

Book forum

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On Tim Ingold, *Imagining for real. Essays on creation, attention and correspondence*

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Imagining for real: a précis

Imagining for real is a collection of essays written over the past ten years or so. Along with my two previous essay collections, *The perception of the environment* (2000) and *Being alive* (2011), it forms a trilogy of which this is the third and final volume, and in so doing rounds off three decades of study. In *Perception* I had brought together work produced during the 1990s, on the themes of livelihood, dwelling and skill, and in *Being alive* I followed this up with a series of essays, written in the 2000s, in which I developed the themes of movement, knowledge and description. This new volume charts the development of my thinking since then. For expository convenience I have arranged the 23 essays into five parts of four or five essays per part, each with a short introduction. Their titles are “creating the world”, “light, sound and experience”, “surface tensions”, “material thinking”, and “life as a whole”. Running through all of them, however, and tying them together, are the collection’s core themes: of creation, attention and correspondence.

I could not have known, when I embarked on this intellectual voyage three decades ago, where it would lead. But in retrospect, it describes a kind of arc that carries on without limit yet nevertheless revolves around a centre. That centre is the inescapable condition of human existence in a world. The essays assembled in *Perception* are centred, accordingly, on a conception of the human being as a singular nexus of creative growth, or ontogenesis, within a continually unfolding field of relationships. My aim was to bring to bear on this process of growth a synthesis of relational

thinking in anthropology, developmental systems thinking in biology and ecological thinking in psychology. Ontogenesis, as I came to regard it, is a movement along a way of life. By way of life, I meant a path to be followed, rather than a body of tradition – or a culture – to be handed down. Along such paths, I argued, and not from within the confines of bounded places, lives are lived, skills are developed, and understandings grown. Human beings, in short, are wayfarers.

In *Being Alive* I went on to explore the dynamics of wayfaring, leading me to introduce the critical idea of the meshwork, as a texture woven by multiple lives as they carry on their lives together – in their movements and perceptions, in the stories they tell, in the knowledge they grow, and in the traces they leave. One crucial element, however, was still missing from these explorations. While I had set forth a comprehensive theory of movement and perception, there appeared to be no room in the theory for imagination. So long as we suppose perception to be an operation in the theatre of mind, resulting in images that may or may not represent what is “out there” in the world, this is not really a problem. For in this view, there is little to distinguish perception from the work of imagination. But the entire gist of my argument was to the contrary, namely, that perception is part and parcel of the activity of a being in its immediate, real-world environment. What happens to imagination then?

Critics of my earlier work would often put this question to me, and I had never been able to provide a satisfactory answer. Indeed, I had to admit to avoiding the question, for fear of reinstating the very division between human and nonhuman conditions that I had been at such pains to eliminate. How can we even talk about imagination without reviving the spectre of human exceptionalism? Must we conclude that in their capacity not just to inhabit the world as it is but to configure worlds as they might be, and even to create the actual in the figure of the possible, humans are truly without parallel in the animal kingdom? A concern to re-frame the question so as to get around its seemingly inevitable conclusion lurks, in one way or another, behind most if not all the essays assembled in *Imagining for real*. That is to say, they all struggle with the limits of an approach to perception that is so tied to proximate presence that it is unable to accommodate what I call the *stretch* of human life.

I cannot claim to have arrived at a single answer, let alone to have applied it consistently. Readers looking for what I *really* mean by imagination will be disappointed, since I am far from settled in my understanding of it. I’m not even sure that a final answer would be desirable, for it

could act as a roadblock to further inquiry. The great virtue of inconsistency is that it provides an opening through which to move on. The one thing I am sure of, however, is that the stretch I am after is *not* a power of mental representation. It has nothing to do with the construction of images. And for that reason, the word “imagination” is singularly ill-suited to capture it. As scholars who work with words, however, we have no alternative but to make do with the hand that language has dealt us. If there is no word to express precisely what we mean, then we can only assemble elements of the existing pack into a phrase that somehow points in the direction we want to go.

This is what I intend with my title, *Imagining for real*. My aim is to find a way that would take us *beyond* both imagination and reality, in so far as each term limits the other by dint of their opposition. It is thanks to this opposition, so often assumed in our secular era, that reality comes to be identified with objective fact, and imagination with fiction or fantasy. A more generous understanding of reality would admit to a world that is not already precipitated out, into fixed and final objects, but launched in ever-flowing currents of formation; a more generous understanding of imagination would allow it continually to overspill the limits of conceptualisation and representation, into unmapped realms of conscience and feeling. By imagining for real, then, I don’t mean the suspension of disbelief, or the artifice of taking an interior world-picture for a putative exterior world that may or may not exist in fact. I refer, rather, to a way of entering from the inside into the generative currents of the world itself, by balancing one’s very being on the cusp of its emergence.

This is not something a mind can do from within the safety and security of its corporeal housing. On the contrary, imagining for real, in the sense implied here, means setting existence loose amidst the flux of creation. It is a release from confinement which repudiates any separation of mind from body, or of self from world. Here, imagining joins with the real instead of playing off against it. Simultaneously at large in the cosmos and at the core of being, both everywhere and somewhere, it is the way life has of ever surpassing itself, even as it is enfolded into the experiences and memories of the living. As such, imagining for real has three defining properties. First, it harbours the promise, and the potential, of *creation*. Second, its creative dynamic is marked by a quality of *attention*. And third, this attention is also responsive; that is, it sets up relations of *correspondence* among co-inhabiting beings. These are the terms of the book’s subtitle. In the following paragraphs, I shall say a few words about each.

