Ways of Imagining: A New Interpretation of Sartre's Notion of Imagination

Lior Levy

In the conclusion to The Imaginary *Jean-Paul Sartre draws attention to the centrality of imagination in human life, describing it as a constitutive structure of consciousness. Imagination, according to him, is not a contingent feature of consciousness, but one of its essential features. This essay re-examines Sartre's notion of imagination, arguing that current interpretations do not exhaust its meaning. Beginning with a consideration of dichotomies that dominate his theory of imagination—such as those between present, material objects and absent images, or real entities and fictional creations, as well as interpretative responses to them—the essay moves on to explore the possibility of locating a different sense of imagination in his work, one which is irreducible to such oppositions. Focusing on Sartre's example of the work of an impersonator, this essay advances the idea that the playful activity of impersonators and actors enables the spectators who are watching them to explore novel and often unfamiliar connections between objects in the world. Imagination, according to this interpretation, enriches and augments perception, rather than suspends or replaces it with mental images. This new interpretation of Sartre's notion of imagination places him in proximity to Wittgenstein's discussion of 'aspect-seeing' in* Philosophical Investigations. *However, whereas Wittgenstein's discussion of 'aspect-seeing' can lead to the conclusion that it is impossible to draw a line between perceiving and imagining, the notion of imagination operative in Sartre's example enables us to maintain and explain the differences between ordinary and 'imaginative' perception.*

1. Introduction: Rethinking Sartre's Notion of Imagination

In the conclusion to *The Imaginary,* Jean-Paul Sartre draws attention to the centrality of imagination in human life. He describes imagination as 'a constitutive structure' of consciousness, emphasizing that it is not a contingent feature of consciousness, but rather pertains to its very essence.[1] And since consciousness defines the human, imagination is a necessary feature of every human being. As Sartre himself puts it, 'imagination … is … an essential and transcendental characteristic of consciousness'.[2]

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1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: A phenomenological psychology of the imagination*, trans. Johnathan Webber (London: Routledge, 2004), 179.

2 Ibid., 188.

Following Sartre's remarks, numerous commentators have addressed the centrality of imagination in his work.[3] Despite their different perspectives and foci, these and other interpretations present Sartre's conception of imagination along similar lines, arguing that he understands imagining as an activity by means of which one breaks off from the real.[4] Imagining, then, is an activity that opens a gap between consciousness and the world, such that it allows humans to 'nihilate the world—the domain of the perceptually given, the empirically real—in order to enter a realm in which an unhindered spontaneity becomes possible'.[5] This line of thinking is loyal to Sartre's insistence that human imagination epitomizes freedom. In allowing consciousness to withdraw from experience, imagination manifests 'the potential of consciousness to live and gain distance from the ensnaring presence of the perceptual world'.[6] Imagination is understood as a negating force, able to annul reality and suspend our current, pragmatic engagements with it.

This interpretation in turn gave rise to a critique of Sartre's theory of imagination. Paul Ricoeur famously argued that in emphasizing its negating features, Sartre neglects the productive dimensions of imagination, dimensions which are most manifest in the creation of fiction. In fiction, imagination does not simply suspend reality in favour of its mirror image, the absent object, but rather produces new meaning which is irreal.[7] Coming from a somewhat related direction, Edward Casey criticized Sartre's theory of the *analogon*, the object that mediates perception and imagination, for introducing presence into the (allegedly) purified conscious field.[8] Casey's criticism borrows language from Martin Heidegger, whose critique of the philosophical prioritization of the present points to the preference given to 'beings' (understood as entities that are fully present to the mind's inspection) over 'Being' (the condition for the possibility of all that is). Thus, the critique against Sartre's thinking of imagination in terms of 'presence' includes an argument against the reduction of imagination to the experience of present and existent things over and above its temporal modalities and its relationship to potentiality.[9]

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3   See, for example, Thomas Busch, 'Sartre and Ricoeur on Imagination', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 50 (1997), 507–518; Edward Casey, 'Sartre on Imagination', in Paul Arthur Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (La Salle: Open Court, 1981), 139–166; Thomas Flynn, 'Sartre as a Philosopher of Imagination', *Philosophy Today* 50 (2006), 106–112; Beata Stawarska, 'Sartre and Husserl's *Ideen*: Phenomenology and Imagination', in Jack Reynolds and Steve Churchill (eds), *Sartre: Key Concepts* (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 12–31.

4   Busch, 'Sartre and Ricoeur on Imagination', 507.

5   Casey, 'Sartre on Imagination', 145.

6   Stawarska, 'Sartre and Husserl's *Ideen*', 28.

7   Paul Ricoeur, 'Sartre and Ryle on Imagination', in Paul Arthur Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (La Salle: Open Court, 1991), 167–178, at 167. This critique is repeated in Busch, 'Sartre and Ricoeur on Imagination', 507–518 and in Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining* (London: HarperCollins, 1991).

8   Casey, 'Sartre on Imagination', 149.

9   Heidegger's critique was famously developed by Jacques Derrida. Presence and absence are central concepts in Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence and are related to the bifurcation of speech and writing, as well as signified and signifier. The scope of this essay does not allow me to examine the manner in which the details of Derrida's criticism underlie interpretations of Sartre's theory of imagination in terms of 'presence'. For an account of Derrida's relationship to Sartre and to the question of presence, see Gavin Rae, 'Disharmonious Continuity: Critiquing Presence with Sartre and Derrida', *Sartre Studies International* 23 (2017), 58–81.
      I elaborate on the meaning of 'presence' in the context of Sartre's theory of imagination in the next section.

In an attempt to defend Sartrean imagination from such criticisms, several commentators reconstructed Sartre's account to show that it does acknowledge such productive dimensions.[10] Imagination, according to their interpretations, does not merely *represent* absent objects and is not confined to the paradigm of presence. In this sense, it is not reality-bound, as Ricoeur, for example, argued. Instead, it 'operates in relative independence from perceptual experience … as spontaneous and self-determined creativity'.[11]

Nonetheless, both the critiques of Sartre's conception of imagination and the consequent responses to these critiques understand his notion of imagination through binary oppositions: between presence and absence (in other words, the tension between thinking about the imaginary through the paradigm of existing perceptual objects and thinking of it as related to the nonexistent), and between reality and 'irreality' (in other words, taking the imaginary to be a mere negation of the real, its mirror image, or taking it to be fictional, an object that does not mimic reality). In this respect, both strands of interpretations of Sartrean imagination approach it through a set of dichotomies which, it must be granted, seem to dominate *The Imaginary*.

