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Ethics as Poetics
Exploring Imagination in Ethical Life through Gaston Bachelard and Paul Ricoeur

Introduction

Ethics as poetics calls for an approach to moral philosophy that emphasizes the imaginative dimensions of ethical life[1]. This approach challenges traditional notions of ethical life as rigid, impersonal, and a purely rational enterprise. It suggests that moral decision-making is not simply a matter of applying abstract principles or adhering to a strict code of conduct. Instead, it involves a complex interplay of judgment, perception, emotion, and intuition, shaped by the stories, metaphors, and exemplars that inform our moral character and identities. By exploring the implications of this view, we can gain a richer understanding of the nature of ethical goodness, the role of creativity and skill in navigating moral challenges, and the importance of drawing on a wide range of cultural resources–from literature and art to lived experience–in our efforts to live well and wisely. In doing so, we may discover that the path to a more nuanced, humane, and fulfilling approach to ethics lies not only in pursuing detached, universal principles but in also embracing the poetic dimensions of our shared moral lives.

This paper explores the role imagination plays in this approach of ethics as poetics from the accounts of Gaston Bachelard and Paul Ricoeur. At first, this idea of connecting ethics and imagination may sound absurd and incompatible. How can a faculty historically associated with fantasy, fiction, and what-is-not have a role in one of the most critical aspects of our lives, i.e., to know what is good, how to live

[1] We prefer the term ethical over the term moral for the purposes of this paper, given that our main interest resided on the question how to live a good life. In this concern, we are following Ricoeur, who in his book *Oneself as Another* states: «[W]hat is there to say about the distinction proposed between ethics and morality? Nothing in their etymology or in the history of the use of the terms requires such a distinction. One comes from Greek, the other from Latin; both refer to the intuitive idea of *mores*, with the twofold connotation, which I shall attempt to decompose, of that which *is considered to be good* and of that which *imposes itself as obligatory*. It is, therefore, by convention that I reserve the term "ethics" for the aim of an accomplished life and the term "morality" for the articulation of this aim in norms characterized at once by the claim to universality and by an effect of constraint» (Ricoeur, P., *Oneself as Another*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 170).

Bachelard Studies / Études Bachelardiennes / Studi Bachelardiani, n. 2, 2025 • Mimesis Edizioni, Milano-Udine
Web: mimesisjournals.com/ojs/index.php/bachelardstudies • ISSN (online): 2724-5470 • ISBN: 9791222333977
• DOI: 10.7413/2724-5470131

well, and how to be with others? This reluctance to relate both terms–ethics and imagination–is rooted in the idea that ethics encompass only a rational system of principles. On the contrary, imagination is not rational; it is regarded as the free play of images unconstrained by reason[2]. Imagination has then been disregarded as not having any constitutive role in determining right or wrong and what it means to live a good life. The neglect of imagination results from the rationalist theory of morality that arose at the end of the eighteenth century, especially with Kant[3]. This rationalist approach to morality was a reaction against the sentiment theories, which held that moral judgments are based on shared feelings rather than on rational laws. In these theories, imagination played an important role. Some of the proponents of these theories were David Hume and Adam Smith. However, with the success of Kant's theory, these others were eclipsed. Imagination and its role in moral deliberation therefore were eclipsed. Imagination then was not considered as a source of moral insight[4].

How is it then that we are going to recover imagination for ethics? I believe that Bachelard and Ricoeur can help us in this endeavor, especially their theories on imagination. Both inform each other and give us a comprehensive view of imagination and its crucial role in our ethical life. Their accounts show us that imagination is not just a tool we use to see better or decide better regarding our ethical lives. It is much more; imagination ends up constituting the way of life of human beings, and therefore, it is constitutive of our ethical life itself. We will need a different understanding of ethics, one in which not only the rational component is prevalent but also one in which the aesthetic, imaginative, and human dimensions of ethical life are also emphasized.

1. Bachelard's Phenomenology of "Ethical" Imagination

Bachelard's phenomenology of imagination is not known for its analysis of "ethical imagination". In looking at the Bachelardian corpus, one realizes that this thinker was not directly interested in ethical or political praxis[5]. Neverthe-

[2] See specially Kant's theory of imagination in *KU*, but also, Sartre, J.-P., *The Imaginary* (Kant, I., *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000; Sartre, J.-P., *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, London, Routledge, 2004.