I choose “creation” advisedly, in preference to the currently fashionable “creativity”. For my aim is to get to know creation from the inside, rather than to seek the exterior conditions of its production. The temptation, in our commodity-obsessed age, is to start with end-products, and to read back to the concepts of which they are taken to be the realisation. The all-consuming logic of commodity capitalism configures the imagination as an incubator for ideas, the creativity of which is defined as the measure of their novelty. Under this logic, creativity drives creation much as productivity drives production, in an input-output relation that binds ideas to objects with a mechanical necessity which only serves to highlight, by way contrast, the spontaneity of their initial conception. I seek to subvert this relation by thinking of creation not as the realisation of an image but as a way of imagining for real that is generative at once of things and of the ideas by which we come to know them. Creation, then, is not an outward expression of creativity but harbours its own impulse of growth and renewal. In a word, it is *crescent*.

A crescent world, however, demands continued attention – the second term of my inquiry. Attention is another word for the *stretch* of human life to which I have already referred. I argue that in attention, human life is stretched not between mind and body, knowing and being, reason and emotion, or intelligence and instinct, but between sedentism and flight. On the one hand, it is unceasingly fugitive, running ahead of itself as if swept up in the wave of creation. But on the other hand, the need to keep a grip in a world heavy with materials forever holds it back. There are thus two sides to the coin of attention. One side connotes the perceptual attunement that allows the skilled or masterful practitioner to pick up information specifying salient features of the environment and to adjust his or her movement to them. But the other side connotes a stance not of mastery but submission, of exposure to a world that is not yet settled. Here, to attend means to *wait*. Thus if, in one sense, the world is ready and waiting for the practitioner, in the other the practitioner is obliged to wait upon the world.

In both senses, however, attention opens a way for an imagination that does not oppose but reaches into, and joins with, the real. This joining is what I mean by correspondence. The key to correspondence lies in the twin principles that life is not confined to fixed points or locations but lived along lines, and that as they go along together these lines continually differentiate themselves from within the texture of their enmeshment. I call this “interstitial differentiation”. Correspondence, in short, is about *living together in difference*. As such, it contrasts with the more

usual view of social life as interaction, involving a back-and-forth exchange between parties confronting each other face-to-face. Admittedly, others have framed much the same contrast in terms of an alternative concept, namely “intra-action”. This concept, however, doesn’t quite work for me, since reversing the between of *inter-* to the within of *intra-* cancels what is critical to relations of correspondence, that they are neither between nor within but *along*, not lateral but longitudinal. Strictly speaking, correspondence is not the inverse of interaction, but orthogonal to it. That’s why imagining, for me, is not about intra-acting with the real but corresponding with it.

The essays in this book are not just *about* imagining for real, however. They are practical ways of *doing* it. We do it not by going to the world for the materials we need to answer questions we have asked from within the confines of our own thought; we go there, rather, to find the questions that the world itself both presses upon our attention and binds us to follow in our thinking, keeping our noses to the ground as we go. They are questions like: What does it take for light to shine? Or for sound to be heard? What happens when the earth meets the sky? How are things formed? Why do they last? What does it mean to join things? What is human and what is animal? What is everything? What is a world? How can it keep going? These are just some examples of the questions I ask in this book. They are questions of philosophy. But in answering them, we allow ourselves to be taught by the world itself, and by all the beings – human and nonhuman – that inhabit it. And this, for me, is what it means to study not just philosophically but anthropologically.

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Some of the major disasters of mankind

“The virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual” (Deleuze 1995: 272). This oft-repeated phrase is quickly forgotten when we speak of the real, as Tim Ingold’s beautiful *Imagining for real* amplifies. The virtual is real insofar as it is virtual. The actual carries this quality of the real not as the virtual itself, but as its potentializing force. Imagination lives here.

When Tim Ingold insists that imagination is real, this is what he means: imagination lives in the interweave of that qualitative field of the excess on itself of experience taking form. Imagination is the jump of a world making itself across the actualisation of all that pragmatically motors existence. Imagination is the speculative leap of that pragmatism, its radical empiricism.

Delving into the complexity of how worlds make themselves, Alfred North Whitehead coins the concept of prehension. Prehension grasps the world’s beckoning: it catches tendencies in the forming. Not calling this quality of the world forming itself “perception” has an impact on how imagination situates itself in the field of experience making itself: it forces us to remember that experience cannot be reduced to a subject-centered account of existence, to an “image” limited to and by human consciousness.

That Ingold takes us directly to perception in its prehensive grasp to consider the real force of imagination is the first clue that both perception and imagination will deviate in this account of what else we might mean by the “seeing”. Imagination here is never image-making, at least not any kind of imaging that would settle for a subject-centred account of a world already formed. Imagination is how the real catapults us into our difference.

For Alfred North Whitehead and process philosophy more broadly, the real is the resonant backgrounding of experience unparsed, its force of form. Its contrast in Whitehead is “appearance”, that cull of the real that foregrounds itself in actualisation (Whitehead 1967). What is to be retained here is that the real is where the uncategorizable dwells, where indefinability does its work. The real is the virtual, that field of *a life* Deleuze describes as the emergent surfacing of worlds transindividuating (Deleuze 2001). Not this life, but the quality of life-living through which this life finds its most intensive spread.

The “stretch of human life” is what is at stake for Ingold in this account of what else perception does in its encounter with experience (Ingold 2022: 3). Perception is not in “the theatre of the mind”, he argues. And, importantly, imagination remains unsettled: “Readers looking for what I really mean by imagination will be disappointed, since I am far from settled in my

understanding of it" (Ingold 2022: 3). Openings are crafted for a thought still beckoning: "the one thing I am sure of [...] is that the stretch I am after is not a power of mental representation. It has nothing to do with the construction of images. And for that reason, the word 'imagination' is singularly ill-suited to capture it" (Ingold 2022: 3).