Indeed, Sartre's tendency for thinking in dualistic terms manifests itself in his theory of imagination, as well as in his philosophy as a whole. As we already briefly observed, in the context of his analyses of imagination, he demarcates the real from the irreal, and imagination from perception and memory.[12] Yet elsewhere, too, such oppositions appear. In *Being and Nothingness*, for example, he contrasts the *pour-soi* (for-itself) with the *en-soi* (in-itself), defining the first as an inert, self-identical, substance-like being,[13] and the latter as non-being or nothingness, a non-identical, self-escaping relation to otherness.[14] His account of the self-other relationship in the same text depicts it as fraught with an irreconcilable tension between subject and object, a tension that cannot be resolved by mediation.[15] These dichotomies seem to exhaust the field of inquiry, positing an anti-thesis in relation to each thesis and forcing thought into one of the two positions that were laid out for it. This thinking follows an antagonistic logic that seemingly refuses a third position, in which reconciliation between the two binary terms can occur. Because of this, one may ask how these opposing poles can consequently come into contact with one another—as they clearly do throughout human life. As they stand, these dichotomies reduce the complexity and richness of human life, of human interactions and, more relevant to our case, of activities and accomplishments of imagination into rudimental,

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10   Beata Stawarska, 'Defining Imagination: Sartre between Husserl and Janet', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 4 (2005), 133–153; Lior Levy, 'Sartre and Ricoeur on Productive Imagination', *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 52 (2014), 43–60.

11   Stawarska, 'Defining Imagination', 151.

12   Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 12–14; 136; 8–9; 181.

13   Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, ed. Richard Moran, trans. Sarah Richmond (London: Routledge, 2018), 28.

14   Ibid., 9.

15   Ibid., 380.

unitary phenomena. Yet, the problem with these accounts is not that they are logically impossible, but rather that they provide a simplified account of what it means to be human, a subject involved in the world through various interactions and activities, among them different imaginative projects.

Nevertheless, although Sartre himself rejects complete mediation or reconciliation between those opposed poles outlined above, he suggests that they coexist, ambiguously, in human beings. To be human means to live the unresolved tension between thinghood and freedom, or facticity and transcendence.[16] Following this position as a clue, can we perhaps locate an alternative to the sets of dichotomies that seem to dominate Sartre's theory of imagination? Is there a different sense of imagination operative in his work, whose meaning resides outside the opposition between the real and the irreal, between presence and absence?

This question is worth exploring, I believe, because imagination, as Sartre conceives of it, is crucial to human life as a whole. Reconsidering what it could mean to imagine can allow us to think anew about how imagination shapes human life, and what it means to be the sort of creatures for whom different possibilities of imagining are available. In what follows, I want to focus on an example in *The Imaginary*, the example of the actress Claire Franconay impersonating Maurice Chevalier which, based on my reading, implies the existence of an alternative model of imagination.[17] This model is not a replacement for Sartre's more recognizable theory of imagination, but an alternative whose existence attests to the fact that imagination is not a monolithic mental power, but a label that groups together numerous activities. Sartre's lectures and notes on the theatre, prepared and published later in his philosophical career, provide further basis for developing the notion of imagination that I find operative in this unique, early example. The scope of this essay does not allow me to study Sartre's conception of acting, but I offer an analysis of the examples of impersonations in *The Imaginary* as a preliminary account of a notion of imagination that does not involve a split between present objects and absent images, or real entities and irreal, fictional creations.[18] The playful activity of impersonators and

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16 Sartre's discussion of the phenomenon of bad faith examines various attempts to escape this tension. Ibid., 96–116.

17 Recently, Kathleen Lennon used this example to demonstrate that a schism dominates Sartre's theory of imagination. In her reading, Francony's body is an analogue for the absent figure of Chevalier, who is imagined—that is, given as existing elsewhere (i.e., not on or through her body). See Kathleen Lennon, *Imagination and the Imaginary*, (London: Routledge, 2015). Lennon does not examine the detailed discussion of Franconay's impression; she focuses on Sartre's claim that we did not see Franconay's physical features, but rather Chevalier's and she takes this claim to be instantiating the distinctions that dominate Sartre's thinking: for example, 'between the present and the absent, being and nothing, the perceived and the imagined' (Ibid., 33). She is of course correct in noting that Sartre's theory is dominated by a bifurcation between the imaginary and the real. However, perhaps because she takes such dichotomies to be 'contrary to the direction of thought which is being defended in this work [i.e., Lennon's book]' (32), she does not delve into the example, but rather uses a segment of the text to examine how this division plays itself out in Sartre's ontology in *Being and Nothingness*. I hope to show that a closer and more detailed reading of the impersonator example allows us to develop a different, non-dichotomous line of thinking from within Sartre's work.

18 I develop an account of Sartre's conception of acting in Lior Levy, 'The Image and the Act - Sartre on Dramatic Theatre', in Tom Stern (ed.), *The Philosophy of Theatre, Drama and Acting*. (London: Rowman and Littlefield), 89–109.

actors can present the world itself anew, and the imagination of spectators watching actors is free to explore novel and often unfamiliar connections between objects and persons in the world.

