The Imaginal World and the Orientation of Perception: Henry Corbin and the French Phenomenological Context*

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This article places Henry Corbin's concept of creative imagination in conversation with the French phenomenological tradition he had earlier influenced.[1] Ultimately, I want to argue that Corbin's understanding of the imaginal world suggests a potentially fruitful way to harmonize individual and social conceptions of autonomy.[2] However, this article aims merely to lay

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[1] It would certainly be fruitful to examine shared *German* sources between Corbin and figures like Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (e.g., Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Karl Jaspers). On such sources, see Henry Corbin's discussion in "*Post-Scriptum* à un entretien philosophique," in *Henry Corbin*, ed. Christian Jambet (Paris: L'Herne, 1981), 38–56. As for Corbin's own influence in France, his early translations of German texts include, notably, short works by Karl Barth, Johann Georg Hamann, Jaspers, and, most famously, several selections of Heidegger. For a record of these, see Association of the Friends of Henry and Stella Corbin, "Bibliographie," https://www.amiscorbin.com/bibliographie/. Corbin's terminological impact on phenomenology and existentialism in France in the 1930s is well established, e.g., regarding terms such as *ipséité*, *projet*, and, most notoriously, *réalité-humaine* (for Heidegger's *Dasein*). Notable in this context is Sartre's discussion of Corbin's terminology in "Un Nouveau Mystique" (February 1943), in *Situations, I: Essais Critique* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1947). On Corbin's Heidegger translation specifically, see, e.g., Rebecca Bligh, "The *Réalité-humaine* of Henry Corbin" (PhD thesis, Goldsmiths, 2012). Finally, as for Corbin's impact on early French phenomenology *beyond* terminology, this is difficult to measure. Merleau-Ponty, at least, knew Corbin's book on Avicenna (cited below) well enough to invite him in 1955 to contribute to an edited volume. See his letter to Corbin in Jambet, *Henry Corbin*, 339, in which he also reminds Corbin that they had crossed paths "in Kojève's courses." See also n. 31 below. (I thank a reviewer for suggesting a note here.)

[2] My hope is that Corbin's work—as well as the Iranian sources he works with—might converse fruitfully with more overtly political thinkers, especially in the Greek democratic tradition. The works of Cornelius Castoriadis on imagination—e.g., most recently in English, *The Greek Imaginary: From Homer to Heraclitus, Seminars, 1982–1983*, trans. John V. Garner and María-Constanza Garrido Sierralta (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023)—might promise interesting and challenging possibilities for dialogue. However, on the perils of any too-easy

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the groundwork for that project by providing an exegesis of Corbin's concept of imagination and having it converse with two iconic phenomenological alternatives. In a broad way, I hope to indicate that Corbin's work not only offers relatively untapped resources for thinking about imagination but also that he—as engaging deeply with Persian and Arabic traditions—models one way in which phenomenology might fruitfully take steps beyond its Western boundaries, narrowly defined.

Section I briefly explores the alignment between Corbin's phenomenological method and the (largely Islamic) visionary practices he studied. His examination of medieval Persian theories of imagination draws out a key distinction between, above all, the subjective imagination and the imaginal world proper.[3] Section II briefly places this concept into conversation with early Sartre's "annihilative" imagination and Merleau-Ponty's critique of it. I suggest that Corbin's view can help vindicate a strong distinction, like Sartre's, between creative imagination and regular perception. Even so, Corbin's "realism" of imaginal content moves beyond Sartre's subjective and annihilating imagination (and also, as I argue, beyond Merleau-Ponty's concept of expression), insofar as it allows for positive sources of meaning not anchored in (i.e., via neither affirmation, negation, nor implication of) perception.[4]

By somewhat artificially placing Corbin in this debate—I am unaware of any direct engagement between these thinkers along these lines—my hope is to show the relevance of his alternative position. What Corbin's position suggests, as I explore in my concluding section, is that certain "primordial Images" are needed to provide perception with an interpretability and significance.[5] Corbin calls the philosophy that recognizes the need for this significance "Oriental," which for him refers not essentially to geography

comparison of Greek, later Western, and Iranian political concepts, see Ahmad Bostani, "Rethinking Political Theology in the Islamic Context: The Case of Iran," in *Islamic Political Theology*, ed. Massimo Campanini and Marco Di Donato (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 135–57. See also nn. 6 and 38 below.

