapport between imagination and reality seems not only inverted but subverted altogether." The *releasing* of the unfettered imagination, resulting in a reality of one's own making, ironically becomes a net loss since there is nothing real in the first place.

These renderings of the imagination denigrate the human self, dehumanizing humanity with a mechanistic worldview that leads to an emaciated existence. On the other hand, an uninhibited imagination leads to a pompous and solipsistic understanding of the human self as one proceeds to play with various images *ad infinitum*, constructing fantastical worlds disconnected from the reality of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

This paper contends, then, that the imagination is a disposition of human being that brings continuity to the self, connecting the past through memory and the future through vision with the present. Such an understanding of human imagining restores dignity to human beings when they allow what Søren Kierkegaard calls the "ideal self," christologically understood, to inform their entire lives, bringing understanding and meaning while orienting them towards a compassionate existence in pursuit of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

1. Introduction

Prometheus, the son of a Titan in Greek mythology, appears in Hesiod's epic poem *Theogony* as a trickster, one who seeks to challenge the wisdom of almighty Zeus by attempting to usurp his authority and free humanity from the dictates of the gods. In one instance, Prometheus steals the fire from Hephaestus, the crippled blacksmith of the gods, hiding it in a fennel stalk and giving it to mortal human beings.¹ Now that mortal men possess fire, they are able to transform their world and are no longer captive to the capriciousness of the gods or the divine order of nature. Instead, they have the imaginative power to fashion and form their own world, creating culture from nature. Zeus, infuriated by Prometheus's actions, binds him eternally to a rock in the Caucasus Mountains where an eagle comes to masticate his liver, only to eat it again and again after it regenerates itself during the night.²

Like all Greek mythology, Greek myths tell a tale designed to explain various aspects of reality, to offer an explanation for the way things are. The Greek myth of Prometheus is no exception. Prometheus, from the Greek word προμήθεια, means foresight or foreknowing. As such, his theft of fire is said to ascribe a negative connotation to the imagination. In *Thieves of Fire*, Denis Donoghue's seminal work on the affects of the Prometheus myth upon the Western literary tradition, he remarks: "We think imagination a wonderful power, unpredictable and diverse, and we are satisfied to call it divine and to ascribe to it an early association with transgression."³ Is the human imagination an illegitimate power, something pilfered from the gods? Or, is the imagination a superior human ability able to construct fantastical worlds of meaning on its own?

In addressing these questions, we will look briefly at the history of ideas beginning with two thinkers from the Enlightenment, René Descartes and John Locke, finding that the ethos of the Enlightenment exalts human reason as the supreme cognitive function for knowing reality and binds human imagining by restricting it to a world devoid of objectivity. Such denigration and skepticism awakened Immanuel Kant from his dogmatic slumbers as he asserts that the imagination is the "common, but to us [the] unknown root" for sense and understanding.⁴ Kant's dramatic assertions lead to the aesthetic humanism of the Romantic period, unbinding the imagination as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and many of his contemporaries vigorously contend. This unbinding of Prometheus, though, when coupled with the "will to power" of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, produces an unfettered imagination, unleashed to play with culturally instantiated signs *ad infinitum*. Surely, such an empowered imagination will finally take its seat next to king reason.

These extreme renderings of the imagination, unfortunately, denigrate the human self, dehumanizing humanity with a mechanistic worldview that leads to an emaciated existence on the one hand while an uninhibited imagination leads to a

¹ Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 544–584.

² Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 585–616.

³ Donoghue, D., *Thieves of Fire*, Faber, London, 1973, 61.