I call this notion of imagination 'dynamic imagination' because, on the one hand, it focuses on the activity of imagining rather than on its end results and, on the other, it draws attention to consciousness's apprehension of the world as having the potential (or *dunamis*) to support and sustain novel connections between things, as opposed to grasping the world as an array of fully actualized and distinct real or irreal entities. This account presents one of imagination's modalities; it is not intended to replace the other conceptions of imagination that Sartre explores in his philosophical and his literary works. At the same time, the existence of various models of imagination does not amount to a shortcoming or an inconsistency in his conception of imagination. Instead, in gesturing towards this alternative account, Sartre highlights the wealth of possibilities embedded in human imagination.[19] By anchoring the 'clue' for this alternative account in the example of the impersonator, Sartre invites us to consider the work of the artist, rather than that of the philosopher, as a source for approaching the multifaceted nature of imagination. In this respect, the implicit account outlined in *The Imaginary* and developed more explicitly in the later works on the theatre suggests that there are limits to conceptual thought, when it is used as a means to provide an all-encompassing account of imagination. Such attempts can lead to a narrowing down of the wealth of possibilities embedded in imagination. The activity of the impersonator and the actor, on the other hand, which playfully engages with the spectators' imagination, is a source for broadening and renewing the philosophical understanding of the topic.

As Sartre's theory of imagination has been studied thoroughly, I will not review it here at length. Instead, I will provide a short account of the standard interpretation of his theory, followed by a review of a few critiques of this view that stress his prioritization of presence and tendency to think in binary terms. After the limits of the standard notion of imagination have been explored, I will move on to develop the alternative account of dynamic imagination by examining Sartre's example of the impersonator in *The Imaginary*. This example will be studied in relation to Wittgenstein's discussion of 'aspect-seeing' in *Philosophical Investigations*. By exploring the relationship between Sartre's and Wittgenstein's positions, I will offer a phenomenological account of dynamic imagination and its relationship to the primary notion of imagination operative in the text.

2. Imagination in *The Imaginary*: The Standard Account

Using the reflective method of phenomenology, Sartre sets out to describe and classify the distinctive characteristics of image-consciousness, those features that make it what

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19   In this respect, Sartre's position resembles the view developed in Richard Moran, 'The Expression of Feeling in Imagination', *The Philosophical Review* 103 (1994), 75–106, at 86–87, as well as Elisabeth Camp, 'Two Varieties of Literary Imagination: Metaphor, Fiction and Thought Experiments', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33 (2009), 107–130, at 111–116.

it is—an act of imagination, rather than one of perception or thought. Rejecting the traditional philosophical account of imagination in terms of mental images, he insists that imagining does not consist in the inspection of mental entities with the mind's eye. This mentalist understanding of imagination, he continues, results in a distorted conception of consciousness. If one follows the mentalist assumption that mental images resemble and represent external objects, then one must conclude that the image possesses the quantities and qualities of the object. However, if consciousness were to contain such ideas (which replicate objects), then its movement would be arrested and 'its unity would be broken by the inassimilable, opaque screen'.[20] Refusing to ossify consciousness, he rejects the model of the mind as a container for mental content. Since consciousness is not a thing-like entity, and it is therefore a mistake to reduce it to pure presence, a different way of understanding imagination must be sought.

As an alternative, Sartre suggests that imagination is an activity through which consciousness intends the world (other such activities are perception and thought). Consciousness is defined by intentionality.[21] It is a relation to things, to otherness, rather than a thing itself. Through different intentional acts, consciousness posits things as meaningful objects, objects embedded with a particular meaning. In imagining, objects are intended or posited as absent or irreal.[22] Unlike perceiving, which reveals an existing world, imagining grasps *nothing*, says Sartre. Yet, the act of imagining is not in itself nothing, for 'it is in the very nature of consciousness to be intentional and consciousness that ceased to be consciousness *of* something would thereby cease to exist'.[23]

In imagining, consciousness moves beyond real, existing things, towards absent or irreal objects. One imagines, for example, on the occasion of looking at photographs, drawings, and paintings. The former are actual perceptible things, material objects that possess certain properties; printed-paper, canvases, wooden frames, ink, and layers of paint are plainly visible things with a specific gloss, texture, density, and size. The painting is a real thing, 'the result of the brush strokes, the impasting of the canvas, its grain, the varnish spread over the colors'.[24] Yet, when intending a painting imaginatively, Sartre argues, something else is present, although not literally *in* the canvas, but *beyond* it, in what he calls the irreal world.[25]

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20   Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 6.

21   Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's *Phenomenology*', trans. Joseph P. Fell, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 1 (1970), 4–5; Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 11; Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 23.

22   In fact, image-consciousness can posit its objects in four different ways. It can posit it 'as nonexistent, or as absent, or as existing elsewhere; it can also neutralize itself, which is to say not posit its object as existent' (Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 12). The first three positional acts can be translated into terms of presence: the object is posited as not present in reality as a whole (nonexistent); posited as not present in space (exists elsewhere); or posited as not concomitant with one's presence (absent). Only the last thesis, which does not really posit the object, is neutral with regard to the question of its presence or absence. The last thesis suspends positioning its object altogether.

23   Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 183.

24   Ibid., 189.

25   Ibid., 125–129.

When looking at Degas' *Swaying Dancer*, for instance, one sees the dancers in mid-performance, active, lively, and moving on stage. However, the painting itself, as a material object, is neither alive, nor active, nor moving. It consists of patches of paint and colour that function as analogues for the imperceptible objects—the living, moving dancers—that the former represent. In other words, the pictorial space, the space of the objects depicted in the painting, is not identical to the material space of the painting. The painting presents on its surface paint blots, lines, and figures; yet the absent-minded gaze of the dancer in the back is not clearly present, in the same way, in or on the painting. Even more intuitively, the deeply-bored Roquentin, who is suddenly overwhelmed by the black, knotty mass of the chestnut's roots, is not present in the signs printed on the page of the 2007 edition of *Nausea,* which I am reading now. According to Sartre, imaginary objects are irreducible to material and perceptible objects; whereas the latter are real objects, '[T]he work of art is an irreality'.[26] Acts of imagination are those by virtue of which one transcends the perceptually-given, sees that which is not present, or that which is present only as a 'perpetual elsewhere, a perpetual absence'.[27]

2.1. *Prioritization of Presence in* The Imaginary

Despite the emphasis on the negating power of consciousness which, in imagining, suspends the real, as well as on the irreality of imaginary objects, the analysis of image-consciousness in *The Imaginary* is understood to prioritize presence for two main reasons: first, Sartre insists that one always imagines through the mediation of analogues (for example, canvases, photographs, newspaper images, and also 'mental images' which, he speculates, are born from knowledge or emotions that animate or endow with sense certain kinaesthetic movements).[28] Analogues have positive, determinate qualities and are present to perceptual consciousness as things. Second and more crucially, absent objects intended through the mediation of analogues are also understood in terms of presence. They are present *as* absent or irreal things. An image, Sartre says, is 'the relation of consciousness to the object … a certain way in which consciousness *presents* to itself an object'.[29] He stresses, again, later in the book, that imaginative acts 'all act to "*make present*" an object … an absent object'.[30] This point is crucial for him, since he wishes to maintain that imagination presents nothingness or absence to consciousness in an intuitive manner.