[3] At no point in this article will I attempt to assess the accuracy of Corbin's interpretations of the thinkers with whom he engages (e.g., Suhrawardī, Ibn 'Arabī, etc.); I will be working only with the concepts he develops through his engagements with them.

[4] Corbin's project has not, to my knowledge, been made to engage directly and substantively with Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's debate on imagination. That said, for some works with helpful elements (not further cited here), see Chiara Bottici, *Imaginal Politics: Images Beyond Imagination and the Imaginary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Aydogan Kars, "World Is an Imagination: A Phenomenological Approach to the Ontology and Hermeneutics of Ibn al-'Arabī" (MA thesis, Middle East Technical University, 2009); Laura McMahon, "The Poverty and Richness of the Imaginary: Sartre on (Anti-)racist Ways of Seeing," *Sartre Studies International* 27, no. 2 (2021): 87–100; Stéphane Massonet, "L'imagination aggressive ou la phénoménologie *made in France*," *Eikasía Revista De Filosofía* 100 (2022): 269–84; Ali Shariat, "Henry Corbin and the Imaginal: A Look at the Concept and Function of the Creative Imagination in Iranian Philosophy," *Diogenes* 39, no. 156 (1991): 83–114; and Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *L'imaginaire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003).

[5] Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, trans. Nancy Pearson (New Lebanon, NY: Omega Publications, 1978), 4–5.

but rather to the *orientation* of perceptual life through the strictly nongeographical notion of the imaginal world.[6] (Only secondarily does the term playfully refer to a direction, insofar as philosophy in the *eastern* Islamic world, that is, mystical Persian thought, was, for him, one notable example among the very many global traditions that recognized this exigency.) What Corbin ultimately argues, as I try to show, is that our access to the imaginal world enables a characteristic duality to arise in all perceptual life, and this feature is required for us to be able to relate to perception either critically or charitably. It is thus the imaginal world that orients and enables any authentic hermeneutics of perceptual life.

I. PARTICIPATING IN THE IMAGINAL WORLD

In 1948 Henry Corbin proposed that religious studies must ultimately be grounded in phenomenology and in a practice of "entering into religious consciousness."[7] Central to (but not unique to) his view is his insistence that there are "multiple orders of reality which correspond to different modes of data and 'objective existence.' These modes are not reducible to each other, nor can they be judged in each other's terms. And it is not possible to have access to each of them, except through an examination of the acts of consciousness which lead to them, acts in which the region of being [*région de l'être*] towards which they reach is manifested [*peut se manifester*]."[8] Corbin is thus deeply committed to the need to analyze reality at multiple coexisting levels, levels in principle irreducible one to the other. Likewise, he is clear that while the examination of "acts of consciousness" is important, these acts must be understood as reaching toward specific regions or modes of being and as helping them manifest themselves. That is, distinctive acts of consciousness imply and access distinctive strata of reality.[9]