⁴ Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn, in *Wadsworth Philosophy Source 3.0*, CD-ROM, ed. D. Kolak, Wadsworth Publishing, New York, 26.

delusional, pompous and solipsistic understanding of the human self on the other. This paper contends, then, that the imagination understood as a disposition of human being brings continuity to the self, connecting the past through memory and the future through vision with the present. Such an understanding of human imagining restores dignity to human beings when we allow what Søren Kierkegaard calls the “ideal self,” christologically understood, to inform our entire lives, bringing understanding and meaning while orienting us towards a compassionate existence in pursuit of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

2. Prometheus Bound

René Descartes inaugurates, with good intention, a methodological shift that gave prominence to human reason with his revolutionary notion of *cogito ergo sum* – I think, therefore I am. His efforts are attempts, in part, to overcome a rising tide of skepticism and open new avenues for human progress through his notion of “clear and distinct ideas.” In doing so, he sets a rationalistic trajectory that defines reality in terms of human subjectivity where the human mind is given priority over an objective reality. Despite setting a new trajectory toward modern humanism, Descartes is skeptical of the imagination particularly in relationship to reason, seeing it as mimetic and unreliable.⁵ Although there are some who argue that Descartes’s supposed hostility to the imagination is exaggerated, his contemporaries and successors, like Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Leibniz who internalize this Cartesian shift in thinking, seem less inclined to ascribe validity to the imagination.⁶ Spinoza’s remarks are paradigmatic: “Whence may also see how easily men may fall into grave errors through not distinguishing accurately between the imagination and the understanding.” As such, “there is no doubt that words, equally with the imagination, be the cause of many and great errors, unless we strictly [be] on our guard.”⁷

Following the empirical tradition, although not in complete opposition to rationalism, John Locke roots knowledge and its verification in the senses, seeking pragmatic and utilitarian ends. According to Locke, “the mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas.”⁸ Such ideas,

⁵ Descartes, R., *Discourse on the Method for Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking the Truth in the Sciences*, trans. E. Haldane in *Wadsworth Philosophy Source 3.0*, CD-ROM, ed. D. Kolak, Wadsworth Publishing, New York, 9 and his sixth meditation in *Meditations on First Philosophy: In which the Existence of God and the Distinction of the Soul from the Body are Demonstrated*, trans. Elizabeth Haldane in *Wadsworth Philosophy Source 3.0*, CD-ROM, ed. D. Kolak, Wadsworth Publishing, New York, 38–47.

⁶ See Lyons, J. D., “Descartes and Modern Imagination,” *Philosophy and Literature* 23/3 (October 1999): 302-312 and Sepper, D. L., *Descartes’s Imagination: Proportion, Images, and the Activity of Thinking*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999, for counterexamples to the received view that Descartes construed the imagination as unreliable.

⁷ Spinoza, B., *On the Improvement of the Understanding*, Echo Library Publishing, Middlesex, England, 2006, 30. Spinoza goes on to argue that it is reason and understanding that are able to separate clear and distinct ideas while the imagination is what confuses the matter with its illusions.

⁸ Locke, J., *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in *Wadsworth Philosophy Source 3.0*, CD-ROM, ed. D. Kolak, Wadsworth Publishing, New York, 161, 299.

though, are only *representative* of reality. The mind arranges these simple ideas into complex ones, which requires “judgment” (i.e., reason) so that one carefully separates ideas and is not “misled by similitude and by affinity to take one thing for another.”⁹ Within this context, Locke makes a distinction between “wit” and “judgment” whereby wit tends toward the pleasurable and fanciful world of entertainment and judgment toward the toilsome and noble world of knowledge. Language associated with the latter must be clear and precise, while language associated with the former is of the lesser order of metaphor, figures of speech, and poetry, which are “perfect cheats” because they do not “speak of things as they are.”¹⁰ The imagination, for Locke, is of this lesser order as it deals with the non-real while empirical reason addresses the real.

Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism exalt human reason as the supreme cognitive faculty for knowing reality. Neither approach, says David Gouwens, “could adequately account for the faculty of imagination or for aesthetics as a realm of activity. For rationalism, the imagination did not possess the clarity of rational ideas; for empiricism, the imagination seemed to lack the concreteness and vividness of sense-impression.”¹¹ Consequently, the imagination concerns itself with felicity and feelings, with fascination and emotion, rather than the exactitude of human reason, thereby *binding* the imagination’s cognitive operations to the non-real.