[3] Throughout history, we have land to some moral systems that serve as guides. The most familiar to Western societies are Kantianism, consequentialism, contractualism, natural law theory, virtue ethics, and so on. Sophie Grace Chapell exposes three problems with systematic moral theory. The first problem is that these theories suffer of intellectual imperialism. Each one of them claim to be exclusively true. The second is that these theories put attention in detail in the wrong place. Chappell argues that these systems say nothing or little about the aspect of our ethical lives that we most need to examine. The third problem she finds is the motivational dryness that these theories expose. These theories do not give us visions or ideals to live by. See Chappell, T., *Ethics and Experience: Life beyond Moral Theory*, London and New York, Routledge, 2014).

[4] Johnson, M., "Moral Imagination", in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Imagination*, London, Routledge, 2016, p. 355.

[5] Pierron, J.-P., *Les puissances de l'imagination*, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 2012, p. 66.

less, according to Kaplan, Bachelard's phenomenological account of imagination has a profound moral commitment: «[T]o establish imagination in its living role as the guide of human life (*Air*, 209)»[6] Bachelard uses the term "ethical imagination", particularly in *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*[7], in passages he consecrates to Nietzsche. Bachelard refers to the Nietzschean ideal of making man great and vital in these passages. Bachelard shows that Nietzsche uses different images to «provide an experimental physics of the moral life»[8]. The Nietzschean images mutate and show us how we can go through ethical mutations simultaneously. Bachelard then highlights the Dionysian force's dynamics in contraposition to the Apollonian one. This Dionysian force is devoted to metamorphic powers instead of the formalism of well-regulated behaviors[9]. Through its dynamic images, imagination nourishes our will, which transforms us.

One of the examples Bachelard uses is from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which he quotes as follows:

> A path that ascended defiantly through stones, malicious, lonely…a mountain path crunched under the defiance of my foot… Upward–defying the spirit that drew it downward toward the abyss, the spirit of gravity, my devil and archenemy. Upward–although he sat on me, half dwarf, half mole, lame, making lame, dripping lead into my ear, leaden thoughts into my brain.[10]

Bachelard emphasizes the Nietzschean use of images of ascent, crumbled earth, abyss, and gravity, all symbolizing our ethical struggles in life. In other words, these images refer to our ethical life as a vertical conquest, which challenges our human nature, pulls us down, and does not let us be better but go upwards. For Bachelard, these images are productive, dynamic, and transformative. Nevertheless, they do not have these "powers" just because they are images, but because we must recognize that they have these powers, that they are «mutations of imaginative psychic powers»[11]. Only then are the images not static but dynamic and transformative[12]. According to Bachelard, Nietzsche's philosophy benefits us because it puts into motion

[6] Kaplan, E.K., "Gaston Bachelard's Philosophy of Imagination: An Introduction", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 33, 1, 1972, p. 1.

[7] Bachelard, G., *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, Dallas, Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1988.

[8] *Ivi*, p. 149.

[9] Pierron, J.-P., *Les puissances de l'imagination*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

[10] Nietzsche, F., *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, London, Penguin Classics, 2003, part III, § 46 (quoted in Bachelard, G., *Air and Dreams*, p. 149).

[11] *Ibid*.

[12] Bachelard distinguishes between three imaginations, i.e., formal, material, and dynamic. «The imagination also draws its dynamism from the materiality of the world. For Bachelard, reverie can focus on an "object" ([1960] 2016: 132). However, the imagination takes its impulse from the "elements" (fire, water, air, and earth) more so than from objects ([1957] 2020: 52). The imagination can be "formal", "material", or "dynamic": consequently, one may see the form of an object, penetrate its substance, or experience its movement ([1943] 2010: 13-5). The material imagination and the dynamic imagination have, however, a dream-like power greater than that of the formal imagination (pp. 13-5)» (Charbonneau, M., "Gaston Bachelard and the Phenomeno-

our being through these images[13], contrary to the moralists, to whom morality seems to be just the work of the mind and not of imagination. For Bachelard, the imagination provides images «for the dynamic schema that we call heroism»[14].