The question that troubles and enlivens *Imagining for real* stays at that intersection of both terms, "to find a way that would take us beyond both imagination and reality, in so far as each term limits the other by dint of their opposition" (Ingold 2021: 4). Reality has too often been confused with appearance, superimposed on the actual, the effect of which has been that imagination has only been able to be conceived as its opposite, and by extension, the unreal. "It is thanks to this opposition, so often assumed in our secular era, that reality comes to be identified with objective fact, and imagination with fiction or fantasy" (Ingold 2022: 4).

A process philosophical approach allows Ingold to challenge this mainstay. If reality is the buzzing backgrounding of experience in potentia, it cannot but be threaded with the spark of an imagination that courses through it. In the actualization of experience, the actual buzzes with all it cannot contain. This more-than inhabits any taking form, or, better said, exhabs it. Imagination lives here, in this exhabitation of what moves us beyond ourselves. We do not imagine: imagination takes us with it, makes that "us" that is never reducible to a categorized form. Imagination is the more of the more-than human.

Imagination, as Ingold underscores, does not operate in the lexicon of the "what if" (Ingold 2022: 4). The what if is of the register of the possible, of worlds already conceivable. Imagination is "the way life has of ever surpassing itself", it is the force of life-living at the angle of its expressibility (Ingold 2022: 4). Imagination is the push in the field of the real to make palpable its excess in the very same gesture as it is the making-real of that quality for the actualisation of experience. Imagination worlds us.

For Ingold, imagining for real has three defining properties: "it harbours the promise, and the potential, of creation"; "its creative dynamic is marked by a quality of attention"; and this attention is "responsive, setting up relations of correspondence among co-inhabiting beings" (Ingold 2022: 5). These three properties are interwoven. Creativity is the output not of the productivity associated with neoliberal capitalism, but the force of difference that enlivens experience, its contrast, as Whitehead would say (Whitehead 1967). Creativity as differential impulse for renewal, "crescent rather than created" (Ingold 2022: 5). Attending is a waiting (*attendre*) that is in emergent attunement to the "befalling of things" (Ingold 2022: 6). This

waiting has the posture of a being-poised in the encounter of world and body, co-composing. Ingold uses the figure of the joint - attention the hinge that brings imagination and reality together. "To imagine, then, is not to dwell in appearances rather than reality, but to participate from within, through perception and action, in the very appearing of things. It is, in this sense, to move upstream, to inhabit the cusp upon which, at every moment, the world is on the verge of disclosure" (Ingold 2022: 12).

The crux of Ingold's project is heard here: "we will need to reconsider the significance of imagination: to think of it not just as a capacity to construct images, or as the power of mental representation, but more importantly as a way of living creatively in a world that is always crescent, always in formation" (Ingold 2022: 32). To situate imagination as the crescent of experience exceeding itself is to recognize that what makes the world, what worlds, is always in excess of what moulds itself into appearance. The age-old question of permanence lives here: how to square - as Ingold also asks early in the book - the permanence of things with their immanent agitation?

Whitehead attends to this question in his beautiful, strange book, *The function of reason*, a book I've returned to over and over to make sense of how nature thinks. The book is strange because its journey toward a concept of reason is so far removed from how we would normally understand reason that it forces us to radically resituate ourselves with respect to how and where reasoning happens. Moving away from any Kantian account of reason, mobilized and organized as it is by a subject formed in advance of the world to judge it from without, Whitehead argues that reason is that force for differential attunement that culls a lived intensity from the vastness of all that stirs. A technology of lived abstraction, reason becomes not the prism through which the world makes sense of itself from without, but its very capacity to cull from itself a mode that amplifies all it can be. The refrain of the book turns on this. Reason is "the promotion of the art of life" (Whitehead 1929: 8).

The art of life, for Whitehead, is contrast, *a life*. It is the differential force of all that cannot be reduced to a given form or presupposition. Methodology is a case in point: "Some of the major disasters of mankind have been produced by the narrowness of men with a good methodology" (Whitehead 1929: 12). Contrast is the attunement, in the event of experience, to its differential. Reason is the conduit of this differential, forging a certain pathway through it to foster the actualisation of difference. This requires a certain orientation of the world's appetite, appetite here understood as the crescent force of all that quivers toward potential and *makes a difference*.

It would be a mistake to understand appetite as necessarily positive or good. Nature is potent in its appetite for contrast, and this potency has nothing to do with gentleness. It moves at the pace of an energetic expressivity, striving to replenish itself. This complexity can be thwarted, and is thwarted continuously in these times of ecological degradation. The monocultural easily embeds itself in areas of clearcut, nature's complexity defeated by the violent destruction of ecosystems of soil and air and water. Reason in the Whiteheadian sense can't do its work under these conditions. Imagination has been too reduced, held in abeyance by a human-centred refusal to allow the world's imaginings to do their work. Appetite has been curbed and thought has been silenced.

To say that nature reasons is to refuse the separation between thinking and feeling. Feeling, the motor of experience in the Whiteheadian "philosophy of pure feeling", is the shape through which reason finds its appetite. Reason not as what judges from without but what operates in the attunement itself of appetite's commitment to worlding, feeling as the lure for a thinking in act that natures us.

Here we come against a potential limit, a limit that in my view is the result of a phenomenological perspective that Whitehead's process philosophy exceeds.