3. Prometheus Unbound

Lest we think that Prometheus remains bound to the rock of the Enlightenment forever, the renowned Hercules scales the Caucasus Mountains to free Prometheus from his tormenting captivity, being rewarded with the secret for obtaining the golden apples of Hesperides. Immanuel Kant’s efforts to resolve the dilemmas facing the rationalist and empiricist traditions are no less herculean as he combines elements from both by proposing a new method for the validation of scientific inquiry. Drawing from the empiricist tradition, Kant contends that our sensate experiences provide the content for cognition while our understanding provides the forms by which we grasp our experiences.¹² Yet, how are we to synthesize these two branches of knowledge? Kant surmises that it is the “transcendental function of the imagination,” with its “productive” and “reproductive” capacities, that synthesizes these two branches of knowledge, “for without this transcendental function no

⁹ Locke, J., *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 80.

¹⁰ Locke, J., *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 289.

¹¹ Gouwens, D. J., *Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of the Imagination*, Peter Lang, New York, 1989, 17. Paul Avis also makes the point: “The modernity that stems from the Enlightenment... privileges *logos* over against *eidōs*. The former is hailed as the vehicle of knowledge, mastery, and progress; the latter dismissed as the source of ignorance, superstition, and illusion. The first path to truth; the second to falsity (*God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology*, Routledge, London, 1999, 22).

¹² Kant argues that “it may well be that even our empirical knowledge is made up of what we receive through the impressions (of the senses) and of what our own faculty of knowledge supplies from itself” (Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Smith, Macmillan, London, 1964, 24).

concepts of objects would themselves make up a unitary experience.”¹³ Kant’s unbinding of the imagination and championing it as the quintessential expression of human freedom, although limited to the realm of art, sets the stage for the Romantic period as the poetic response to the mechanistic worldview of the sciences.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge demonstrates his affinity for the German Idealist, Immanuel Kant, when he refers to the imagination as having the power to “shape into one” directly correlating it with *Einbildungskraft*, the term Kant used to identify the productive imagination.¹⁴ Although Coleridge distinguishes two aspects of the imagination, one as primary and the other secondary, it is the secondary that Coleridge describes as a “synthetic and magical power” with the ability to usurp the strictures of logic by “balancing and reconciling opposite or discordant qualities” and the faculties of natural perception by integrating a “sense of novelty and freshness [into] old and familiar objects.”¹⁵ This Romantic construal of the imagination advocated by the likes of William Wordsworth, Percy B. Shelley, William Blake, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and others, comes to value novelty, nostalgia, emotional intuition, and an acute awareness of feelings and emotions, all within an autonomous realm of poetic discourse.

In Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, he circumscribes the limits of the productive imagination, despite his advocacy for a “free playing” imagination in *Critique of Reason*. It is not that he denies the imagination its autonomy, which actually unbinds it from its Cartesian chords, but rather confines this autonomy to the realm of art where he disassociates reason from feeling.¹⁶ In doing so, “the judgment of taste, therefore, is not a cognitive judgment, and so not logical, but is aesthetic, ... *it is one whose determining ground cannot be other than subjective.*”¹⁷ Despite Kant’s well-intentioned efforts to free Prometheus, he has established a trajectory for the romantic ideal of art-for-art’s-sake that not only emboldens the romantics in their opposition to science but also reinforces the values of aesthetic humanism that abdicates any sort of authorial/artistic intention such that meaning arises from the free interplay between interpreter and a particular text where textual signs have no reference point beyond themselves.

4. Prometheus the Bringer of Fire

If this is the case, Kant’s subjectivism does not merely continue into the 19th century but turns further in on itself, providing the impetus for two kinds of relativism present today — individualistic and communitarian.¹⁸ This pervasive ethos becomes the backdrop for philosophers like Arthur Schopenhauer and

¹³ Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, 144, 146.

¹⁴ Coleridge, S. T., *Biographia Literaria*, in Coleridge, S. T., *The Major Works*, OUP, Oxford, 2008, 239.

¹⁵ Coleridge, S. T., *Biographia Literaria*, 319.

¹⁶ Kant, I., *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. C. Meredith, in *Wordsworth Philosophy Source 3.0*, CD-ROM, ed. D. Kolak, Wadsworth Publishing, New York, 10–16.