For Bachelard, there is no special faculty called ethical imagination, but an imagination that can influence and constitute our ethical life through its dynamic images. As explained, we must recognize the dynamic power of the images in order to have them influence our ethical lives. However, the question now is how we come to recognize these powers. The answer for Bachelard resides in poetic reverie. Nietzsche is an excellent example for Bachelard because his philosophy is a poetical engagement with reality and ideas. The Nietzschean engagement is particularly in aerial reveries: «Nietzsche is the prototype of the *vertical poet*, the *poet of the summits*, the *ascensional poet*»[15]. In this poetical engagement, in the poetics of reverie, characteristic of poets, we find and recognize the dynamic powers of images. In this sense, Bachelard invites us to delve into the world of poets and, with them, discover the dynamism and power of imagination to show us that we can also be benefactors of the poetics of reverie[16]. We can learn from the poets and be poets of our own life. He is inspired by how poets can open up and discover reality in such a beautiful way. But Bachelard's account is not only for poets; his intentions are not just to do a descriptive phenomenology of the poets. On the contrary, he talks to each of us because everyone can do what poets do to some extent[17].

Ethics as poetics should be understood as work and activity to configure our lives according to what is good. Through Bachelard's phenomenological account, we discover that the work of imagination in reverie and in paying attention to reality through that reverie is a form to prepare the soul for ethical action. It is not just an affective disposition but a linguistic one. We pay attention, understood as perceptual, and discover new meanings in the world surrounding us. We are rereading

logy of the Imagination", in de Vaujany, F.-X., Aroles, J., Pérezts, M. (ed). *The Oxford Handbook of Phenomenologies and Organization Studies*, Oxford. Oxford University Press, 2023, p. 85.

[13] Bachelard, G., *Air and Dreams*, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

[14] *Ivi*, p. 112.

[15] *Ivi*, p. 127.

[16] Bachelard's corpus is vast, and not systematic. His account of imagination can be found spread out in all his philosophical works, especially those on reverie and poetry. However, one can say that in *The Poetics of Reverie* we find a more systematic approach to the phenomenology of reverie. See Bachelard, G., *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language and the Cosmos*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1971.

[17] Richard Kearney highlights this aspect of Bachelard's thought by describing it as democratic: «[Bachelard's] writing and thinking are deeply democratic, available to everyone regardless of ideology or creed. It requires no academic degree to appreciate the genesis of the image in the individual consciousness. His imagination is capacious, nothing deemed ineligible if it stirs being into language and language into being. No reader is excluded: professional or amateur, expert or lay. Anyone who can read poetry can read Bachelard–a philosopher of the infinite in the infinitesimal, of the mystical in matter. Daydreams and fantasies are grist for poetic reverie as much as masterpieces by Dante or Baudelaire. "When we dream, we are phenomenologists without realizing it", Bachelard tells us. We are born poets whether we like it or not, though what we do with it is our singular responsibility» (Kearney, R., *Introduction*, in Bachelard, G., *The Poetics of Space*, London, Penguin Random House, 2014, p. XXII.

reality, reinterpreting reality. The ethical force of this rereading is often borne by a shift in description rather than by a change in facts: what was experienced as an "obligation" can be refigured as "care", what appeared as an "interruption" can become an "encounter", what felt like "lost time" can be disclosed as a "gift of time". Such redescriptions reconfigure the field of what is thinkable and doable, and thus open concrete possibilities of response. In this sense, ethics as poetics should be understood as an activity of formation by which we configure our lives according to what is good, precisely by learning to let the world speak otherwise and by allowing ourselves to be addressed by these new meanings.

Bachelard clearly distinguishes reverie from daydreaming. In his famous work *The Poetics of Reverie*, he develops what we can identify as three phenomenologies. The first is a phenomenology of poetic reverie. His main question is how poetry comes to be through reverie. He answers that poetry is a spontaneous creation that needs to be written[18]. The second is a phenomenology of poetics of reverie. Here, Bachelard addresses how reverie unveils and brings forth reality. This unveiling of reality is achieved through poetics, understood as *poiesis* and a work of creation. The third phenomenology is that of the image and of imagination itself. Bachelard is against analyzing or interpreting images. He aims to consider images in their being and imagination as the principle of psychic becoming and for expanding our being within us[19]. With this triple phenomenological approach to reverie, Bachelard ends with a working reverie, which differs from daydreaming in that reverie «leads to increments of consciousness or a growth of being by an intense focus in surprising variations in wonder-filled images»[20].