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26   Ibid., 188.

27   Ibid., 193.

28   Unlike external analogues that can be studied and mapped by the descriptive, phenomenological method, mental images can only be known in a probable manner. This is because introspection yields both the matter—the mental analogue—and its transcendent, imagined object. The first does not leave a residue beyond the second. Sartre turns to experimental psychology, which produces probable knowledge alone (as opposed to the certainty of phenomenological studies), to study the nature of the mental image. He suggests that it is produced by kinaesthetic impressions that act as analogues for the imagined objects and are themselves 'provoked', for example, by eyeball movements (ibid., 78).

29   Ibid., 7; emphasis added.

30   Ibid., 19; emphasis added.

That is, imaginative acts present absence immediately, without the mediation of thought or perception. Despite the fact that the analogue is involved in the act of imagining, Sartre holds that consciousness does not deduce the absent object from it or add it after the analogue has been perceived. Or, put differently, the analogue plays a role in positioning the person imagining in relation to the irreal object but, once it has been established, the relation itself is direct and unmediated. Thus, Sartre concludes, what is imaginatively intended is 'given as absent to intuition'; it is 'intuitive-absent'.[31]

As noted in the introduction, Sartre's emphasis on the presentation of absence and the consequent restriction of imaginative acts to modes of presence are frequently criticized.[32] Critics point to his prioritization of perception, which is strengthened rather than weakened by his insistence that the image is unlike perception. Casey argues, for instance, that in framing imagination through its relation to perception (indeed thinking of it as perception's 'negative'), Sartre provides 'a systematic subordination of imagining to perceiving'.[33] Paul Ricoeur, too, argues that despite Sartre's attempts to differentiate imagination from perception, his analysis 'does not shake the privilege of the original in the slightest'.[34] This is because all instances of imaginative acts—from observing photographs to intending mental images—remain confined to their function of making '… an object present to myself'.[35]

These criticisms—that acts of the imagination are secondary and derivative to those of perception, and that they are confined to the presentation of objects and hence are unable to conjure the fictional and the unreal—are well-founded and stem from Sartre's own tendency to think in binary terms: presence versus absence, the real against the irreal. Yet, in pointing to the shortcomings of his account, these readings also remain caught in the binary logic that they criticize. For example, Ricoeur calls for a prioritization of the fictional over the real, thus preferring one term in Sartre's dichotomy, rather than rejecting the dichotomy altogether.[36] Moreover, attempts to defend Sartre's account from the charge of prioritization of presence also accept his binary logic of presence and absence. For instance, in arguing contra Ricoeur that Sartre develops a productive notion of imagination, manifested mostly in reading and writing, Beata Stawaska suggested that imagination can be thought of in terms of irreality.[37] And against Ricoeur's claim that

31   Ibid., 14.

32   Even authors who do not problematize the relationship between presence and absence in *The Imaginary* acknowledge the subordination of absence to presence in the text. See, for instance, Philip Blosser's discussion of Sartre's example of Beethoven symphony, where imagination is said to allow the symphony 'to present itself in some sense as absent' (Philip Blosser, 'The Status of Mental Images in Sartre's Theory of Consciousness', *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1986), 163–172, at 163).

33   Casey, 'Sartre on Imagination', 157.

34   Ricoeur, 'Sartre and Ryle', 170.

35   Ibid., 172. Ricoeur touches on the issue of the priority of presence in Sartre's analysis when he argues, for instance, that 'absence and presence are sub-classes of reality' (ibid., 171). Both absence and presence are instances of the real (or irreal) and not of the fictional.

36   Ricoeur, 'The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination and Feeling', *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978), 143–159, at 154.

37   Stawarska, 'Defining Imagination', 143–144.

Sartre approaches the objects of imagination in reproductive terms, I have suggested that he also thinks of its objects in fictional terms.[38] However, both arguments for and against Sartrean imagination understand it through the opposition between presence and absence, reality and irreality, which were taken to be characteristic of its objects.

While I do not argue that these accounts falsify or misrepresent Sartre's approach to imagination in *The Imaginary*, I do think that they focus on a particular aspect of the text and ignore other, less noticed dimensions. Understanding the activity of imagination solely through the prism that they offer narrows our understanding to a single variety of imagination, rather than seeing it through its wealth of manifestations. This is because the distinctions between the real and the imaginary or the fictional create a schism between imagination and the concrete world in which and on which imagination acts. This schism can prevent us from acknowledging the ways in which imaginative activities are grounded in and respond to the world, as well as the ways in which those activities enrich and renew it.

Before I offer an alternative to this standard view by addressing one neglected dimension in Sartre's theory of imagination, I want to examine the relationship between acts and objects in this theory. Recall that he opens his discussion with the claim that images are conscious acts rather than things.[39] In other words, to have an image means to perform some sort of conscious activity; having an image means relating to the world *imaginatively*—at least in the sense that it allows one to treat existent things as analogues for absent ones. Yet, rather than examining the activity of imagining itself, Sartre quickly moves in *The Imaginary* to discuss the specific objects toward which this activity is directed or with which it culminates. Whereas in the introduction he stressed the fact that the term 'image' indicates nothing but 'the relation of consciousness to the object … a certain way in which consciousness presents to itself an object',[40] in the much longer second chapter titled 'The Image Family' he dedicated the discussion almost in its entirety to 'objects that are also called images (portraits, reflections in the mirror, imitations, etc.)'.[41] Central to this chapter is the theory of the analogue, 'a certain matter that acts … as an equivalent of perception'.[42] Sartre groups different kinds of objects together as analoga, the contents of the imaginative acts.[43] Analoga—external or mental matter—provide consciousness with the opportunity of transcending real objects toward imaginary ones. Regardless of the manner in which one understands the term 'imaginary' in this context, it is clear that the emphasis is on *specific kinds of objects* in which imagining results, rather than on the activity itself: in imagining, one transcends the real object and arrives at the absent or the irreal one. Put differently, the analogue (a real, material object) transports consciousness beyond the given to the imaginary object, which is absent, irreal, or non-existent.