In Ingold the potency of the world's anarchic share – imagination – is held in the humaning. Imagination, he contends, does its work in the verb, in the movement, of a certain reduction to human experience he calls "humaning" (Ingold 2022: 315). It would be a mistake, he suggests, to move too quickly away from the human: "Putting our anthropic selves at the center amounts to a recognition that for every one of us, the world of experience radiates from where we stand to embrace others of every possible complexion, and to an acknowledgement of the debt we owe to these others for our existence as human beings. Decentering humanity would renege on this debt [...]. We have to place ourselves, once again, at the beating heart of a more-than-human world, and from this emplaced centre to renegotiate our *humic* relations with the earth and its manifold" (Ingold 2022: 323).

The limit is complex. One way of attending to it would be to ask where the more-than does its work in the figure of the more-than-human. In my view, the more-than is detached, in excess of, any account of the human. It is so not because there is not, in human existence, an excess that motivates a becoming – of course there is! – but because the human is a category born of a genocidal colonialism that has and continues to produce delineations of its value at the expense of contrast. The human, in other words, is

never other than the colonial subjectivity it has brought to bear on the world. It is white. It is neurotypical. It is male.

This is a systemic statement. Whiteness, neurotypicality, masculinity are constellations of existence limited. They are the embodiment of the humanism that curtails imagination. Yet their monocultural infestations of territories belie the earth's contrast, its aesthetics, as Edouard Glissant might say, where despite them, despite us, the art of life pushes through (Glissant 1997).

Brian Massumi, in his work on the supernormal tendencies that belie our conditioned account of how instinct works in animals, emphatically orients us toward the imagination of the animal. The supernormal tendency – a bird's response to colour, for instance, or shape – “doesn't just throw the behavioural functioning off its form. It makes the form of the functioning behaviourally vary. It twists the situation into a new relational variation, *experientially* intensifying it. What is in play is an immanent experiential excess by virtue of which the normal situation presents a pronounced tendency to surpass itself” (Massumi 2021: 122-3). The tendency of the supernormal cuts across the presupposition of the form, of species-thinking, orienting us toward how animality itself exceeds the terms of its imposed condition. Animality is *also* improvisation.

The problem with making of the human a verb that centripetally orients the hinge of imagination and the real is that it resituates the aesthetics of the earth as a human problem (Ingold 2022: 323). And it does so, necessarily, through the prism of an account of self-recognizability in the figure of the human. Who is human in this account?

Imagination in the real, it seems to me, makes a more potent proposition. It offers an opportunity to grasp, in prehension, how the real makes a more-than that can never be reduced to us. This returns us to Deleuze's proposition that we attend to how the virtual is real, but not actual. “From the indiscernibility of the actual and the virtual, a new distinction must emerge, like a new reality which was not preexistent [...]. Then the real will be created; at the same time as it escapes the eternal referral back of the actual and the virtual, the present and the past” (Deleuze 1989: 87, 88). Nietzsche rejoins: “With the real world we have also abolished the apparent world” (Deleuze 1989: 139).

In the real, the quiver of bare activity thinks the world into differential existence (Massumi 2014, 2015a). Abductive operations appetite difference into being. Presuppositional fields abound (Massumi 2015b). The effect of human infiltration is everywhere. The earth is heating, burning, and

more so every day. And these burns are not recalibrations. They are in every sense an endgame.

Imagining for real is essential under these circumstances, and even more so is the necessity to not center ourselves, even in the movement of our becoming in the stretch of human life. This is not about us. It was never about us. Because any concept of “us” retains the center, the recognition, that the concept of the human cannot wrest itself from. Imagining for real opens another way, calling for a revaluation of all that concretes beyond any notion of us, “life that continuously risks exposure by running ahead of itself” (Ingold 2021: 38).

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On Tim Ingold's *Imagining for real*

Tim Ingold's new book of essays presents itself as the concluding instalment of a trilogy commencing with *The perception of the environment* (2000) and continuing with *Being alive* (2011). If the present volume is the culmination of a sequence, however, it is by no means evocative of definitive closure, suggesting rather that the author's intellectual journey is far from over. Along with a new attentiveness to imagination (in contrast to the themes of perception and movement that predominate in the earlier volumes, *Imagining for real* is marked by a plethora of new ideas and fresh interlocutors, including on occasion some new adversaries (notably some of the thinkers associated with "object-oriented ontology").

Preceding volumes in the trilogy sought to recast perception as a matter not of mental representations of a world existing "out there", but of immersive involvement in an ongoing and overflowing movement of life in which all living beings are understood to participate. Ingold now asks what role his previous reflections might have left for imagination, or the practice of imagining, in so far as this would seem to involve the capacity to configure a world not as it actually exists, but as it might be. Again, Ingold is insistent that imagining is not concerned with the formation of images in the supposed interiority of the mind but is rather a direct engagement with the "generative currents" of the world's becoming, an engagement that is at once creative, attentive, and responsive (Ingold 2022: 4). Above all he sets out to refute a longstanding and influential characterization in Western thought of the imagination and its products as standing in an oppositional relationship to truth and reality, a move arguably symptomatic of a more fundamental assumed separation between humanity and nature finding expression in the long-entrenched binarisms of nature/culture and nature/society. Instead Ingold sets himself the task of closing the gap between imagining and reality and thus contesting the relegation of the products of imagining to the status of falsehood.