This focus is decisive: reverie is not escapist drift but an intentional modification of attention in which one chooses to hold a phenomenon–a flame, a gust of wind, the grain of stone, the cadence of rain–long enough for it to generate variations of meaning. Daydreaming disperses; reverie concentrates. And because it concentrates, it forms: it is a disciplined receptivity that enlarges our capacity to receive what appears, rather than merely compensating for what is lacking. Reverie is a working of imagination, both of the poet and the reader, in which the being of reality and our own being is expanded. Reverie discovers new ways of being and unveils the beauty of the world. The other characteristic distinguishing daydreaming from reverie is that the former is an unconscious mental state, whereas the latter involves consciousness and will. The poet's work is done consciously and willingly, he wants to do it. The poet decides to be immersed in contemplating the world, playing with the images. Also, the reader of poetry decides to open the book and, with the poet's images, be immersed in this contemplation of the world.

In this engagement with reality through reverie, the subject-object opposition is overcome: «[in reverie] the imagined world takes its rightful place before the object… The world is admired before being verified. Every primitive condition is

[18] Bachelard, G., *The Poetics of Reverie, op. cit.*, p. 6.

[19] *Ivi*, p. 8.

[20] Rizo-Patron, E., "Regressus ad Uterum: Bachelard's Alchemical Hermeneutics", *Philosophy Today*, SPEP Supplement, 2008, p. 21.

pure oneirism»[21]. As Novalis says, mentioned by Bachelard, the world dreams in us.[22] We are part of the world, and the world is part of us. We dream the world, and the world dreams in us. Bachelard then transforms the cartesian cogito into the following formulation: «I dream the world; therefore, the world exists as I dream it»[23]. Our world is possible because we can dream it. There is no opposition between the subject and the world:

> Where objectivity requires the subject to accommodate itself to a rationally organized physical reality, resulting in a separation of subject and object, self-aware reverie accommodates the world to subjective reality, thus transcending the subject-object opposition without destroying the separate identity of the subject.[24]

Reverie, then, is essential to our subject constitution. Our identity is formed partly through these reveries. We are our dreams. For Bachelard, we are made of material imaginings in the depths of our soul that we reinhabit through reverie. With reverie, we hear and feel these images, as well as craft and shape them[25].

Reverie effectively expands our being and constitutes our subject because, through this activity, we pay attention to the world. In the same spirit as Simone Weil, who describes attention as the deliberate suspension of one's subject to enable a full encounter with the other with humility and openness,[26] Bachelard's poetic reverie allows us to pay attention to the being of the world. In poetic reverie, we encounter the other–a person, a flower, a bird, a mountain, a god, etc.–and focus on it; we contemplate, explore, and discover the other. In this paying attention, we begin to be emptied in order to receive the gift of the other. In other words, reverie prepares our soul to receive and accept the other. At the same time, in this moment of paying attention and of preparation, an act of will is involved, which is described as a moment of decision, of response to the other:

> «"When it strikes", writes Bachelard, "the instant imposes itself all in one blow, completely; it is the agent of being's synthesis" (II 15). Such a burst of consciousness is experienced as an instant of "invention" (>Lat. *Invenio-invenire*): a discovery and creation that is simultaneously active and passive, receptive and dynamic.[27]

[21] Bachelard, G., *Air and Dreams*, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

[22] *Ivi*, p. 149

[23] Bachelard G., *Poetics of Reverie*, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

[24] Smith, R.C., *Gaston Bachelard: Philosopher of Science and Imagination*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2016, pp. 121-22.

[25] See Kearney, R., *Introduction*.

[26] I am not completely sure if Bachelard was familiar with Simone Weil's work. However, their conceptions of attention are similar, despite some differences. For Weil, attention involves a focus on the object, leading to a diminishing of the self, thereby opening oneself to God. Bachelard, on the other hand, perceives attention through reverie as a means to both focus on the object and transcend the self. Weil, S., *Waiting for God*, London, Routledge, 1951; *Gravity and Grace*, London, Routledge, 1952.