¹⁷ Kant, I., *Critique of Judgment*, 20. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ Murphy, F., *Christ the Form of Beauty: A Study in Theology and Literature*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1995, 29.

Friedrich Nietzsche who bring the fire of a *postmodern aestheticism*.¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, in his provocative work, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, announces in prophetic tone that “God is dead!”²⁰ What, though, does Nietzsche mean by this bold assertion? Why is it not simply *his* interpretation or “most enduring lie?”²¹ Surely, Nietzsche draws his conclusions from within a particular frame of reference? This in fact is his sneering criticism of modernity as he attempts to throw off traditional forms of authority: historical, political, religious, moral, and authorial. Not even science with its claims to neutrality and objectivity are unbiased, for “there simply is no science ‘without presuppositions.’”²² There are no facts, only interpretations. There is no single meaning but meanings *ad infinitum*, what Nietzsche calls “perspectivism.”²³

Nietzsche’s perspectivism desires to overcome the supposed chasm that separates this world and the “true” world. In doing so, humanity must give shape and form to the world through its imaginative “will to power,” yet how humanity does so is not through referential language but through the language of metaphor. Chaos is accessorized with human speech to hide the horrors of this world, as Nietzsche maintains, “for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*.”²⁴ For Nietzsche, there is no ultimate reference point, no unity of being that grounds the true, the good, and the beautiful —“God is dead!” Reality consists of strife and destruction where one’s personal “will to illusion” creates a façade that attempts to mask this painful existence, *à la* Arthur Schopenhauer.²⁵

The promulgation of the Nietzschean imagination in postmodern culture, which finds its roots in Schopenhauer and dawn in thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Derrida, begins to lull and dull our sensibilities for the real as we are inundated with reality-indifferent messages that reinforce the norms of deconstruction, relativism, plurality of meaning *ad infinitum*, and nostalgia. Richard

¹⁹ Defining postmodernity is illusive and highly contested (See Jenks, Ch., *What Is Postmodernism?* St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1987). Edward Farley offers an apt definition that includes two important and interrelated senses: the radical critique of and cultural shift away from modernity (Farley, *Faith and Beauty*, 2-6). Many also identify this shift as the “postmodern turn or condition” (See Jameson, F., *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1991 and Lyotard, J.-F., *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984). To understand beauty’s fate in contemporary theology, we must come to grips with this shift (See Kevin Vanhoozer’s introductory essay, “Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, 3–25, detailing the impact of postmodernity on “modes of thought and embodiment”).

²⁰ Nietzsche, F., *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. T. Common, in *Wadsworth Philosophy Source 3.0*, CD-ROM, ed. D. Kolak, Wadsworth Publishing, New York, 2.

²¹ Nietzsche, F., *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. W. Kaufmann, Vintage Books, New York, 1974, 283.

²² Nietzsche, F., *The Gay Science*, 281.

²³ Nietzsche, F., *Will to Power*, Vintage Books, New York, 1968, § 481.

²⁴ Nietzsche, F., *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. W. Kaufmann, Vintage Books, New York, 1967, §5.

²⁵ Nietzsche, F., *The Birth of Tragedy*, §1–4, 16–17. Arthur Schopenhauer provides much of the impetus for Nietzsche’s thought, not to mention the German musician Wilhelm Wagner. The main idea of Schopenhauer’s aesthetic, found in *Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Dover Publications, New York, 1966, is that art and beauty are an escape from the evil travails and misery of existence, which makes life tolerable. It is evident from this point that Schopenhauer’s thought echoes through Nietzsche, bequeathing a reticence for beauty into the postmodern psyche.