[6] On "orientation," see Corbin, *Man of Light*, 1–12, and Henry Corbin, *The Concept of Comparative Philosophy*, trans. Peter Russell (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1981), 26–31, esp. 26: "[The] concept of the 'Orient' in a Suhrawardī and in all of his followers (*isrāq, mashriq*) is not that of an Orient which one can set up as a mark on our maps. The word in his work has neither a geographical nor an ethnic sense, but essentially a metaphysical sense. He is describing the spiritual world as that greater Orient towards which the pure intelligible sun rises, and the '*Orientaux*' are those whose inner dwelling receives the fire of this eternal dawn." Orientation is thus something forwarded by many global traditions, including those not linked by historical continuity or "influence," etc. Despite Corbin's clarity on this point, for an account of the cooption of some of Corbin's terms by political ideologues, see Ahmad Bostani, "Henry Corbin's Oriental Philosophy and Iranian Nativist Ideologies," *Religions* 12, no. 11 (2021): 1–13 and see n. 38 below. Finally, on Corbin as a critic of "Orientalism" in the imperialist sense, see, e.g., Hermann Landolt, "Henry Corbin, 1903–1978: Between Philosophy and Orientalism," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119, no. 3 (1999): 484–90. (I thank a reviewer for suggesting a more expansive note here.)

[7] Henry Corbin, "Iranian Studies and Comparative Religion," in *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy*, trans. Joseph Rowe (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1998), 17.

[8] Corbin, "Iranian Studies," 16–17; italics removed from "manifested" for clarity.

[9] The disclosive and not merely creative nature of imagination is proposed in different ways by other phenomenologists. On Husserl in particular, see, e.g., Julia Jensen, "Imagination Denaturalized: Phantasy, the Imaginary, and Imaginative Ontology," in *The Oxford Handbook of the*

These themes are more amplified in some of Corbin's work from the mid-1950s, where he turned increasingly toward an analysis of one specific level of human experience, namely, what he initially called "the Imaginable." For example, in 1955 he wrote that "we need an organ of perception outside of our reason, our senses, or our belief in history, if we are to grasp the unreal which is more than real. Between the rational and the sensory, we must admit a third world, that of the Imaginable [*l'Imaginable*], of a structure no less positive *and objective* than the other two."[10] Evident here is Corbin's commitment to a form of what we might, today, refer to as a realism of imagination's content.[11] (However, more precisely, it might best be called a *super*-realism of the Imaginable, since Corbin here speaks of these contents both as "unreal" and as "more than real."[12] His debt to the Neoplatonic distinction between two kinds of nonconsciousness—sub- and superconsciousness—cannot be explored here.[13]) Second, Corbin's term "the Imaginable" distinguishes the *potential* object from what might become *actually* imagined. Accordingly, Corbin introduces a second term, "the Imaginatrix," which captures the actualized event or site of imagination: "Perhaps better than active Imagination, would be the word Imaginatrix [*l'Imaginatrice*]. It is the organ and the site of the encounter. . . . This is neither sensory perception, nor

History of Phenomenology, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 676–95. On the phenomenological background more generally, see Eva Brann, *The World of the Imagination: Sum and Substance* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), esp. pt. 1, chap. 4. Part of what makes Corbin's conception of the imaginal world unique in the phenomenological tradition is its Neoplatonic backdrop, as I suggest in notes below.

[10] Henry Corbin, "Sufism and Sophia," in *Voyage*, 223–24. Note that, according to L.W.C. van Lit, *The World of Image in Islamic Philosophy: Ibn Sina, Suhrawardi, Shahrazuri and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 18, Corbin's terminology of "*le monde de l'Imaginable*" (translating the Arabic *'ālam al-mithāl*) traces back at least to 1944. Later, Corbin's translation would become *le monde imaginal* or, in Latin, *mundus imaginalis*. See, e.g., Henry Corbin, "Comment concevoir la philosophie comparée?," in *Philosophie Iranienne et philosophie comparée* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1985), 33.

[11] Compare Corbin's view of imagination's role in cognition to the role of mathematical imagination in *A Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's "Elements,"* trans. Glenn R. Morrow (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). Corbin cites this text in *Comparative Philosophy*, 22. See also Dmitri Nikulin, *Matter, Imagination and Geometry: Ontology, Natural Philosophy and Mathematics in Plotinus, Proclus, and Descartes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); and John V. Garner, "Creative Discovery: Proclus and Plato on the Emergence of Scientific Precision," *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (2020): 299–321.