[27] Kearney, R., "Vertical Time: Bachelard's Epiphanic Instant", in Rizo-Patron, E., Casey, E. S., Wirth, J.S. (ed.), *Adventures in Phenomenology: Gaston Bachelard*, Albany, University of New York Press, 2017, p. 54.

A moment of epiphany happens in this instant of paying attention to and hearing the object. A moment of natality of new ways of contemplating being comes about in our soul.[28] According to Kearney, this ethics of attention in reverie involves a radical ethics of empathy because we are preparing our soul to receive the other, to empathize with the other: «The self for Bachelard (…) is less a substance or cogito than a dynamic relation to the endlessly surprising other»[29]. In reverie, our soul develops the disposition always to let be surprised by the other, whether person, animal, or god. Our self is not anymore, a closed unity that we must protect but an opened unity that can receive and let be affected by the other in unique ways. Moreover, Kearney continues suggesting that this ethics of attention and empathy in Bachelard also encompasses the ethics of emancipation[30]. In reverie, we are free to explore all the possibilities that unfold in front of us through the creative play with the images. Moreover, we are open to giving ourselves to the other who is surprised by it: «[I]n liberating us from the ineluctable flow of *durée*, we are released into the option of generosity»[31]. We can accept the instant and the other who shows up. We can say yes or no to this or that possibility. All this is because, in reverie, the self is enthralled in a realm of complete possibility.

One distinctive aspect of Bachelardian reverie is that the images the poets or readers creatively play with are not understood from the pictorial paradigm. The fruitfulness of Bachelard's account resides in the fact that the images are conceived primarily as linguistic. Imagination is, for Bachelard, «a dimension of language and not a trace of perception»[32]. This linguistic dimension of imagination allows Bachelard to speak about newness, about the birth of something new, as mentioned before. In the pictorial paradigm, images are always conceived as copies of an original, as representations of reality, which means there is never newness in these images[33]. Departing from this paradigm, the images in reverie are echoes of language. Bachelard uses the metaphor of reverberation here, by which he wants to symbolize how these linguistic images produce sound, which is continually reflected and, therefore, allows the images to be heard eternally. The echo does not come from the past but from the creative dynamism of the linguistic image that produces a chain reaction in which new meanings emerge: «By its novelty, a poetic image sets in motion the entire linguistic mechanism. The poetic image places us at the origin of the speaking being»[34]. This linguistic novelty produces then the renewal of the perceptual residues of the images. In the end, Bachelard does not deny the pictorial dimension of poetic images. This dimension also plays a vital role in our engagement with the world; ultimately, we are visual beings. However, the origin of the images resides in language. It is from the dynamic power of language that images come to be. Our imagination, then, is in its root language.

[28] *Ivi*, p. 59
[29] *Ivi*, p. 56
[30] *Ivi*, p. 59.
[31] *Ibid.*
[32] Ricoeur, P., *Lectures on Imagination*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2024, p. 227.
[33] *Ivi*, p. 231.
[34] Bachelard, G., *The Poetics of Space*, *op. cit.*, p. 8

Bachelard then presents us with a visionary engagement with reality through imagination to prepare the soul for ethical life. He views the poetic reverie as cultivating an ethical disposition of patience, humility, and hospitality towards the world. This receptive wonder allows us to be taught by reality rather than mastering it through reason alone. Bachelardian reverie is, therefore, not a turning inward to fantasy but a turning outward towards phenomena while transmuting them through an ethical imagination. It re-visions the depths of the real to re-orient us towards more attuned ways of being and acting in the world. Imagination is not opposed to truth and reality but opens up dimensions of meaning that cannot be accessed by abstract rational analysis alone. For Bachelard, we cannot be ethical in the highest sense without this kind of poetic, imaginative immersion in the phenomenal genres of our experiences. Only through re-vitalizing our engagement with reality through reverie can our actions authentically respond to these primordial sources of human meaning. In this way, Bachelard's account of imagination reveals ethical imagination's centrality to human life. Far from being ancillary to ethics, poetic reverie is the soil required for moral questioning, discernment, and motivation to take root and flourish as an organic dimension of our being in the world with and for others. Abstract moral rules and duties cannot be adequately understood, let alone enacted, without this fundamental phenomenological grounding in an imaginatively animate and animated universe of significations.

2. Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of Narrative Imagination

Ricoeur recognizes that Bachelard shows him this essential linguistic dimension of imagination. In his *Lectures on Imagination*, Ricoeur states that Bachelard's phenomenology of poetic reverie helps him to make two points: «First, […] it's through language that imagination may become creative. […] The second point […] is the ontologial dimension of fiction. […] [I]f we start with an image without an original, then we may discover a kind of second ontology […] the ontology displayed by the image itself»[35]. Ricoeur recognizes the importance of Bachelard's ideas; nevertheless, he also thinks they are insufficient for his philosophical endeavor. The main reason is that Bachelard's phenomenology seems to apply only to poetic reverie and poetry. Ricoeur wants to take a step further and claim that the phenomenology of imagination, primarily linguistic, can also be used in other dimensions of human life. Moreover, for Ricoeur, Bachelard does not develop that potential ontology of poetic images. The newness, the bringing forth of new possibilities, is stated by Bachelard in his characteristic poetical style, but it is not completely explicated. Ricoeur proceeds to develop this ontology through his theory of fiction and metaphor, in which an image, because it has no previous referent, it may refer in a productive way to reality, and even increase reality[36]. This is the paradox of fiction, in which images and imagination are productive without referring

[35] Ricoeur, P., *Lectures on Imagination*, *op. cit.*, p. 231.
[36] *Ivi*, p. 275.

to anything before, which opens new possibilities. For Ricoeur, the reproductive imagination is marginal in terms of reality; it is the genius of the productive imagination, of the fictional, to open and change reality. «Productive imagination may enlarge and even create new worldviews, new ways of looking at things, and finally, may change even our way of being in the world»[37]. Bachelard then does not recognize the philosophical importance of the productive imagination for all creation of meaning. Ricoeur recognizes Bachelard's interest in poetry and highlights the benefit of poetry, but without reducing all his account to it. This is of the utmost interest to us because then we can have a more nuanced account of imagination and its relation to our ethical life.

Ricoeur understands imagination as a result of language and work. In contrast to Sartre's imaginary life, characterized by the fascination with the images[38], Ricoeur claims we need a phenomenology of the work in fiction. It is only when we work the images that the imagination becomes productive. This feature of imagination as work is essential to our understanding of imagination having a role in the configuration of our life story and, therefore, our identity, which is necessary for an ethical life. For Ricoeur, this imagination work is closely tied to the metaphorical process. The fecundity of imagination is linked to the fecundity of language, of the metaphorical process. For Ricoeur, it is through metaphor that we get the emergence of new meanings. It is where we find semantic innovation. The creativity of the metaphor resides in the emergence of new predicative statements; it is not only about the emergence of a new word but of a completely whole new predication about the world. When we say, for example, "time is a thief", we do not merely decorate an already known experience of temporality; rather, we introduce a new network of predication–loss, deprivation, stealth, irreversibility–through which time can be newly articulated and evaluated. Metaphor involves a deviant use of predicates in the context of the sentence as a whole[39].

This semantic innovation is supported by the expansion of semantic fields, which were clashing, and the result of this clash is an extension of meaning[40]. The role of imagination, according to Ricoeur, is that of transitioning from literal incongruence to metaphorical congruence in the birth of a new pertinence, of a new appropriateness[41]. In this context, imagination is described as seeing a new predicative pertinence. Thinking is then posited as *seeing-as*. One can grasp what Ricoeur means here if we consider expressions such as "wounds of memory". Literally speaking, memories are not flesh; the statement is incongruent. Yet imagination perceives a congruence–pain that returns, sensitivity to touch, the need for care, the possibility of healing–and, in doing so, it brings into view a new appropriate-

[37] *Ivi*, p. 220.

[38] This fascination with images entails also an "essential poverty", as Kearney notes: «The imaginary could not teach us anything new since it was held [for Sartre] to be a "nothingness" projected by our consciousness» (Kearney, R., *Poetics of Imagining: Modern and Postmodern*, New York, Fordham University Press, 1998, p. 137).

[39] Ricoeur, P., "Imagination in Discourse and in Action", *Analecta Husserliana*, 7, 1978, p. 7.

[40] Ricoeur, P., *Lectures on Imagination*, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

[41] *Ibidem.*

ness that was not available in the literal register. Imagination is the apperception, the sudden view, of a new predicative pertinence. Kearney explains this function of imagination as the ability to say one thing in terms of another, creating something new in this manner[42].