Like its predecessors, the new book is multifarious in its referentiality. Readers are introduced by turn to medieval monastic scribes, Sami reindeer herders, archaeologies of prehistory, contemporary cityscapes, baboon primatology, the physics of light, the art of cello playing, and more! Yet this dizzying, whirlwind tour of people, places, and topics ends, very strikingly, with an affirmation of the author's commitment to a "One world anthropology" (Ingold 2022: 347). Such an affirmation, Ingold

notes, stands in stark contrast to what he takes to be a longstanding partiality on the part of anthropologists for the plural. If this once found expression through versions of multiculturalism, a plurality of cultures affording different representations of an underlying, unified realm of “nature”, it has resurfaced more recently, he suggests, in the guise of what has been called anthropology’s “ontological turn”. The latter has often claimed to supersede notions of cultural difference by insisting on a multiplicity of radically incommensurable, ontologically distinct worlds. One difficulty with such a claim of course is the practical one of knowing when one is encountering a difference between worlds rather than a difference within a particular world. (As a resident of the United States, for example, it has often struck me that supporters of former president Donald Trump inhabit a reality radically different from the one I and most of my friends know, yet I would insist on understanding these differences as contestations internal to the world I and the Trump supporters share). Ingold for his part is insistent that all living beings inhabit and in doing so contribute to the production of *one* world, albeit a world that is potentially accommodating of limitless differences.

How does Ingold’s commitment to affirming the reality of imagining lead him to such a conclusion? To acknowledge the reality (rather than the unreality) of imagination surely demands a thoroughgoing rethinking not only of imagination (as fully and unequivocally real) but also, equally importantly, of reality (as something of which imagination forms an irreducible and indispensable part). What sort of reality is it in which imagination could be said to be fully participant? To recognize the reality of imagining is perhaps to recognize that there are multiple ways of being real, and that reality is not exhaustively encompassed by the actuality of what currently exists. It strikes me as imperative to insist upon this point not least to avoid the dogmatic reductionism to which visions of a single world can sometimes fall prey. (Think for example of some of the world systems theory-inspired critiques of culturalism that circulated in anthropology in the late twentieth century).

How then might we conceive of a reality beyond the actual? Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze (two of Ingold’s longstanding philosophical interlocutors) referred to it as the “virtual” – an inexhaustible reservoir of non-determined generativity subsisting as a no less real counterpart to the actual, which is continuously produced out of it through an ongoing movement of becoming and differentiation. In Deleuze’s remarkable study of the Anglo-Irish painter Francis Bacon, works of art (and literature) are seen as granting access to the virtual dimension of actual bodies,

making it possible to glimpse the generative processes that give rise to apparently stable forms even as they exceed them and carry them beyond themselves (Deleuze 2005). For both Bergson and Deleuze, the virtual also offered a way out of an age-old philosophical problem, that of the One versus the Many: is reality comprised of a single, unitary substance or idea, or does it consist of multiple and heterogeneous elements, irreducible either to one another or to any underlying, unifying principle? Both Bergson and Deleuze seek in their different ways to sidestep the seeming necessity of such a choice by appealing to the notion of multiplicity, drawn from the work of mathematician Bernhard Riemann and referring to a mode of organization specific to the many as such, without need for an overarching principle of unity. Bergson (and later Deleuze) then draws a distinction between different kinds of multiplicities – actual and virtual. Actual multiplicities consist of objects arranged in space and as such are quantifiable, divisible, and composed of differences of degree. Virtual multiplicities, on the other hand are unquantifiable, indivisible and composed of differences in kind. The virtual can be characterized in terms of both unity and multiplicity because it refers not to a given, circumscribed totality of actually existing entities, but to a unity of becoming (Bergson 2015, Deleuze 1991).

Ingold's exposition of his vision of a one world anthropology does not explicitly discuss the concept of the virtual, nor does it need to. I offer these reflections in a spirit not of criticism but of profound solidarity, and in an attempt to articulate my own understanding of why a commitment to the reality of imagining might imply also a commitment to a shared world of difference. To admit that imagining is real is to accept that what is real amounts to something more than the actual. It is also to recognize that the one world in which our imaginings participate is not a finished product or closed totality but an endlessly ongoing project and, on occasion, a site of struggle. Think for example of the threats to a world of difference currently posed by, for example, the burgeoning economic inequality unleashed by neoliberal economic policies, the plundering of indigenous lands for timber and fossil fuels, and the narrowly exclusionary formations of identity and belonging promulgated, sometimes violently, by far-right ethno-nationalisms in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere). Ingold has written a book that gives power to the imagination. It also challenges all of us to channel that power to keep changing the world – *the* world.

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The place of judgement in the aesthetics of correspondence

For some years now, I've been trying to come up with an approach to aesthetics that draws one of its lines of inspiration from Tim Ingold's thought. In particular, an approach in keeping with his most recent production: from around *Being alive* (2011). Although Ingold still does not declare himself to be a philosopher, there is no doubt that his work has also aroused ever-increasing interest in the area of philosophy, notably in the mestizo declination of critical and ecological studies and, more recently, in aesthetics. I think that one reason for that is that food for Ingold's thought comes ever less from the anthropologists' menu and ever more from that of theorists and philosophers. Among others: Gibson, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Bergson and Whitehead. But, for Ingold, anthropology is akin to philosophy as it is not ethnography but the "art of inquiry", i.e. more concerned with questions than with answers, with describing life more than with classifying it. All Ingold's works (and, in particular, those of the last decade) are characterized by a "holistic" approach – not multi-disciplinary but programmatically *un-disciplined* – to the problems of knowledge, of the connections between science and art and between making and perceiving. Therefore, all his books are teeming with valuable insights and promising pathways for the field of aesthetics.

For an academic scholar of aesthetics, however, his latest work *Imagining for real* is particularly attractive and interesting, because he explicitly opens up to aesthetics, notably in chapters 8 and 9 of Part II. In the introduction, Ingold states something that is worthy to report: aesthetics “is a subject that I had previously shunned, as it always seemed to me to mask the study of perception under another name, one moreover freighted with largely unwarranted evaluative overtones. Yet opening perception to imagination, I now realise, means opening to aesthetics as well. I could no longer avoid the subject” (Ingold 2022: 82). This passage shows an approach that many academics might find insolent and unjustifiable. To my eyes, instead, it is a resource to be positively exploited, precisely for how much it criticizes and displaces directly and, at the same time, for the sincerity of an afterthought if not of a retraction. Once he realized that perception is already imagination, aesthetics became impossible to overlook. Ingold’s aesthetics stands at the crossroads of the concepts of creation, attention, and correspondence – as the subtitle of his book states.

