

For past centuries, humans have created ways to move forward as a society. One of the most essential attributes we have that has helped with this progression is something each person has to call their own. This is our imagination. Imagination is what makes us human, and mentally sets us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom.

What is imagination? According to the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy imagination is “the mental faculty sometimes thought to encompass all acts of thinking about something novel, contrary to fact, or not currently perceived” (361). From this definition, questions arise about imagination and its purpose, specifically why we have imagination in the first place. Once answered, it can be found that there is an even deeper reason why imagination is vital for us as a species.

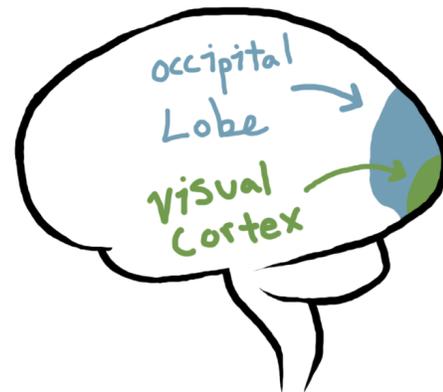
Finding out what makes humans what they are brings us closer to determining why imagination makes us human. There are two answers to this, one being the biological aspect, and the other philosophical. Besides the way we live and function as a species, such as walking on two legs, what it means to be human is reflected in the way our mind works; this includes the many aspects of our consciousness (Popova). Antonio Damasio explains that we are set apart as a higher rank in the animal kingdom due to the consciousness' unique attributes in the human mind (Popova). Philosophically, being aware of being human is another way of knowing what it means to be human. Heidegger explains that being human is being familiar with the world (Williams). This makes sense: by being familiar with what is around us, we can interpret more and more about it by using our imagination.

By finding out where imagination happens within the brain, we can further find out its purpose. By this, I mean there are specific areas in the brain where certain activities happen. For example, when imagining things, the visual cortex works harder (Thomas). Even so, according to Nigel J.T. Thomas there is no straightforward answer for where the imagination happens within the mind, but rather it uses many other functions of the brain. Due to this, scientists are unsure which parts these are (Thomas). The visual cortex is located in the back of the brain where the occipital lobe is (Brain Parts). However, it really depends on what a person is imagining or what they are trying to do with mental imagery for certain areas in the brain to have activity (Thomas).

People are more dependent on imagination than they may perceive. In fact, our imagination is a very dependent faculty in the human mind. According to Priscilla Long, “imagination is dependent on our memories.” Just as well, remembering and imagining both send blood to the same area of the brain; this location is the hippocampus (Long). The hippocampus is used for memory and classifying information (Brain Health).

Without memories, we are unable to use our imagination, let alone even have imagination. For example, when designing clothes, a designer creates a style based off of memories of other clothing styles (Thomas). Ergo, we have imagination because of our memories. But it is even more than that; without imagination we would not have ideas, or a sense of perspective, amongst other things. Because of this, we are human in the way we imagine, and our imagination is what makes us human.

Besides all of the essential functions of imagination, there is a deeper meaning behind it other than making us what we are as a species, that being why we use it so much in our daily



lives. Imagination helps relieve stress, helps people cope, and is a form of escapism from reality; the creativity that comes with it is rejuvenating.

There is hardly any doubt that when a person imagines, they let go of stress in some shape or form. Allowing the mind to wander away from pressing issues and detach from reality helps people cope with their life. Take any artists' work for example; after the planning, they are free to go off and create. This is true even for the artists' whose work is more fact based, political, etc., because they take information they know and create something new out of it. Henry Darger and Adolf Wölfli are prime examples of using imagination as a way to cope with reality. Darger's creation of epic stories is what helped him cope with life after a hard childhood (Ayers). The same can be said about Wölfli. He drew from the depths of his imagination with his intricate drawings (Freeman). In this way, imagination can be the key to living through a hard life, by providing an escape from reality. Which may be one of the reasons why creating art blends so well with imagination: the artist has control over what they make, rather than in life where it is vice versa. However, there are also other ways in which imagination helps the human mind. One example comes from a transcendental author.

Within the pages of Thoreau's work comes his essay called Redemptive Imagination. He speaks of how walking is a form of rejuvenation for the soul by "cleansing off the crust made by his life in the town" (Garber). Imagining relates to walking because when imagining, the mind goes off on a tangent or direction. The two come hand in hand in a way, because when walking alone a person is free to think to themselves and let go of the reality they live in, if only for a while. The person is able to retreat into their imagination that much more, depending on how long the 'walking' time is. In this case imagination washes away the persistent dullness or weight of having a job or living in a town. Even Thoreau points out that "...walking becomes an activity of consciousness, indeed one of the primary tasks of the mind..." (Garber), meaning that imagination is a necessity for us as humans, for it is part of our consciousness it makes us human. Even so, imagination is different for everyone, as it is their own perception of the reality they live in.

The things I have heard, seen, and learned in my life have shaped me. Due to this my imagination works on questioning how things could be, random musings, and creating things based off of these ideas. Which really, is just like anyone else... however what matters and differentiates people's imaginings is the content. For example, seeing a milkweed float by, I notice that its outlining shape is that of a circle. The way it daintily floats on the wind's breeze leads me to think of bubbles. With a connection made, I think of how one is organic with its soft fragile exposed 'bones', and the other non-organic with its slick shiny 'skin.' Ideas like this fuel me as an artist, and my desire to inspect my surroundings. The little tidbits I notice help me in thinking of new ideas, perspectives, and also provide a way to mentally relax. For me, the most reassuring aspect about imagination is that there is no end to it, as new information comes at us in different ways.

Walking arm in arm, we have imagination because of our memories. Imagination is what makes us human because it is a form of a higher level of thinking; but it is more than just that. It is about how we have used it that makes it so essential to us. Without the knowledge that comes from learning and the experiences had, the mind then becomes stagnant. It is because of the different types of knowledge gained that imagination is always fueled, and ever abounds in our lives and society.

Bibliography

Audi, Robert. *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Print.

Ayers, Sara. "Henry Darger." *Sara Ayers*. Web. n.p. 2008. Web. 22 Nov. 2011.

"Brain Parts and Functions." *Brain Health and Puzzles*. SBI. n.d. Web. 9 Nov. 2011.

Freeman, Barbara. "Adolf Wolfi." *Phyllis Kind Gallery*. Princeton University Press. 1992. Web. 22 Nov. 2011.

Garber, Frederick. "Literary Criticism." *American Transcendentalism Web*. Virginia Commonwealth University. n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2011.

Long, Priscilla. "My Brain On My Mind." *American Scholar*. Phi Beta Kappa. 2007. Web. 16 Nov. 2011.

Popova, Maria. "What Does It Mean to Be Human?" *Brain Pickings*. Media Temple. 7 Sept. 2010. Web. 16 Nov. 2011.

Thomas, Nigel J.T. "Which Part of the Brain does Imagination Come From?" *Imagination, Mental Imagery, Consciousness, and Cognition: Scientific, Philosophical and Historical Approaches*. n.p. 4 April 2011. Web. 9 Nov. 2011.

Want, Christopher and Klimowski, Andrzej. *Introducing Kant*. Cambridge: Totem Books, 1997. Print.

Williams, Gary. "Being human: take two." *Minds and Brains*. wordpress.org. 19 Mar. 2008. Web. 18 Nov. 2011.