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38   Levy, 'Sartre and Ricoeur on Productive Imagination'.

39   Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 5; 16; 17.

40   Ibid., 7.

41   Ibid., 17.

42   Ibid., 18.

43   Ibid., 53.

If we follow this line of thinking and try to use it to characterize the activity of imagining, then it seems that imagination substitutes one kind of object (real) for another (irreal). But substitution of real for irreal objects does not differentiate imaginative acts from other acts, like those of thinking. Consider the following example: in trying to solve a problem in geometry, I draw a triangle on a piece of paper. The sketch allows me to arrive at conclusions about the relationship between the angles in an isosceles triangle. My thought aims at the universal, ideal, and, in this respect, irreal properties of the triangle, but I arrive at them through the mediation of the concrete geometrical construction of the triangle that I see before me. In this process, I substitute one object for another: I use the real object as an opportunity to think about the irreal one.[44]

Yet, despite the structural similarity between the relationship between objects and acts, in the cases of imagining and thinking with the aid of images, the two acts are different. When Sartre gives the example of imagining his friend Pierre by means of looking at a photograph that depicts him, he provides an example of imagining; in my example, the transition from the drawing of the triangle to the ideal triangle is an instance of thinking (a specific kind of thought, thinking through images). I do not imagine the mathematical or geometrical proof, I conceive or think of it. As Sartre points out, in thinking, the specific details of the concrete isosceles are inconsequential, whereas in imagining, the specificity of the object is precisely what matters. For example, when I am conducting a thought experiment, it does not matter whether the person involved is Pierre or Jacques, but it matters a great deal when I am imagining. When I am reading a novel, for instance, I am imagining the characters in great detail and these details precisely shape the nature of my reading experience as an imaginative experience. Despite the fact that, in the case of imagination, thus understood, substitution seems necessary for imagining to occur, substitution is not sufficient. If it were, any such act of thinking would have been an instance of imagining and vice versa. Hence, in developing an alternative account of imagination it seems that we must focus on the activity of imagining, rather than on its objects; and, second, we need to think of this activity in terms other than substitution.

3. Dynamic Imagination

Sartre argues that imagining is engaging in a specific conscious activity. Adhering to the phenomenological principle of intentionality, he holds that consciousness is always conscious of something: 'it is in the very nature of consciousness to be intentional and consciousness that ceased to be consciousness *of* something would thereby cease to exist'.[45] In the previous sections, we focused on Sartre's distinction between real and irreal objects as well as on his claim that to imagine means to transcend real objects in order to arrive at irreal objects. However, toward the end of *The Imaginary*, Sartre seems to imply that

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44   See, for instance, Marcus Giaquinto, 'Epistemology of Visual Thinking in Elementary Real Analysis', *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 45 (1994), 789–813. According to Giaquinto, visual thinking, thinking with images, is not used as evidence from which a mathematical conclusion is drawn, but rather serves 'to bring to mind a *form* of thinking' (ibid., 793; original emphasis).

45   Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 183.

the model of imagining as substituting irreal objects for real ones is inaccurate or at least incomplete. Commenting on his own earlier observations, he says, in the conclusion to the text: 'To tell the truth, there is no passage from one world to the other, there is a passage from the imagining attitude to the realizing attitude'.[46]

With this, Sartre suggests that one object, the human world, can be apprehended through two different attitudes or activities, imagining and perceiving. According to this claim, imagining does not necessarily involve a transition between two kinds of objects— real and irreal, present and absent. Instead, it is a change of approach; imagining entails engaging in a specific activity, through which the world is given. If indeed there is just one object, the human world, then imagining is a way of grasping the real. We may say that it is a way of grasping the real *as* imaginary, but we must not think that in imagining, the real is eradicated or suspended. Instead, imagining opens up a new depth or new meaning *in* the real itself.

In her short essay on the relationship between Sartre's theory of imagination and his existentialist philosophy, Mary Warnock refers to a 'second kind of imagination' operative in his work, in which 'an actual existent object in the world is seen…as something else'.[47] Both there and in her later, systematic study of imagination, she links this conception of imagination to Wittgenstein's notion of 'seeing as' in *Philosophical Investigations*, particularly his treatment of the gestalt figure of the duck-rabbit.[48] When one is asked what she sees in the picture, and she answers, 'a rabbit', she is reporting her perception, says Wittgenstein.[49] When she suddenly sees a duck in the same picture, she speaks as if she is perceiving something utterly new, but she is, in fact, reporting 'the expression of a *new* perception and at the same time of the perception's being unchanged'.[50] Seeing the picture *as* one thing or another does not involve a perceptual change, but a change in the imaginative content invested in perception. There is nothing over and above the perception, nothing absent that dominates it from elsewhere.[51] Instead, interpretation— imaginative interpretation—augments perception, without adding or taking away anything material from the picture itself.

Reading Sartre against himself and rejecting his explicit claim that imagination and perception are completely separate from one another, Warnock finds an implicitly

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46   Ibid., 193.

47   Mary Warnock, 'The Concrete Imagination', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 1 (1970), 6–12, at 9. Warnock distinguishes two types of imaginary awareness: thinking or imagining an absent or totally nonexistent object and imagining that an actual perceptual experience is different than itself (ibid., 8). Her discussion of the second type comes closest to what I call 'dynamic imagination', although she does not address imagination's relation to potentiality as key for overcoming the dualism of reality and irreality.