Ingold’s suspicious attitude towards aesthetics and its unjustifiably emphatic tones has many justifications that I cannot go into here in detail. On one hand, I think they need to be looked back over, given his very early socio-anthropological and Marxist background. On the other hand, however – and this is what I am interested in underlining here – his allergy to aesthetics (just as notable philosophers deeply immersed into the subject of perception, like Wittgenstein or Derrida, manifested the same attitude) also concerns its characterization as a philosophy of fine and beautiful art and as an acquired competence (good taste). He rejected these two notions – Art with a capital A on one hand, competence on the other – for reasons I believe to be compelling and promising for a new paradigm of aesthetics. This paradigm I call “aesthetics without objects” (or subjects) or “relational aesthetics”. I wish to focus on the chapter entitled “The cello and the lasso. Five propositions on beauty” in which these reasons are clearly laid out.

Ingold’s move consists in subtracting the notion of beauty from its most orthodox representations, both in the anthropology of art and in Western aesthetics. These representations place beauty either in the qualities of the object (the so-called “Platonic view”) or in those of the subject (it “exists merely in the mind which contemplates it”, to quote Hume’s famous remark). In line with this paradigm, he adds, such representations “place a separation between the viscosity of immediate sensation and the rationality of judgment and interpretation, attributing the

former to innate psychic universals and the second to conceptual or cognitive models of an acquired culture” (Ingold 2022: 114). In order to propose a different conception, according to which beauty does not reside in the finished form of something but in continuous formation, he tackles the issue through two specific cases. One of the examples concerns the ability to play the cello. It is an interesting example also because it is autobiographical: Ingold is an amateur cellist.

Considering beauty in terms of ongoing formations instead of stable forms – *any* kind of form, objective or subjective, formal structures or formal categories – is clearly in line with the process philosophy of Whitehead and Bergson. If beauty is performance and relation, we have to shift from judgements, inheriting the final product – the object as an output – to “skills of performance and the captivation of attention in the spell of unfolding events” (Ingold 2022: 82). One has to think of beauty not as the establishing of forms from inputs (project, design, ideas that rise from the inner) but from outputs. In other words, beauty is generated along an ongoing flow. It is a purely relational notion, and its creation corresponds to the continuity of attention along experience. From this, it follows that beauty is not experienced through pure contemplation from a distance but through a participatory and engaged perception that, obviously, is not at all (or at least not mainly) cognitive but affective, collusive, and intimate. Experiencing beauty is a process of exploration that is different than and prior to judgement and evaluation, and it occurs along the very same pathways of its unfolding, not in its judgment and evaluation.

Now, this vocabulary – engagement, collusion, experience, exploration, savoring, etc. – may sound familiar to aesthetics scholars: Dewey and Berleant’s perspectives resonate here particularly. In fact, Dewey is one of Ingold’s main references for the use of the notion of experience. In making an experience, the work of art grows and flourishes, and this is true both from the side of the maker and of the perceiver. To take up the distinction between object and work of art proposed by Arnold Berleant, the *object* of art exists just for critics who stand at a distance to analyze and evaluate, not for artists nor for amateurs who are drawn into engaged participation with the creative process. This argument also resonates with contemporary attempts – still a minority but growing – toward radically relational aesthetics, which dislocates the subject/object paradigm in favor of a processual one in which the distinctions between sensation and reason, immediacy and judgment are overcome. This proposal is radical and thought-provoking, as it challenges today’s trend to “corroborate” theories with numbers (adopted, to varying extents, by all

fields of knowledge, including aesthetics), i.e. with verifications offered by the “hard sciences”. Ingold’s statement, according to which *experience* in general – and thus also aesthetic experience – is not essential only to physics and psychology, but on a different plane, indicates perceptual experience without ontology and without foundational categories to lean on. He stigmatizes “empirical aesthetics” as an exercise in problem solving while, in line with Dewey, “what distinguishes the work of art from the puzzle is precisely that it is a problem without a ready solution” (Ingold 2022: 83).

Describing his personal experience of playing the cello, Ingold writes: “Beauty, then, lies in the act of playing itself. That, at least, is how it is for me. Most often I practise by myself, and there is no one else within ear-shot. The sudden awareness of another’s presence can intrude into the intimacy of the conversation between sound and feeling in which I am otherwise immersed, breaking the spell and throwing the performance off course. But I often wonder how it might be for listeners. One of the frustrations of playing an instrument like this is that you never know. Everyone who has ever heard a recording of their own voice realises that it sounds quite different, to others, from hearing oneself speak. It is the same with the cello” (Ingold 2022: 118). This passage clearly suggests that beauty takes place in the course of an attentional process, and that is not experienced in judgment and evaluation but in exploration and in the overall savoring. Again, this is true both for the maker, in this case the player, and for the perceiver, in this case the listener. To put it differently: the *operative* order – concerning experience and collusion – and the *thematic* order – concerning knowledge, criticism and judgement (Matteucci 2019) – are two different perceptual occurrences. While the first consists of perceiving *with*, the second is perception *about* or *of*. The former is processual; the latter is objectual.