Kearney aptly notes the irony of the situation: “One of the greatest paradoxes of contemporary culture is that at a time when the image reigns supreme the very notion of a creative human imagination seems under mounting threat.” There is no reality, only vain imaginings, for “we are at an impasse where the very rapport between imagination and reality seems not only inverted but subverted altogether.”²⁶

5. Dehumanization and the Dignity of Human Being

Intimated in this brief historical survey are ruminations of various dehumanizing tendencies that ultimately denigrate human dignity and grate against our understanding of human being. If we gravitate to an Enlightenment mode of thinking, human imagining, if acknowledged at all, becomes merely mimetic and deceptive because of its inability to distinguish between the real and the non-real. Such notions relegate human imagining to an inferior status. To be sure, the Enlightenment, with its turn toward human subjectivity amidst the ongoing renaissance in education, science, and politics, provides humanity with several humanizing reforms. Yet, it seems that the Enlightenment’s turn toward human subjectivity as the basis for meaning and reference actually instantiates an anthropological and cosmological reductionism, making humanity the measure of all things and reducing the cosmos merely to material existence. Such reductionisms leave humanity emaciated and devoid of wonder, feeling, and emotion.²⁷ It is no surprise when Romantics like W. B. Yeats deride Descartes, Locke, and Newton for their degradation of the imagination, indicting them as they “took away the world and gave us its excrement instead.”²⁸

We may be tempted to cast our lots with Kant since he is the one who frees Prometheus from the petrified rock of the Enlightenment. Yet, Kant’s construal of judgment is closely aligned with an autonomous freedom that champions the imagination as that which “freely produces its own law,” having no accountability beyond itself.²⁹ As such, many of the Romantics conflate human reason with the imagination hailing that humanity has reached its apogee. Such extravagant claims play a significant role in the aesthetic discourse during the Romantic period, conveying the ideal side of the arts where sentimentality, nostalgia, and novelty reign as Friedrich Schelling notes in his *Philosophy of Art*.³⁰ These romantic ideals,

²⁶ Kearney, R., *The Wake of the Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988, 3.

²⁷ See von Balthasar, H. U., *Love Alone Is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2004, 15–30, 31–50 for further explanations regarding these reductionisms.

²⁸ Yeats, W. B., *Explorations*, Scribner, London, 1989, 325.

²⁹ Warnock, M., *Imagination*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1976, 49.

³⁰ Schelling, F., *Philosophy of Art*, trans. D. Stott, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989, 24. C. M. Bora details these same Romantic tendencies, in *The Romantic Imagination*, Galaxy Books, New York, 1961. Aesthetic theory, during this period, incorporated beauty and the imagination into its self-understanding, evidenced in the following works: Tolstoy, L., *What Is Art?*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky, Penguin Group, New York, 1995, Schlegel, F., “The Limits of the Beautiful,” in *The Aesthetic and Miscellaneous Works of Friedrich Schlegel*, trans. E. Millington, H. Bohn, London, 1849, Hegel, G., “Introduction,” *Aesthetics: Lectures in Fine Art*, trans. T. Knox, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, and Schiller, F., “Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man,” in *Essays*, trans. W. Hinderer and D. O. Dahlstrom, Continuum, New York, 1993.

though, “misrepresent reality through evading or trivializing evil, are emotionally self-indulgent, and avoid appropriate costly action.”³¹ Romanticism’s overindulgence leads to disillusionment as humanist hopes begin to erode at the hands of political upheavals, societal conflicts, capitalistic exploitations, and the ravaging environmental effects of industrialization.

Nietzsche seeks to overcome this disillusionment as humanity forms and fashions its own world through its imaginative “will to power.” Such thinking, though, encourages an uninhibited imagination that leads to a pompous and solipsistic understanding of the human self as one proceeds to play with various images *ad infinitum*. As a result, the unfettered imagination constructs fantastical worlds disconnected from the reality of the true, the good, and the beautiful. Efforts to erect one’s own reality, in search of meaning, actually result in a net loss of meaning since humanity denies the real world while becoming enchanted with its own.