48   Ibid., 10. See also Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 182–195.

49   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. and trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997 [1953]), 195.

50   Ibid., 196.

51   A similar position was expressed more recently by Jospeh Margolis, in *Art and the Definition of the Human* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009). Margolis develops this position as a critique of Sartre's philosophy of imagination. I discuss the relationship between Margolis and Sartre's positions in Lior Levy, 'Imagining the Given and Beyond - On Joseph Margolis' Phenomenology of Imagination', *Contemporary Pragmatism* 13 (2016), 70–87.

Wittgensteinian line of thinking in *The Imaginary*. Examining Sartre's discussion of the impersonator performing on stage, she argues that in this case, when the impersonator is seen *as* someone else, a new aspect is revealed in her. 'On the stage of a music hall', says Sartre, 'Franconay is "doing some imitations"; I recognize the artist she is imitating: it is Maurice Chevalier. I assess the imitation: "It is really him", or else: "It is lacking" '.[52] Performing onstage, the actress Claire Franconay appears as carrying a specific, new sense. The spectators' ability to recognize her gestures as an imitation of Maurice Chevalier implies that their perception is already saturated with imagination. Consequently, in this case, the image is 'not separate from our interpretations of the world'.[53] The perception of impersonations involves what Warnock calls 'perceptual or material imagination'.[54]

In postulating that the perception of Franconay *as* Chevalier implicates material or visual imagination, Warnock is clearly moving away from the model of understanding the activity of imagination in terms of substitution. The 'image' in this case appears on the impersonator's body. Her body and bodily movements are not merely an occasion for imagining a different, absent object; they are rather supplemented by meaning or significance that they did not possess before—that of Chevalier. She is seen as the person she is impersonating.

However, Warnock herself admits that perceptual or material imagination always seems to partake in perception, and it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish ordinary seeing from 'seeing an aspect'. This is due to the fact that things are always perceived as 'such and such'; they appear as significant, in the minimal sense that they appear *as* something or other. In other words, perception is always saturated with meaning, invested by imagination. Therefore, she concludes, 'we cannot draw a hard line between perceiving the world as familiar, as where we live … and perceiving a portrait of a familiar face … Into both these kinds of perception it seems that imagination enters'.[55]

Yet, phenomenologically, there is a crucial difference between the experience of ordinary and imaginative perception. The difference not being that the one is involuntary whereas the other is voluntary. We do not have the choice of seeing Franconay, for example, as Chevalier; if the impression is good we simply see her as the former, just as we see the green tree, the rain falling, and so forth.[56] Warnock linked this phenomenon

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52   Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 25.

53   Warnock, *Imagination*, 194.

54   Ibid., 199.

55   Ibid., 194.

56   Wittgenstein compares seeing an aspect and imagining by contrasting them with ordinary perception. Whereas the former two are subject to the will, the latter is not: 'There is such an order as "Imagine *this*", and also "Now see the figure like *this*"; but not "Now see this leaf green" ' (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 213). However, although aspect seeing and imagining can be induced or provoked by invitation, being subject to the will is not a necessary feature of these experiences. In the case of the impersonator, her work is an invitation to imagine something or other and also an invitation to see 'the figure like *this*', but wanting to see what she provokes is insufficient for actually seeing it, and likewise wanting to see a figure in patches of colours does not always result in the actual seeing. Because of this, I do not think that the adherence to the will can explain or characterize what goes on in the activity of imagining.

to the experience that Wittgenstein called a 'dawning of an aspect', the recognition of certain features, unseen before, in an object. This, he says, resembles the experience of seeing an utterly new object: 'the expression in one's voice and gestures is the same as if the object had altered and had ended by *becoming* this or that'.[57] Yet, as we already noted, the perception itself has not changed. 'It is as if', Wittgenstein continues, 'an *image* came into contact, and for a time remained in contact, with the visual impression'.[58] In Sartre's example of Franconay impersonating Chevalier, the spectator's experience is also characterized by a rare instance of contact between imagination and perception, and it is precisely the meeting between the two that generates the unique pleasure that accompanies the experience. In seeing Franconay *as* Chevalier, one possesses a 'hybrid consciousness … neither fully perception nor fully image'.[59] On the one hand, one does not imagine Chevalier as absent, apart from Franconay; on the other hand, the two are not completely merged into one another, as the synthesis between them is often incomplete or, as Sartre says, 'not entirely made'.[60] In other words, Franconay does not function as an analogue for the absent Chevalier; she does not disappear and she is not displaced by an absent Chevalier; but neither does she become entirely fused with him. The imaginative act finds the two neither completely distinct, nor completely assimilated into one another. This intermediary state, according to Sartre, is 'what is most pleasant in the imitation'.[61]

Recently, the possibility of a commingling of perception and imagination came under scrutiny by Robert Hopkins who revisited the radical opposition between imagination and perception, referring to it as 'the claim of Sartre's that is hardest to swallow'.[62] According to Hopkins, as Sartre is fully committed to the idea that the two are opposed, the range of cases that fall under his conception of imagining are limited. One excluded case, he points out, is aspect perception, in which, as we saw, perception is saturated with imagination. Nonetheless, he discusses some cases in which imagination blends with thinking (despite the fact Sartre holds that imagining is opposed to thinking as well), thus leading us to see that the oppositions that are set up in *The Imaginary* are undermined by certain concrete examples. Returning now to the case of the impersonator, it is clear that this example subverts the official Sartrean theory. Yet, as Sartre points out, as an intermediary or a hybrid activity this imaginative activity lacks equilibrium; it is therefore never permanent.

Nonetheless, the activity of the impersonator leads to a change in ordinary perceptual and imaginary experiences. For, according to Sartre, it reveals 'at the very heart of perception—a fundamental indeterminacy'.[63] Franconay's gestures destabilize perception, which is usually determinate, in the sense that when it is well-functioning and complete

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57   Ibid., 206.

58   Ibid., 207.

59   Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 29.