Ricoeur uses Kant's schematism, which he describes as a method for giving an image to a concept, to explain the work of imagination and its intrinsic relation to language. In this context, imagination is a method rather than content. Imagination grasps the similar, seeing as we see old age as the close of the day and time as a beggar. This is why Ricoeur can say: «In short, the work of the imagination is to schematize metaphorical attribution. Like the Kantian schema, it gives an image to an emerging meaning. The image is an emerging meaning before it is a faded perception»[43]. The ethical force of this claim becomes clearer when we notice how abstract norms require schemata in order to become practically intelligible. Concepts like justice, for instance, do not guide life only as formal ideas; they acquire operative intelligibility through images such as justice as balance (proportionality), justice as repair (restoration), or justice as hospitality (welcome of the stranger). These images are not optional ornaments; they organize different practical reasonings and disclose different ways of being responsible. Schematism names, in this sense, the imaginative mediation through which emerging meanings become action-guiding.

Ricoeur continues:

> The ultimate role of the image is not only to diffuse meaning across diverse sensorial fields, to hallucinate thought in some way, but, on the contrary, to effect a sort of *epoché* of the real, to suspend our attention to the real, to place us in a state of non-engagement concerning perception and action… in this state of non-engagement we try new ideas, new values, new ways of being-in-the-world. Imagination is the free play of possibilities.[44]

One can see this *epoché* at work paradigmatically in tragic narrative, where the reader or spectator is withdrawn from immediate practical engagement and placed before a staged world in which competing goods collide. In *Antigone*, for example, the conflict between familial piety and civic law is not offered as a case-study to which one simply applies a rule; it is configured as a world that compels us to try out values such as obedience, justice, loyalty, resistance, without the immediacy of action, and to experience how each path generates residue and loss. The narrative thereby functions as an ethical laboratory, making visible moral complexity and testing our evaluative bearings. We see some images only to the extent that we first hear them. Bachelard prepares our soul to do this *epoché* of the real. However, with Ricoeur, we understand the metaphorical process carried out by the imagination and how the semantic innovation comes to be.

Moreover, for Ricoeur, this does not have to happen only in poetic reverie. He would agree that poets and the readers of poetry train their souls to engage with

[42] Kearney, R., *Poetics of Imagining*, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
[43] Ricoeur, P., *Imagination in Discourse and Action*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
[44] Ricoeur, P., *Lectures on Imagination*, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

new ideas, new values, and new ways of being in the world and that we should all have, to some extent, access to this experience. However, this same attitude and disposition could be used in another aspect of our life, such as our ethical life. For Ricoeur, our images do not necessarily represent or communicate moral meanings that previously existed in our minds or our cultures. Instead, these imaginative symbolic works generate new existential possibilities for ethical self-constancy, disrupting and reconfiguring the pre-existing meanings institutionalized by cultural traditions and sedimented identities. Our ethical behavior is inseparable from this continuous work of imagination that productively configures new ways of being and new ways of relating to others.

In extending our self-understanding beyond itself through metaphors, imagination discloses fresh pathways that cannot be encountered in the universal and abstract principles of moral theories. In this light, Ricoeur views imagination as a transformative production of metaphors that carries ethical life forward through a continuous process of symbolically experimenting with our existence and with our way towards a good life: «The metaphors, symbols or narratives produced by imagination all provide us with 'imaginative variations' of the world, thereby offering us the freedom to conceive of the world in other ways and to undertake forms of action which might lead to its transformation»[45]. We are always reimagining and refiguring what it could mean to realize the ethical ideal of an authentic life through these narrative variations.

Ricoeur proposes a second way of understanding how imagination prepares us for ethical life, his most novel proposal in contrast to Bachelard. This way involves his understanding of narrative imagination as synthesizing our experiences from past, present, and future in one self-identity. Without this self-identity, discussing ethical life and ethical action would be impossible, preventing also discussing accountability, responsibility, and freedom. Narrative imagination forms our identity through what Ricoeur calls "narrative configuration". Kearney explains that this narrative configuration consists of a «temporal synthesis of heterogeneous elements–or, to put it more simply, the ability to create a plot which transforms a sequence of events into a story»[46]. This act is an act of emplotment; it is a synthesis as explained by Kant in his account of the productive power of the transcendental imagination: «As a power of grasping the many under the rules of the same, the narrative imagination is one which introduces recollection and repetition into a linear sequence of events (natural time), thus making it into a recapitulative story (narrative time)»[47]. Narrative imagination then synthesizes the heterogeneous elements of human life–agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results-into a meaningful, followable story of our life.

