Imagination and Action

Eva Backhaus, PhD, Goethe-University of Frankfurt

My talk will draw on the interdependency between imagination and action. I argue that imagination provides a link between our current practices in politic, society and culture and new, unorthodox or radical actions. My argument starts with the general thesis that action and perception are mutually dependent on one another. Not only is action a necessary part of perception but also perception a necessary part of action. I will only speak about the second part of the interrelation thesis, as it is relevant for the imagination-thesis. If we stand in front of a steep hill and think about how to get to the top, our success will largely depend on our ability to see which path will securely lead us to the top. Naturally, seeing an opportunity to reach the top of the mountain will depend on the fact whether we are a skilled mountaineer or an apprentice. The skill of mountaineering thus depends on our ability to see the opportunities of the environment and perceiving an opportunity is itself part of the relevant task. My discussion of this relation will follow arguments of Anton Ford, who suggests (discussing Aristotle) that perception plays an important part in the formation of the second premise of the practical syllogism.

Now, if we believe that perception is an important part of action because it shows us where and when certain actions can be performed, we run into difficulties when it comes to actions that have never been done before, because we cannot rely on our established routines. This is where imagination comes into the picture. According to many scholars the faculty of imagination is both conservative and inventive. It is inventive because it can actively create something that has not yet been thought by the subject who imagines them. Imagination is also conservative because the parts that form imaginations necessarily stem from past experiences like perception and memory, i.e. things that have already been encountered. Although, it is in principle possible that one imagines things (e.g. a machine) that already exist but one is unaware of them, the interesting case is when we imagine things that are not yet part of our shared cultural, scientific or political world. The same is true for actions. If we are confronted with the problem of what to do and we don't find an already approved solution, our imagination can help us to see a solution or a new way to act, by combining old ways in an imaginative way. This shift of seeing in regard to a problem may lead to new ways of acting – and can thereby change our habits. Once this new way of acting is established it can become a building block for new imaginations that go even further. This is how imagination can bring about new and unheard of actions and these actions can (once they are established ways of acting) fuel our imagination again.

Political imagination, Political Realism, and the Case of Israel-Palestine

Anat Biletzki, Keynote, Quinnipiac and Tel Aviv

Building upon a disagreement between Samuel Moyn and Kiel Brennan-Marquez, we will follow the questions concerning the possible objects of political imagination in the pursuit of political goals and especially political change. The political imagination that Moyn espouses and the realism preferred by Brennan-Marquez will be compared as substantially different avenues for political transformation, showing the potential of both for positive and negative – or even dangerous – change. A pertinent case-study will subsequently be presented, using the "solutions" offered for the Israel-Palestine conflict. The conventional, almost unanimously accepted, two-state-solution will be contrasted with the imaginative, though usually shunned, one-state solution. An obvious reading puts the former as minimally imaginative, even realistic, while the latter occupies the role of maximal political imagination. Three complexities of such a supposedly simple categorization will be discussed:

1) Empirically, it is a realistic overview of the current situation that negates the two-state-solution;
2) Historically, the two-state-solution was no less a revolutionary move;
3) Politically, the imagination leading to the one-state-solution arises from contradictory world-views. An additional, captivating gesture is made towards literature, in the work of Gil Hochberg, exposing authors who have, contrarily, espoused partition and separation, rather than solidarity, between Jews and Palestinians as the product of a literary imagination.

Ordinary Ethics, Care, and Human Expressiveness
Sandra Laugier, Keynote, Panthéon-Sorbonne

I will present the turn I have tried to operate by defending ordinary language philosophy (OLP) together with an ordinary conception of ethics and vulnerability. Then I will discuss the ethics of care as a basis for a re-definition of ethics as attention to ordinary life and to moral expressivity. One result of ordinary language philosophy is to call our attention to human expressiveness. The idea of an ethics formulated in a different voice (women's) sees ethics as not founded on universal or abstract principles but rather stemming from experiences of everyday life, and the moral problems of real people in their ordinary lives. We can thus find in OLP resources for a reformulation of what is at stake in feminism: the inclusion of women's voices and expressiveness and the attention to their experiences.

The Unquiet Life: Salience and Moral Responsibility
Sabina Lovibond, Keynote, Oxford

The idea of salience has entered moral philosophy mainly through neo-Aristotelian accounts of practical reason, where it has been argued that the range of considerations that are 'salient' for us in any given context (in the sense of commanding our active attention or concern) will determine which practical principles we select as starting-points for deliberation, and hence will shape our lives as rational agents. According to this picture, it will be mark of good character and/or good judgement to experience as salient those features of a situation which we ought to find salient – for example, the fact that someone needs help or encouragement, is being offensive, or whatever. To the extent that one can be relied on to get things right in this sort of respect, one has a sound basis for the effort to 'live well' in general.