60   Ibid.

61   Ibid.

62   Robert Hopkins, 'Sartre', in Amy Kind (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2016), 82–95, at 87.

63   Ibid., 27.

it yields fully individuated objects (seeing results in the sight of x, hearing in the sound of y, etc.). Ordinarily, Franconay is perceived as a 'small, stout, brunette; a woman'.[64] She appears and is recognized as who she is because of such specific characteristics. When she is impersonating, these determinations are still observable, but her gestures 'loosen' them up. With this, the spectators have the feeling that new possibilities have been opened in the world itself, one such possibility being her ability to appear as Chevalier.

To see Franconay as Chevalier is to experience, according to Sartre (who seems to agree with Wittgenstein on this point) something akin to the intermingling of imagination and perception. Recall that Sartre described this as a hybrid consciousness, between image and perception. What I take this to mean is that, phenomenologically, consciousness experiences those possibilities that have gone unnoticed before—such as seeing Chevalier on Franconay—as possibilities contained in the world itself. For, in this example, it is Franconay's specific features, which are now grasped imaginatively, that accommodate her ability to appear as Chevalier. As Sartre puts it: 'the hair, the body are perceived as indefinite masses, as filled spaces'.[65] Despite the fact that her hair and her body are nothing like his, they can be filled by his appearance. It is as though he was there, 'in her', all along. In other words, when we see Franconay as Chevalier she is framed by his presence. In this particular case, Franconay's femininity, for example, may be seen anew; it may appear as artificial, or unstable, or verging on the masculine. But those are precisely *her* features that are illuminated in this way. His presence does not eradicate hers, but is made manifest through and on her body.

When Chevalier appears, he is seen 'on that face, on that female body'.[66] Franconay's imitation invites the spectator to explore and find affinities between her body and Chevalier's. When this invitation is met with success, when we see her as Chevalier, the feeling that the world is made up of discrete objects, each sealed in itself independently of others, is temporarily suspended. In this sense at least, our ordinary perception, in which she is presented as different than him, is disrupted. More concretely, the ability to see him in her gives us the feeling that there are more connections to be made between them, that the artist can explore such connections or affinities with her body and that we can consequently attend to them imaginatively. Extrapolating from Sartre's discussion of the work of the impersonator, we could say that what we enjoy in this specific contact between imagination and perception is the feeling that the meaning of the world is malleable, that it is not necessary for it to appear as containing objects and persons that are demarcated from one another in rigid and determinate ways. We enjoy feeling that the world has potential to support such connections and associations as the ones that we explore through the artist's performance. At the same time, and not unrelated, we enjoy the feeling of freedom that the world, now seen as flexible, as open to playful, imaginative interpretation, affords. We feel free to discover, through imitation, acting, and play new connections between things in the world.

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64   Ibid., 26.

65   Ibid., 28.

66   Ibid., 29.

Examining the example of Franconay's act, Sartre refers to a 'celebrated passage' in *Matter and Memory* to further clarify his notion of imagination.[67] In this passage, Bergson differentiates contemplative from motor memory through their relationship to the perception of individuals, on the one hand, and the ability to generalize, on the other hand. Bergson concludes that memory of images begins not 'from the perception of the individual nor from the conception of the genus, but from an intermediate knowledge, from a confused sense of the *striking quality* or of resemblance'.[68] In the conclusion to *The Imaginary,* Sartre labours to disassociate memory from imagination, and so his point in quoting this passage is not to articulate the nature of memory or its affinities to imagination, but rather to spell out the nature of imaginative experiences, such as those of watching the impersonator. Building on Bergson's discussion, he draws attention to the unique features of the consciousness of the person who recognizes Chevalier in Franconay's impersonation. Her experience is irreducible to perception of individuals in the ordinary sense of the word. She does not merely see the existing Franconay or imagine an absent Chevalier beyond Franconay's body and movements. Instead, she sees her as him, sees him in her. But neither is her experience akin to the recognition of 'Chevalierness' of some sort, shared by the impersonator and the object she is impersonating. The person watching the impersonations possesses, he says, 'une connaissance intermédiaire', translated as 'intermediate knowledge'.[69] With this, Sartre seems to suggest that in seeing Franconay *as* Chevalier, we see her through her relationship to him and him through his relationship to her. Consequently, we do not begin with a general concept of 'Chevalierness' that we apply to the two, for our imaginative interpretation examines what it means to appear *as* Chevalier and *as* Franconay. We posit them in relation to one another, and when we do this, we see both Chevalier and Franconay anew. We see them anew precisely through their relationship to one another, as two individuals, to be sure, but not as two individuals whose appearance and meaning is disconnected from one another.

Imagining is the act of seeing different things through their relationship, so that one thing affects the way that we see the other: for example, we may recognize, through Franconay's performance, a certain theatricality in Chevalier that went unnoticed before. Indeed, following such a performance our perception of the actual Chevalier may alter; the imitation, in which we saw the singer through the body of the comedian can lead to seeing him in a light we hadn't seen before—suddenly this theatricality will stand out as an aspect of his own being. By referring to Bergson, Sartre seems to rule out that imagining always consists in (1) surpassing perception in favour or an irreal or fictional object (as is the case in his analogue-absent object model) or (2) applying a shared concept to two (or more) distinct individuals.

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67   Ibid., 27.

68   Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 158 (original emphasis); Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 27.

69   Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 60. Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 27. Knowledge, in this context, is not tantamount to cognition. It is an understanding, implicit and not necessarily cognitive, of the relationship between the two.

When Sartre describes Franconay's act, he provides a list of gestures and objects that facilitate our ability to imagine Maurice Chevalier through her: 'She is wearing a straw hat; she protrudes her lower lip, she tilts her head forward'.[70] From this description, it is clear that Franconay is not trying to mask her own features. She is not wearing heavy makeup or a full costume; nor is she putting on an elaborate show (in fact, Sartre specifies in a footnote that he is only focusing on imitations 'that are not accompanied by make-up'.[71]) She performs a few simple gestures. Her body retains its specific qualities, but it is seen through these very qualities as the body of another. Sartre insists that the ability to imagine Chevalier through Franconay is not due to resemblance between them. Imagination constitutes their resemblance to one another, rather than deduces it from a comparison between the two. How, then, do the two become related?