[12] Corbin's claim here is not self-contradictory. The imaginal is "unreal" in that it is not of the same order as the perceptibly real (nor as the intellectually real); *and* the imaginal is "more than real" inasmuch as it mediates intellectual truths with perception and provides the latter with orientation. This is a crucial point for comparison with Sartre, who uses the similar term "irreal" to speak of imaginary objects (see below). On various senses of negation in the broadly *Neoplatonic* context, see John N. Martin, "Existence, Negation, and Abstraction in the Neoplatonic Hierarchy," *History and Philosophy of Logic* 16 (1995): 169–96. Of course, the imaginal is not the *only* real stratum of being for Corbin (nor the singularly important one), on which see nn. 68 and 74 below.

[13] Corbin notes the link to Neoplatonism in "Theology of Aristotle," trans. Giada Mangiameli, *Kronos Philosophical Journal* 8 (2019): 24–29. See also, for comparison, Andrew Smith, "Unconsciousness and Quasiconsciousness in Plotinus," *Phronesis* 23, no. 3 (1978): 292–301.

abstract concept, nor belief in some historical event. . . . It is an inner visionary perception [*perception intérieure visionnaire*] . . . controlled neither by the senses nor by critical reason."[14] Here, then, Corbin posits an actual visionary experience that joins one's own creative *subjectivity*—that is, he holds that imagination is creative (comparable to the traditional senses attributed to it, e.g., in Romanticism)—with the *objectivity* of imaginable contents.[15] This Imaginatory instance, for Corbin, is therefore both an actualized mode *of access* to being (i.e., it actualizes potentially imaginable contents for us), and it is itself a mode *of being* (i.e., it is a way, site, or event of being).[16] In Corbin's later terminology, the imaginer comes to access—indeed, performs or instantiates—the *mundus imaginalis* or Imaginal World (*le Monde imaginal*).[17]

Evidently, one might hold that perception or intellection could be described in similarly realist ways. What is it, then, that for Corbin constitutes imagination's distinctness from perception and intellection? First, unlike sense perception, imaginal contents are not generically accessible to all; we have to bring ourselves into a special state of being in order to access them. Certain visionaries—and here Corbin is using the Dante-affiliated spiritual group Fideli d'Amore as his case study—have succeeded in this effort, grasping something that "was not the sensible figure, identically and indifferently perceptible for any visual organ; it was instead a Figure whose beauty became visible only in this figure, and in a way unique to the mode of perception of each member."[18] The perceptible world is thus characterized by its being "identically and indifferently" accessible to normally operative sense powers of different persons. By contrast, imagination

[14] Corbin, "Sufism," 224, with the translation of *l'Imaginatrice* changed from "Imaginatory" to "Imaginatrix" and with the original emphasis there removed for clarity. Note that when speaking of Active Imagination, Corbin's term *Imaginatrice* would later tend to give way to *Imaginal*. On Corbin's developing terminology, see, e.g., the editors' note in Corbin, "Sufism," 224 n. 3.

[15] Compare this to Brann, *World*, especially page 790, where she proposes that imagination should be seen as "receptive" and "not worshiped as an autarchic source [as in Romanticism] but understood as the enigmatic conduit of visions." Brann's citations of Corbin are few, but their potential for dialogue seems substantive. On the philosophic background of imagination, e.g., in Romanticism, see, inter alia, Saulius Geniusas and Dmitri Nikulin, eds., *Productive Imagination: Its History, Meaning and Significance* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); Cynthia Fleury, ed., *Imagination, imaginaire, imaginal* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006), 43–76; and, for a broader vision, Hans-Georg Moeller and Andrew K. Whitehead, eds., *Imagination: Cross-Cultural Philosophical Analyses* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

[16] On imagination as both means and modality, see Adriana Berger, "Cultural Hermeneutics: The Concept of Imagination in the Phenomenological Approaches of Henry Corbin and Mircea Eliade," *Journal of Religion* 66, no. 2 (1986): 141–56, esp. 142: "Imagination thus appears as both a means of knowledge and a modality of being, and in that sense it bears a philosophical (existential) dimension. The imagination is thus a mediation, an intermediary world, which objectivizes itself in the physical one." Regarding the language of "event" here, see Corbin, "Situation philosophique," 80, where he preferred the term "transhistorical event" or "metahistory."