This gives rise to narcissistic obsessions and illusions of grandeur. Sartre depicts this neurotic life as one filled with “so many amorous scenes” created by the schizophrenic imagination that “it is not only because his real love has been disappointed, but because he is no longer capable of loving.”³² Consequently, this life has little regard for others as it seeks to possess and own that which it desires. Ultimately, humanity drowns in a sea of meaninglessness, self-delusion, and nothingness, as the life it has tried to create on its own is void of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

6. The Imagination as a Disposition of Human Being

Fundamentally, these views of the imagination stem from varying existential assumptions about God, the world, and ourselves. The common feature, whether the imagination is maligned or extolled, is the disassociation of the imagination from an objective, metaphysical reality, what the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar identified as the *esse univocum* of Duns Scotus (Being as a Concept)³³ and Meister Eckhart (Being as God).³⁴ This reductionism is “the turning from Being to mental concepts, from things (and God) existing *in themselves* to

³¹ Begbie, J., “Beauty, Sentimentality, and the Arts,” in *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, ed. D. Treier, M. Husbands, and R. Lundin, InterVarsity, Downers Grove, IL, 2007, 45–69, here 47.

³² Sartre, J.-P., *The Psychology of the Imagination*, Citadel Press, New York, 1972, 212.

³³ von Balthasar, H. U., *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. O. Davies, A. Louth, J. Saward, and M. Simon, vol. 5 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, ed. J. Fessio and J. Riches, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1991, 9–47. (Subsequent references to *The Glory of the Lord* are referred to by the abbreviation *GL*). Duns Scotus’s notion of *esse univocum*, according to Balthasar, posits that all reality rests on “an undifferentiated and neutral sphere of ‘existence,’” laying the groundwork for modern science (*GL* V, 18). Consequently, “we see immediately that Being which is formalized to this extent can still just possess the inner modalities of unity, truth and goodness, but no longer that of transcendental beauty.” Therefore, “since Scotist formalism provides the model for the scientific thinking of our day, it is to be expected that the consciousness of any transcendental glory must be alien to it” (*GL* V, 13).

³⁴ Meister Eckhart’s notion of *esse univocum*, according to Balthasar, subsumes all of being into God such that “the absolute point of identity with the divine” is found within “the subject” (*GL* V, 46). Consequently, “the glory of the Absolute is called into question by the fact that it has little or no remaining space in which and through which it can become manifest” (*GL* V, 13).

things conceived as existing ‘for me’ and ‘from me.’ From now on, the subject can regard itself as legislative reason.”³⁵ If, however, we posit an objective reality created by God and ascertained by properly perceiving subjects, then the imagination can become a disposition of human being that brings continuity to the self, connecting the past through memory and the future through vision with the present.

With the unbinding of the imagination by Kant and its subsequent coronation by the Romantics, the active, creative powers of the imagination were on display. If we continue from our premise of an objective reality subjectively perceived, we see that the imagination not only retains this active component but also manifests a passive element as well. Balthasar makes the point where he inverts the Romantic emphasis on the purely creative imagination:

This is why the *Einbildungskraft* (“imagination”) which primarily projects from within toward the exterior, ought rather to be called *Ausbildungskraft* (“power-to-externalize-images”), whereas the process of *Ausbildung* (“education,” “formation,” “development,”), in which the objective content of images is assimilated from the outside to the interior, ought rather to be called *Einbildung* (“imaging,” or “imagining,” that is, interiorizing external images).³⁶

By privileging objective reality as that which educates, forms, shapes, or develops our imaginations, Balthasar redefines *Einbildungskraft* in terms of *Ausbildungskraft*. This redefinition seems to counter the Kantian idea of *Einbildungskraft* that emphasizes the subjective human power of making images, yet not entirely. Balthasar does think that Kant’s description of the creative power of the imagination is appropriate so long as it is prepared by the Holy Spirit in its obedient orientation to Jesus Christ, finding fulfillment in him.³⁷

Taking the active and passive components of the imagination into account, we can further understand the imagination as that “which gives form to thought,”³⁸ what the Venerable 19th c. Catholic Cardinal John Henry Newman identifies as “an intellectual act, ... [which] has the means, ... of stimulating those powers of the mind from which action proceeds.”³⁹ Newman continues noting that “the

³⁵ Balthasar, H. U., *GL V*, 28. Cf. von Balthasar, H. U., *Seeing the Form*, trans. E. Leiva-Merikakis, vol. 1 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, ed. J. Fessio and J. Riches, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1982, 72. Although Hans Urs von Balthasar attributes the demise of western metaphysics to Duns Scotus and Meister Eckhart (*GL V*, 12–20), he notes that “only with Descartes does philosophy become dependent on the scientific ideal of the rising natural sciences, thereby beginning its rift with theology. And only from this point onwards do philosophers become eager to experiment with the question of what reason can accomplish without the aid of revelation and what the possibilities are for a pure nature without grace” (*GL I*, 72), lending further support to our previous arguments.