The relationship between the artist and the person she is imitating is one of possession, says Sartre. He determines that 'primitively, an imitator is one possessed' and continues to connect her state of being possessed with ritual and magic, saying: 'Perhaps this is the way that the role of imitation in the ritual dances of primitive people should be explained'.[72] By associating the activity of the artist with ritual and possession Sartre emphasizes the accidental nature of the relationship between the two. Rather than following rational and predicable laws, Franconay's ability to appear as Chevalier seems to be ruled by chance. Indeed, neither the straw hat nor Franconay's intentional gestures are necessary or sufficient for Chevalier to materialize on her body. On certain nights, the hat and the movements could leave the spectators indifferent, unable to see anyone else but the woman performing onstage. Alternatively, one could imagine Chevalier outside the cabaret hall, when the bodily comportment of a stranger walking by will make the singer appear.

In *The Imaginary,* Sartre focuses on the imaginary consciousness of the spectator. With the exception of the few remarks on the possessed consciousness of the artist, he does not treat the activity of imitation itself, neither from a phenomenological nor from a metaphysical perspective. In other words, he does not examine the question of why and how the actor's activity causes the audience to imaginatively see X as Y. In this respect, he is not different from Wittgenstein who, examining the concept of 'noticing an aspect', argues that the study of the causes of this phenomenon should be left to psychologists.[73] It is worth noting, however, that Sartre's example of imitation is more complex than Wittgenstein's examples of change of aspects in pictures and shapes, a complexity that adds to the 'unstable' nature of imaginative seeing-as. For in Sartre we find two imaginative activities: that of the performer, whose actions aim at making someone else—the character—appear; and that of the spectator, who comes to see the two as related. The performance takes time and changes over time; it is not self-identical like the picture one is contemplating. Moreover, unlike a picture that resembles what it depicts, the body of the artist differs from the object of her imitation.

70   Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 26.
71   Ibid., 197, n.18.
72   Ibid., 29.
73   Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 193.

Sartre addresses, albeit very briefly, the unstable and accidental nature of the imaginative consciousness of the spectator that conjoins the artist with the person she imitates. He does that by mentioning the 'very strong consciousness of spontaneity, of freedom one might say' that accompanies the imaginative act of seeing-as.[74] Nothing grounds the newly established relationship between Franconay and Chevalier, nothing, that is, but nothingness—the freedom or spontaneity of consciousness, which Sartre understands as an activity of meaning-giving. The imaginative person has more interpretative possibilities, she sees 'more' in what she sees—a short, dark woman as a famous singer, a shadow as a face, a chest as a house. Now, of course, in insisting that imaginative acts rest on nothing, Sartre rejects the idea that being imaginative is a psychological trait that conditions what one can or cannot see. Instead, the imaginative person is the one who is willing to admit that his or her perception is not conditioned by unalterable contents, that he or she is free to playfully engage with what he or she sees. She will accept, for example, Franconay's invitation to see her differently, to see her as Chevalier. In doing so, she will stop treating the meaning of world before her as given and determined and will approach it as a space of possibilities, in which she can invest—and find—new meaning.[75]

I suggested that such imaginative activity falls under the category of 'dynamic imagination'. Dynamic, as it involves an experience of the world as *able* to contain or support connections and interactions between objects and persons, such as those that we imaginatively find between Fanconay and Chevalier. Under the standard account of Sartre's theory of imagination, in contrast, the present world is negated in favour of another, absent, fictional, or irreal world that contains scenarios that do not hold in the existing world. When we are engaged in an imaginative project, such as the one that I described above, we do not negate or eradicate the perceptually-given, but rather experience it as having the potential for accommodating new relationships between objects. Whereas ordinary perception yields a view of such objects as separate from one another, the dynamic imagination sees them as interrelated and involved—'Maurice Chevalier … found through these fat and painted cheeks, the black hair, this female body, these female clothes'.[76]

Second, imagination of this kind is 'dynamic,' since with it we enjoy the activity of imagining, as an exploration and discovery of connections and relationships between objects and persons. Whereas under the standard model of imagination as substitution, it is the end result of the absent, irreal, or fictional object that takes centre stage as the analogue is negated in favour of such an object; here, the very source of enjoyment is

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74 Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 29

75 The refusal to admit that one is free to endow perception with new sense characterizes seriousness. Thus, seriousness is a denial of freedom that results in failures of imagination (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 753).

76 Ibid., 27. This kind of imagination is operative in Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida* (trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010)), which he dedicates to Sartre's *The Imaginary*. Barthes reports 'finding' his dead mother in the winter garden photograph, a photograph of her as a child. He sees the child *as* the mother, and in this respect, he sees her as what she is not, or at least not yet. The child has not disappeared, but when seen as the mother, he finds in her the tenderness that characterized the latter; and that feature, the mother's tenderness, gains, in turn, a new dimension once it is recognized in the face of the shy, docile, or mischievous child.

rooted in the activity of seeing the absent in the present, the fictional in the real. Rather than eradicating the real in favour of an imaginary object, abolishing the concrete actress, or viewing her as a means for imagining an absent, fictional, or irreal person, we enjoy exploring and discovering, through her movements and expressions, the different affinities she bears to the person she is impersonating.

Thus, Sartre's discussion of Franconay the impersonator indicates a shift in his conception of imagination. As we saw, for the most part, he tends to emphasize the negating force of imagination, which enables consciousness to transcend the given toward that which is absent or nonexistent.[77] By making the absent present, imagination functions as the capacity to disassociate oneself from the existing world. Yet, in his account of watching the impersonator, imagination is presented as the ability to find affinities between things in the world, rather than negate the present world in favour of another, absent realm. The artist's performance incites us to explore connections between things that until now, under ordinary perception and other forms of imagination, were presented as unrelated to one another. In this respect, the imaginative project outlined in the example of the impersonator escapes the binary opposition to which Sartre's official account of imagination seems to be committed, inasmuch as it allows us to find the absent in the present, the imagined in the real and explore new connections, unseen before, in and through the world.[78]

Lior Levy
University of Haifa
levyliord@gmail.com

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77   For example, ibid., 14; 2; 181.