[17] Henry Corbin, "*Mundus Imaginalis*, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal," in *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, trans. Leonard Fox (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Studies, 1995), 21 and passim.

[18] Corbin, "Sufism," 225.

cannot remain indifferent to given content. It must be "transmuted by such an epiphany," even as the imaginer "makes [the epiphany] possible, because this soul is ready to welcome its own metamorphosis."[19] Thus, access to the imaginal content—in this case, we notice, access is shared between members of a group—is contingent upon a special, willing, and indeed self-positing receptive attitude. In short, through this "fidelity [*fidélité*]," as he calls it, they each posit themselves as receptive to a modification of themselves by the imaginal.[20] This prerequisite self-positing does not make the imaginal thus imagined any less real than perception's object; it simply means that the mode of access to it and performance of it must be achieved differently than with perceptual objectivity.[21]

Despite its distinctness from perception, Corbin ultimately thinks that imagination's most natural and virtuous function is one of orienting perception, that is, translating noncorporeal (spiritual or intellectual) truths for us as perceptual beings in a way that guides our perceptual life. But what sort of guidance is he thinking of? To explore one of his responses to this question, we can turn to a later essay—from 1977—on the medieval

[19] Corbin, "Sufism," 225.

[20] Corbin, "Sufism," 225. Corbin thus holds that individuals each imagine imaginal content in a unique way. (Indeed, individuals are individuated *by* the very way they engage with this content. See nn. 35 and 74 below.) See also Kevin Corrigan and Syed A. H. Zaidi, "On Henry Corbin's *Theology of Aristotle*," *Kronos Philosophical Journal* 8 (2019): 34: "This noetic value of the imagination means that there is 'more' in our images than we can unpack and this 'more' has to be lived on its own terms as part of the divine yearning to reveal Itself to each of us in our experience, however differently, indeed uniquely, it is experienced in each individual." On the uniqueness of each "theophany," see Ibn 'Arabī's concept of the "God created in the faiths" in Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn 'Arabī*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 195–200. For balance, one should also consult, here, Ibn 'Arabī's theme of *overcoming* mere belief. See, e.g., William C. Chittick, "Transcending the Gods of Belief," in *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 335–56, as well as Aydogan Kars, *Unsaying God: Negative Theology in Medieval Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[21] If William James tries to maintain the distinction between, on the one hand, a believed-in content whose very reality depends (i.e., co-depends) on the believer's prior belief in it (e.g., a cooperative act might be made possible, in part, by mutual trust) and, on the other hand, a believed-in content whose mere discovery by a believer, but *not* whose existence in itself, depends upon the believer's prior belief in it (e.g., God), then it might be argued that Corbin places the imaginal world in an intermediate position between these. For Corbin, the imaginer discovers and performs imaginal content only insofar as the imaginer's life is shaped by the content, thus yielding a unique, creative instantiation of content and person. Per Corbin (*Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shī'ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977], 29), in such a case, content becomes hierophany and person becomes hierurgy. (Recall, of course, that not all reality is imaginal in this way.) In such a condition of *unio sympathetica*, it follows, according to Corbin (interpreting Ibn 'Arabī), that "Whoever knows himself, knows his God." See Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 120–35, compared here with William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1897), 25–29. Despite my comparison, a key difference should be noted: if James is understood as trying to *protect* preexisting "passional" commitments from intellectual interference, then his view differs markedly from what we find in Corbin, for whom the imaginal mediates and *facilitates* intellect's conveyance into sensuous life.