³⁶ Balthasar, H. U., *GL I*, 178–179.

³⁷ Balthasar, H. U., *GL I*, pp. 177–179.

³⁸ MacDonald, G., “The Imagination: Its Function and Its Culture,” in *A Dish of Orts*, Edwin Dalton, London, 1908; repr., BiblioBazaar Reproductions, 2007, 12.

³⁹ Newman, J. H. C., *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Notre Dame University Press, South Bend, IN, 2006, 86.

imagination may be said...to be of a practical nature, inasmuch as it leads to practice indirectly by the action of its object upon the affections.”⁴⁰

What seems to materialize, then, is the idea that the imagination is a “holistic faculty ... that relates specifically to the thinking or feeling or willing faculties” that see[s] the end from the beginning and...anticipate[s] what it will be like to arrive at our destination,” as Paul Avis notes.⁴¹ As such, “the imagination becomes constitutive of the self and is an element in the continuity of the self from past to present and future, the imagination emerges as a *disposition*” such that “one who with originality and vision adheres to the picture of the ideal self and allows it to inform his entire life ..., [being] oriented to sympathy, insight, and understanding.”⁴² Such an understanding of human imagining restores dignity to human beings, particularly when we allow what Søren Kierkegaard calls the “ideal self,” christologically understood, to inform our entire lives. In so doing, our lives become meaningful as we orient ourselves towards a compassionate existence in pursuit of the true, the good, and the beautiful.⁴³

7. Conclusion

The human imagination is instrumental to human identity, for it is “at the core of what it means to be human.”⁴⁴ To be sure, the imagination is not a superior human faculty, for it too has the ability to create fantastical, fictitious worlds of our own making. These dangers, though, are no more damning for the imagination than logical fallacies are for our capacity to reason. By being aware of the limitations of the imagination, we can elude these hazardous trappings. To *circumvent* them, though, we must *take captive every thought to Christ* (2 Cor 10:5). In doing so, human imagining can lead to human flourishing as human beings employ their imaginations to envision the numerous possibilities for cultivating the true, the good, and the beautiful for the common good of a society. After all, as MacDonald urges, “a wise imagination...is the best guide that man or woman can have, for it is not the things we see the most clearly that influence us the most powerfully.”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Newman, J. H. C., *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 82.

⁴¹ Avis, P., *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology*, Routledge, London, 1999, 79. Similarly, Mary Warnock identifies the imagination as that which “brings ideas together, and which is at work to create the forms of things which seem to speak to us of the universal, and which at the same time necessarily cause in us feelings of love and awe” (Warnock, M., *Imagination*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1976, 83–84).

⁴² Gouwens, D., “Kierkegaard on the Ethical Imagination,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 10 (1982): 216. Emphasis added.

⁴³ Gouwens summarizes Kierkegaard’s understanding of the ethical person who pursues the “ideal self” where the religious imagination “emerges as a contrast to the ethical” in that “the ethical person may become increasingly aware of the depths and complexities of the ethical task, and increasingly aware of the impossibility of completing those movements.” As such, “Christ presents himself to the ethical imagination not as a glorious internally-generated ideal, but as the suffering God-man who atones for sin — an offense to the self-reliance of the imagination as well as the reason. The imagination cannot, any more than the reason, grasp the divine” (Gouwens, “Kierkegaard on the Ethical Imagination,” 217).

⁴⁴ Hart, T., “Imagining Evangelical Theology,” in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. J. Stackhouse, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2000, 198–199.

⁴⁵ MacDonald, G., *A Dish of Orts*, 32–33, 38.