According to this proposal, aesthetic judgement is not the output of a mental faculty – neither productive nor reproductive – that then relates to the object’s exteriority of the world. However, it might be worth asking: given that judgment and evaluation *can* also be part of the aesthetic experience – the cello player can evaluate their own performance just as the listener can evaluate it – how can we reconfigure them within a relational and not ontological aesthetic model? Even *thematic* perception is a kind of relation, insofar as it is judgement and evaluation, albeit a “classificatory” kind of relation. Granted that they should not lead the experience but follow it, how should these followings be understood and included in relational and ecological aesthetics?

Once we have clarified that the *value* of Ingold's sound – both for Ingold and for the listener – does not consist in the recognition of a form, according to prefixed rules or schema; and that this value does not come from an agency at a *critical distance*, but rather from engagement and attention, we cannot however avoid noting that *even* judgement and evaluation are relations, albeit of a different kind. In the *thematic* order, in fact, classifications are established. And Ingold is obviously well aware of it when he claims that for him Pablo Casal is the *best* cello player ever, and that there is a sense by which his music is judged to be of a much higher quality than that of Ingold. Therefore, here the point should lie not in rejecting judgment and evaluation per se, but in reshaping them according with a paradigm consistent with the overcoming of the subject/object dichotomy and with relational aesthetics, breaking away from their integral belonging to the cognitive models and codes of an acquired cultural framework.

There is the *operative value* that grows in correspondence to experience and quite indifferent to acquired culture and competence. But there is also the *thematic value* elaborated by reflections, heritage, canons, and tradition. These are different plans of value corresponding to different ecologies of experience. I fully agree that aesthetics has long neglected the operative, focusing solely on the thematic, and by so doing, forgetting its essence of “reflection” on being-with, on co-experiencing. At the same time, I believe that in order not to fall foul of an ontology of the “pure act” and of the vitality of the present (and Ingold completely agrees on the risks of the “nowness”), we should forget the reasons of judgement. Starting from this point, we might try to elaborate an alternative and accurate notion of aesthetic judgement within the framework of relational perception and engaged knowledge.

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Tim Ingold

Responses

Here I am among friends. In some ways, this makes my task more difficult. With opponents, it is all too easy to deploy one's accustomed conceptual weaponry, beating the same old drums, often to no greater effect than to keep up the din. Opponents rarely listen, while those on the same side are already united in broad agreement. This gets us nowhere. Conversations with friends are quite another matter. They call for nuance and finesse, along with an admission of the doubts and insecurities that assail one's own position. The real satisfaction of such conversations, however, lies in the possibility they afford to take risks. For only by doing so can we move on. I shall therefore take a risk or two as I address three issues raised by my interlocutors. I begin with aesthetics, and specifically with the question, posed by Nicola Perullo, of how to incorporate evaluation and judgement into what he calls an "aesthetics without objects". I then proceed to Stuart McLean's question, of how to reconcile the one and the many, singularity and plurality. And I'll conclude with a response to Erin Manning's critique of an approach that centres on the figure of the "human".

Let me start with judgement. Those of us employed in higher education are all too familiar with regimes of assessment that require of us to grade student work on a scale from "poor" to "excellent". Critics and art historians, for their part, have devoted much energy to distinguishing

good art from bad, or in identifying what is “arguably” the best of all. And Perullo niftily catches me out on the same game, when I let slip my rating of cellist Pablo Casals as “the greatest player ever” (Ingold 2022: 117). Indeed, so deeply embedded is this way of speaking that we often do it without a second thought, as I did when I wrote these words. Literally, to judge means to arrive at an authoritative conclusion, after deliberation, concerning some particular outcome: was it good or bad, right or wrong, pass or fail? In this sense it can only be retrospective, meted out upon the objective consequences of what people do. But this is not to preclude the possibility of employing the term in a prospective sense, to refer to the process of deliberation itself. This is to switch, in Perullo’s terms, from the *thematic* to the *operative* order.

Judging, in the operative mode, is an exercise of reason. But this is not the reason of an intellect “whose eyes”, in the memorable words of Henri Bergson (1922: 49), “are ever turned to the rear”. Rather, with Manning, we can find inspiration in the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. For Whitehead, in Manning’s terms, reason is the force of “differential attunement” that enters into the grain of the world’s becoming and splits it from the inside. It promotes “the art of life”, says Whitehead (1929: 8) – meaning by “art” the skill of cutting a fine line, of making difference. To exercise the judgement of reason, in this sense, is to open up by cleaving along the grain, as one would split wood with an axe or prize open a shell. It is no wonder that “skill” and “shell” share the same etymological root! I call this cleaving “interstitial differentiation” (Ingold 2022: 59-60). It is at work as much on the artisan’s bench as in a court of law. Perullo, however, challenges me to take the argument one step further. This is to cast judgement in prospective terms, not just in the operative sense but in the thematic sense as well.

This, I think, is where judgement converges with evaluation. Let me illustrate the convergence by way of an example. It comes from a study of the village of Langda, in Indonesian Irian Jaya, by anthropologist Dietrich Stout (2002). At the time of Stout’s fieldwork, in 1999, the villagers still made the blades of their adzes from stone cores, first quarried from the river bed and then reduced by knapping and grinding, before being hafted to wooden handles. The really skilled part is the knapping, which renders the core as near to the finished form as possible so as to keep the laborious job of grinding to a minimum. It’s a social activity, in which men sit in a row, all facing the same way, as they strike flakes from their cores with a hammerstone, all the while commenting vociferously on each other’s accomplishments. A particularly successful flake removal, Stout

observes, is accompanied by cries of delight, and sometimes the flakes are “held aloft in display or passed along the line for examination” (Stout 2002: 698). This is admiration in the act, embedded in a nexus of social relations. It could not be further removed from the formal evaluation of the finished artefact, as in a museum exhibit.