Persian philosopher Suhrawardī (whom Corbin had first studied intensively fifty years prior). In this article he interprets and incorporates Suhrawardī's theory of the *sensorium*:

> The imagination, in its sensitive and passive aspect, is simply a bank which stores images coming from sense-perceptions, which are projected in the *sensorium*. But in its active aspect as *virtus combinative*, the Imagination is as if caught between two fires. . . . It may be captured by the so-called calculative faculty (*wahm*). Animals also possess this, but in humans it leads to judgments which violate the laws of the intellect. Reduced to this level, the active Imagination is only able to produce the fantastic, the imaginary, unreal, or even absurd [*de l'imaginaire, du fantastique, de l'irréel, voire de l'absurde*]. On the other hand, when it acts in service to the Intellect . . . it is designated as *mufakkira* (meditative thinking). It is thereby the organ of access to the reality of the *mundus imaginalis*. . . . In turn, it projects imitative images into the *sensorium*—no longer originating in sensory perceptions, but in the world of pure intelligibility [*du monde intelligible pur*]. It is these intellective or metaphysical images which correspond to the invisible forms . . . which thereby allow visionary perception [*la perception visionnaire*].[22]

Corbin thus argues that veracious imagination must be "in service to the intellect." It transforms intuitive intellectual awareness not into definitions, judgments, or arguments but rather into images for the *sensorium*, that is, the unified seat of sense reception. Thus, not all of what the sensorium receives comes directly from empirical senses; it may also receive intellectual truths translated, if you will, by imagination.[23]

Importantly, Corbin quickly adds in this article that a being who is actively intellectual but lacks this imagination would remain deficient overall. He makes this point by identifying three distinct figures, each with a distinct relation to the imaginal world: philosopher, prophet, and perfect Sage. First, there is "the case of the philosopher whose intellect only possesses mental visions of the forms, without their imitative images being projected into the *sensorium*."[24] This mere philosopher fails to allow intellectual awareness to "become events which are lived by the soul."[25] The mere philosopher is thus distinct, for Suhrawardī, from the existence of the prophet, who can "live" intellectual truths because these truths take the form, for them, of images "projected into the mirror of the *sensorium*."[26] Finally, and greatest of all

[22] Henry Corbin, "A Theory of Visionary Knowledge," in *Voyage*, 127. Notice Corbin's use of the terms *imaginaire* and *irréel* here, which correspond precisely to Sartre's terminology (see below).

[23] Corbin could of course maintain that imagination is involved in all transmission of sensation to the sensorium. However, this would be a limited and restrictive use of imagination as mimetic or as "sensitive and passive." This is the use highlighted in the Aristotelian tradition from *De Anima* forward. On this history see, e.g., Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Discovery of the Imagination," in *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, trans. David A. Curtis (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[24] Corbin, "Theory," 128.

[25] Corbin, "Theory," 128.

[26] Corbin, "Theory," 128. Compare this reading of Suhrawardī on prophecy to Ibn Sīnā on the same topic, for example, in *The Book of Salvation*, excerpted in *Medieval Islamic Philosophical*

for Suhrawardī, as Corbin argues, would be an ideal union of both the philosopher and the prophet in the figure of the "perfect Sage" or *theosophos*.[27] This person exercises philosophical intelligence but also lives by way of mediative images like the prophet.