But the negative side of this effort – the attempt to avoid wrongdoing – gives rise to some perhaps less familiar issues of salience. Particularly arresting here is the view of Robert Merrihew Adams ('Involuntary Sins', Phil. Review 1985) - also belonging to a broadly 'moral realist' approach – that moral responsibility (and hence the reach of legitimate criticism, blame or reproach) extends not just to the voluntary, i.e. what we choose or undertake to do, but to all aspects of our response to what we are in a position to appreciate ethically. Now, this of course raises the question of what constitutes being in such a position, namely the position of being presented with ethical 'data'; in other words, what should be regarded as objectively salient facts or phenomena within any given human context. This question, or rather the more concrete substantive questions occurring downstream from it, are (I will argue) highly contentious, and are the subject of continual negotiation and of much collective anxiety. For example, does the body of ethical data that is objectively salient for a normal, conscientious person – that with which one can be reasonably expected to concern oneself ethically – comprise a 'core' and a 'periphery'? If so, what lies within the core? What is the status of structural (social, global) injustices with respect to salience? What about historic injustices? Unless we can engineer some kind of discursive closure in these matters – a move that is always liable to look arbitrary or dogmatic – we will have to acquiesce in a condition of constant exposure to (the ethical equivalent of) surprise attack. However, this condition is not a purely passive one but also opens up interesting possibilities of discursive agency.

The Good of/in Articulation: A Minimal Conception of Personhood
Carlota Salvador Megias, MA, University of Bergen

This talk explores the relationship between personhood and sociocultural practice. Drawing on resources from neo-Wittgensteinian and neo-Aristotelian strains of philosophy of mind and ethics, I argue 1) that there is a minimal conception of what it means to approach and to receive another being as a person upon which the philosophical and practical coherence of sociocultural practice depends, and 2) that, granted this minimal conception of personhood, (individual, institutional) articulations of value are a function of the co-constitution of self and sociocultural practice. In effect, this position admits of an inexhaustible variety of values -- and of ways of doing right and wrong by

others -- at the level of sociocultural practice, provided that these are of/about persons; and, at the same time, gives one reason to dismiss sociocultural practices that would deny articulation to persons as unjust.

Wittgenstein on Imagination as a Criterion for Logical Possibility in *The Big Typescript*
Jasmin Trächtler, PhD, University of Bergen

Throughout his whole work, Wittgenstein seizes on a distinction between logical and physical possibility, and impossibility. Despite this continuity and although, Wittgenstein brings in this distinction in various contexts and from different vantage points, he often solely brushes over it without elaborating in detail. In the so-called Big Typescript, however, he dedicates himself not only to the distinction between logical and physical possibility but also to the distinction between logical possibility and logical impossibility in particular investigations. In the course of these investigations, another aspect arises and is tossed and turned repeatedly by Wittgenstein – namely, the place of »imaginability« in these considerations.

For, what is physically possible and impossible (e.g. to lift a stone) proves itself by an attempt, as Wittgenstein points out, whilst in case of logical impossibility »we can't even attempt to imagine a round rectangle« (BTS 2005, 98r) rather, it does not make any sense to speak of a round rectangle at all. Connected to that, Wittgenstein especially investigates what it means to say »I cannot imagine the opposite of that«, for example when someone said: »this body is extended«. But why would that be a question of imaginability at all? Obviously, in these cases »being able to imagine« is not a matter of someone's power of imagination or phantasy – but what sort of imaginability is it then? And what does it mean to say »we can't even attempt to imagine a round rectangle« or a not extended body?

In this paper, I want to answer these questions emerging from three focused chapters in the Big Typescript by arguing that imaginability can serve as a criterion for logical possibility. However, this is not to be understood in a Humean sense, according to which the limits of sense are determined by means of the scope of our imaginability. On the contrary, for Wittgenstein the scope of our imaginability is determined by language, that is, by the grammatical limits of sense. For, grammatical statements, like »bodies are extended«, »a rectangle is not round«, »only I know, whether I am in pain«, are norms for the use of certain concepts and as such, they determine what can be said meaningfully. Like a frame, grammatical norms limit the scope of sense and thus, »what we call possible and what not depends entirely on our grammar, i.e. on what it permits« (BTS 2005, 99r) – and vice versa, the denial of such grammatical norms is senseless and therefore, logically impossible. These grammatical norms are presupposed, that is, they have already been accepted when we talk about what is conceivable or not. For, »being able to imagine »what it would be like‹« means that one is capable to describe »what it would be like« – and reversely, to say »we cannot imagine a round rectangle« means that we cannot describe what a round rectangle would be like. That is, the expression »»I can imagine, what it would be like‹ […] gives me an application of the sentence« (BTS 2005, 97r) and thus, the scope of imaginability is not determined subjectively or psychologically but by the norms of grammar. Since both, the scope of imaginability and the scope of logical possibility, lie within the frame of grammatical norms, imaginability can serve as a criterion for logical possibility.