For the Langda adze-maker, every strike of the hammer on the stone core is a moment of risk. But among friends, and counting on their support, it is a risk one can afford to take. And when it works out, what satisfaction it brings! So it is, too, in the travails of scholarship. We and they, respectively scholars and makers, are not so different. We may talk, thematically, about different things, and draw on funds of experience that may have little or nothing in common. Yet operationally, we and they are launched into conversations of life that know no boundaries. That’s why, with McLean, I am against the tendency on the part of many academicians, ensconced in their ivory towers, to multiply other-cultural worlds. Anthropologists, in particular, are obsessed with what they call “radical alterity”. The phrase comes from the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (1979: 121), and connotes a stance that allows others into your presence, such that you can converse with them, without in any way prejudging the terms of engagement. Yet this is precisely what anthropologists do when they presume that they are of one world and that people such as the villagers of Langda are of another.

As McLean (2017: 147-55) has argued elsewhere, to see others from the start as embedded within the specificities of their social, cultural or historical context not only denies the force of their presence, but also neutralizes the creative potential of difference to make and remake the one world we all share. It is to turn every encounter, every conversation, into a bridging operation across the divide between our world and theirs while leaving each intact, instead of treating it as one of the manifold sites from which our common world is ever being made and remade. Rather than multiple worlds, we have one world of nevertheless inexhaustible differentiation. I follow William James (2012) in calling this world a “multiverse” (Ingold 2022: 360). The same idea, of a world possessed of an infinite capacity for renewal through ever extending and diverging lines of difference, has been echoed in spirit, if not in the letter, in the demand of the Zapatista movement for “a world in which many worlds fit” (Escobar 2018). Taken literally, this would mean compressing the many into the one. The intent, however, is quite the opposite, namely, to offer unfettered scope for growth and proliferation. Life will not be contained.

This is why differentiation should on no account be confused with diversity. Diversity belongs to the realm of the actual, of difference that has already “panned out” and found its form. But differentiation takes us upstream, to the generative cusp of a world in formation. This is the realm of the virtual. For both McLean and Manning in their comments, this distinction between the actual and the virtual – a distinction which goes back to the philosophy of Bergson – is key. So, too, is it key to my argument in *Imagining for real*. Yet the words “virtual” and “actual” figure hardly at all in the book, and when they do, I use them in senses more closely aligned with the contemporary vernacular, which routinely equates them respectively with intellectual preconception and material realisation, or more crudely, with fantasy and fact. In the oxymoronic “virtual reality”, for example, the virtual connotes a fantasy that creates its own illusion of factuality. It was precisely in order to avoid the risks not only that one sense of virtuality might be misread for the other, but also of reducing reality to the actual, that I have resorted to the phrase “imagining for real”.

Imagining, as Manning beautifully puts it, “is the more of the more-than-human”. It lies in life’s capacity to exceed itself, ever to overflow the categories of appearance. Yet where, she asks, does the “more-than” truly do its work? I confess to have long been troubled by the phrase “more-than-human”, so often parroted by scholars keen to display their posthumanist credentials. True, it is an improvement on “nonhuman”. It is surely preferable to know other beings by what they are or do, rather than negatively, by the appearance of their *not* being us. But does it help to say they are *more than* us? It is one thing to observe that the planet is not reserved for humans alone, but inhabited by a plethora of beings of other complexions. That much is obvious. It is quite another thing, however, to say of these beings that they are more than human. Why should we humans be the common comparator of all creation? If you were at home in the water, or in the sky, would you say, of terrestrial creatures, that they are more-than-fish, or more-than-bird? Are not all living beings, be they fish, birds or humans, always more than themselves?

I should be the first, of course, to plead guilty. A word-search of the text of *Imagining for real* comes up with 8 counts of “more-than-human”, and no fewer than 58 of “nonhuman”. These expressions are hard to avoid without resort to elaborate workarounds that tend to impede the flow of the text. As shortcuts, they are perhaps harmless enough. Behind them, however, lies a more serious question. What are we to make of this word, “human”? Manning’s answer is unequivocal: “the human”, she asserts, “is a category born of genocidal colonialism”. This view is widely

shared. There is no doubt that over the past several centuries, the Enlightenment project of progressive humanism has trailed environmental devastation, social injustice and genocide in its wake. Intellectually, the project is founded in a claim to universal humanity which has invariably served the interests of the powerful, who have gone on to treat as less-than-human those that have come under their yoke. “Humanism” and “humanity” are demonstrably modern inventions. But “human” is not. The origins of the term are lost in the mists of time, but they go back at least to classical Latin *humanus*, pertaining to persons, as opposed to both animals and gods.

Not that the ancient Romans came with a clean sheet! They were the imperialists of their age, and were inclined to reserve personhood for citizens while classing their human slaves with domestic animals. Doubtless in their time, as in ours, all manner of abuse was inflicted – on animals, slaves, and colonised peoples – in the name of human civilisation. We should not however blame words for the abuses committed in their name. The fact that, in our times, “human” has come to be freighted with connotations of whiteness, masculinity, neurotypicality and supremacy, all of which have curtailed existence by confining it within categorical limits, does not mean that the word cannot be reclaimed to the ends of expunging these very limits, allowing life to push through, not by breaking the bounds of the human, but in the collective work of self-creation which – following the thirteenth-century mystic Ramon Llull – I have called “humaning” (Ingold 2022: 315). Far from expelling humans into a “more-than” world in which they have no place to be, let alone to become, humaning allows them to be ever more-than themselves. How otherwise, save by thus recentring their existence in a worlding world, can generations to come contribute to planetary flourishing?

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