Ricoeur is explicit about the importance of narrative in the configuration of personal identity in his work *Oneself as Another.* He suggests that the stories we tell about ourselves are not mere representations of events but are constitutive

[45] Kearney, R., *Poetics of Imagining*, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
[46] *Ivi*, p. 154.
[47] *Ibidem*.

of our identity. Through these narratives, we make sense of our experiences and actions, linking them together in a coherent story that reflects our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. It is from this personal identity that we can act ethically. The thread of his analysis consists of description, narration, and prescription. The narrative identity works as the means, as the transition between description of the action–which for Ricoeur prevails in the analytic philosophies of action–and the prescription which explains all action only through the ideas of "good" and "obligatory"[48].

Conclusion. The Constitutive Role of Imagination in Ethical Life

By engaging the perspectives developed by Bachelard and Ricoeur, we can see how both views converge in understanding imagination as constitutive of ethical life. For these thinkers, imagination is not simply an auxiliary faculty that we can optionally employ in service of moral deliberation, a tool for illuminating already-established moral meanings. Rather, imagination emerges as a primordial capacity of creative expression that discloses and generates new possibilities to be explored. Ethical norms, duties, and values do not precede or stand apart from human imagination. They arise from and return to the perpetual work of configuring, metaphorically experimenting with, and narratively refiguring the significance of our presence and praxis in the world. Far from being opposed to ethical norms and rationality, Bachelardian reverie and Ricoeurian narrative are shown to be fertile grounds where the very meanings and inspirations for moral thought and action can germinate.

With these accounts of imagination, ethical life itself is opened up to a new conception, one that exceeds an understanding of ethical life as fixed by universal principles, duties, or calculations of consequences. We do not want to negate these aspects of morality; we consider them essential. Nevertheless, we contest that they are not enough to achieve a good life. We need the expansion of our being through the metaphorical and narrative functions of our imagination. This conception of our ethical life encompasses not just formulating moral norms but more primordially regards the continuous configuration of our self through imagination. Furthermore, for ethical action to be vital and responsive, adhering to norms and principles is necessary but insufficient. We might know the universal norm, but sometimes, we do not know how to apply it. It is here where imagination is required to sustain our openness to new possibilities by paying attention to reality and letting us be surprised by the other. We can always find new ways of following the norm; there is never only one way.

This expanded understanding of ethics as poetics recognizes that dwelling ethically means living in spaces of continuous possibilities and transformation through our imagination powers. What is ultimately at stake in ethics is what rules to follow and, more primordially, what modes of existence we poetically

[48] Ricoeur, P., *Oneself as Another*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

envision and strive to actualize through the perpetual metaphorization and narrativization of our lives. The centrality of imagination to ethics that Bachelard and Ricoeur present shows that the most profound ethical questions always involve a call for renewal, transfiguration, and regeneration. Nothing in this life is static. We are all called to change and be transformed. What is renewed, transfigured, or regenerated is our personal identity and all our relations to others, persons, and objects in the world (and beyond the world). Moreover, this transformation involves our existential attunements and our shared horizons of meaning and possibility. Ethics as poetics resolve our vocation towards a fuller existence in which imagination plays a crucial role.

In conclusion, while imagination has historically been disregarded or, at best, treated as peripheral to ethics, the philosophical perspectives of Gaston Bachelard and Paul Ricoeur allow us to conceive imagination as fundamentally constitutive of ethical life radically. Through Bachelard's phenomenology of poetic reverie and Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the productive imagination in metaphor and narrative, we can appreciate how imagination is not merely an auxiliary faculty for picturing images but the very source in which ethical meanings take root and renewal. Far from being opposed to rigorous rationality, Bachelardian reverie, and Ricoeurian metaphoricity and narrativity are revealed as irreducible dimensions of our being-in-the-world required to sustain our capacities for authentic, ethical life.

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