Narrative Imagination and Moral Education
Rosalie Waelen, MA, Linköpings Universitet

When I read the title and topic of this workshop – 'Imagination, Society and Culture' – I immediately thought of the attack on literature in Plato's Republic. In this abstract I will explain how I think this topic relates to Plato's book and why it makes the book relevant.
In the Republic we find Socrates on a search for the nature of justice, as a part of this quest he discusses the role of imagination in education. Imagination, here, means the representation of an image/imitation (mimesis). Socrates, or Plato, finds imagination a (morally) dangerous thing because it can lead us to mistake image for reality, feed our desires, and make us emphatize with bad moral examples. This first leads Plato to censor the kind of imitation we find in poetry or literature (in books II-III) and finally to completely ban poets from society (book X, 595a-b).

Plato's argument against imagination in the Republic can be somewhat summarized as follows:

P1 – A just city has to cultivate just souls through moral education.
P2 – Imagination can harm the soul and endanger moral education.
C – Therefore, poets should be banned from the ideal city.

I am a philosopher, but I am also a great lover of poetry and literature. This made me look for a way to solve the ancient quarrel between the philosophers and poets, that is represented in books II, III and X of the Republic. If I can find an argument that convinces us that P2 is not true, than the poets would be allowed in the ideal city.

Contemporary scholars have argued in favour of literature in moral education. One of these optimists is Martha Nussbaum, who indeed reads novels with the law students she teaches. Nussbaum believes that literature makes us imagine what it is like to be in another's shoes. In other words: literature can cultivate compassion which in its turn can "motivate appropriate action". Imaginative literature is therefore an unique tool to teach citizens a kind of morality or emotional rationality. I think Nussbaum shows that the fact that literature stimulates our imagination is not, or not always, a danger to moral education. On the contrary, imagination in the form of compassion can improve moral character. Therefore I conclude that P2 is not true and the poets can stay in the ideal city. However, this does not mean that Plato's suspicion towards imitation was entirely misplaced. I think his arguments against emphasizing with good moral character are insufficient, but I can follow Plato in his reasoning against young children emphasizing too much with examples of bad moral character. The Republic raises questions that are still important: even though compassion with good moral characters can improve education, we should still ask whether we want children to imagine what it is like to be, for example, a murderer. To what extent do we need censorship?

Semantic Imagination
Julia Wilam, MPhil, King's College London

A line of inquiry in recent philosophy of language is devoted to interrogating the idea of a universal theory of reference. While in orthodox descriptive semantics reference is understood as an unambiguous relation to singular things determining what semantic value a given set of expressions of language has, some philosophers have recently expressed the worry that it does not sufficiently accommodate epistemic considerations.

Dickie (2016) observes that because the token path to belief formation, linguistic in nature, may be assigned a type — "aboutness" — in more than one way, we ought to rethink the explanatory depths of reference theories in terms of cognitive focus. Peet (2018), on the other hand, points out a puzzling discrepancy between norms of assertion that anchor reference judgements in the philosophy of language, and requirements for testimonial knowledge that govern epistemological inquiry. Taking an altogether different approach, experimental philosophers elicit an astounding variety of "folk" intuitions in an effort to show that the very project of developing a theory of reference rests on armchair reasoning that is contradicted by empirical investigation (Machery et al., 2014; Tobia et al., 2018).

Neither theoretical, nor empirical arguments, however, offer a framework through which the phenomenal experience of linguistic understanding can be explained: what anchors our understanding of linguistic exchanges? In this paper, I offer an alternative, phenomenally-motivated way of looking at three apparently problematic cases of reference attribution judgements in non-ideal contexts. I suggest that linguistic understanding, which is the basis for reference attribution, is attained in two stages: first, through a "testimonial" link T to what is said on which one grasps the meaning of its component words, and second, through an "attentional" link A on which one recognises its truth-conditions by imaginatively combining words to envisage possible states of affairs. While T is determined by a broadly conceived social convention — our T-thoughts are not yet about anything and are best understood as merely manipulating concepts (expressing general thoughts subject to reflexive truth-conditions) —, A, an inherently creative endeavour, reflects individual, aspect-based understanding, where aboutness beliefs (singular thoughts and de re beliefs responsive to referential truth-conditions) are fixed by one's doxastic and subdoxastic state.

By recasting considerations on reference attribution in terms of psychology of belief, I make a distinction between knowing what a given expression means, and it being meaningful to us. I conclude by showing the potential efficacy of my argument for the semantic imagination for theories of

reference intended to be at once attentive to ordinary linguistics experience and resistant to sceptical-relativistic outlook toward which many experimental philosophers gravitate. Finally, I suggest how this way of thinking can be exercised in politically-minded philosophical efforts such as ameliorative analysis and conceptual engineering, that set for themselves the ambitious task of pleading with what we think of as our collective imagination.