Through these three figures, we see Corbin's broader point: Strictly intellectual truths might yield intuitive knowledge or even discursive or propositional commitments; but this does not mean that they would automatically impact one's practical or perceptual life. With imagination in service to the senses (or to the merely calculative power) and with intellectual truths thus effectively inspiring no imagination, a person—even if philosophical—would be incapable of living, as a whole, in accordance with their own intellectual awareness. Practically speaking, a person might, for example, know what is required for health but not actively commit to living it out (i.e., classical *akrasia*). Or, perceptually speaking, a person may know the dubiousness of a conspiracy theory but be incapable of passional acceptance that alternative theories are more plausible. Dysfunctional imagination thus leaves the person alienated or "secularized," which for Corbin means that one's sensorium is determined by the natural (e.g., appetitive, calculative, etc.) or social-historical (e.g., traditional, propagandistic, etc.) forces mastering attention. The result would be a person who, while being both actually perceptual and actually intellectual, nevertheless could not connect these and make any intellectual sense of the world. The person would be ruptured. Perceptual events could not open pathways to intellectual lessons, and intellectual truths could not shape attention or inform daily perception. The properly functioning imagination, by contrast, sensuously orients intellect and intellectually orients sense; this is Corbin's primary thesis. This is not to say, however, that the properly functioning imagination would be identical or reduced to the intellectual power in this relationship; intellectual truths are non-spatiotemporal and thus cannot, in themselves, become sensuous. Hence, if imagination were identical to intellect, it would be incapable of

Writings, trans. Muhammad Ali Khalidi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 32: "It is possible for someone to have a soul . . . receptive to the inspiration of the Active Intellect. . . . This is . . . the highest of the prophetic faculties, and this faculty is most worthy of being called a 'holy faculty.' It ranks highest among the human faculties." For the view that Ibn Sīnā minimized imagination in prophecy and severed its "natural link [with] intellection, in order to preserve the immaterial and immortal nature of the soul," see Alfred Ivry, "Arabic and Islamic Psychology and Philosophy of Mind," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2012), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/arabic-islamic-mind/. For a contrasting reading, bringing Avicenna nearer to Corbin's reading of Suhrawardī, see Ahmad Bostani, "The Status of Imagination in Avicenna's Political Philosophy," *Journal of Islamic Political Studies* 1, no. 1 (2019): 86: "In Avicenna's view, celestial souls acted like mediators between the sensible world and intelligible entities. As such, Avicenna paved the way for [an] ontology of imagination. . . . This conception holds extensive political dimensions marking a significant part of the history of political thought in the late Islamic civilization, especially in Iran."

[27] Corbin, "Theory," 128.

projecting images in and for the sensorium. The core of Corbin's thesis is therefore that the imaginal world is *neither* intellect *nor* sense; it is fundamentally a *mediator*.[28] The one who is properly attuned to it is at once intellectual and perceptual, but not merely each of those. Rather, one becomes each of these in a fundamentally intercommunicative way thanks to imagination's access to and practice of the intermediary reality, which is the imaginal world.

That said, I would caution that imagination's mediation can happen in at least two ways of unequal value for Corbin, that is, either by allegory or by symbol. Corbin admits that even in a condition of "secularization" the imagination may produce allegories, but it would not be able to produce or understand symbols. The difference resides in the way that an allegory serves to depict a known or knowable intellectual or perceptual truth in alternative sensuous terms, but the truth could possibly be known in nonallegorical terms as well; it does not require imaginative construal.[29] For example, take someone who uses an image-rich story to help represent the Pythagorean Theorem. Here, one could in principle (even if not in fact) always understand the theorem, construct its proof, or draw conclusions from it without the help of imagination.[30] Corbin, rather, is interested in the distinctively imaginal content, which he calls *symbolic*.[31] Corbin's book on Ibn Sīnā, for example, focuses on Persian "recital" practices, that is, stories (*récits*) repeated so that a figure or guide appears to carry out a journey relevant to one's own

[28] In Corbin's terms, imagination produces not *idols*—as when a percept itself is taken to be a self-sufficient meaning—but rather it reveals phenomena as *iconic*. See Henry Corbin, "Théophanie et miroirs: Idoles ou icônes?," *Les Études philosophiques* 1 (1980): 91: "[The Image] is an *idol* when it settles the vision of the contemplator upon itself. It is opaque, without transparency; it remains at the level of that out of which it came. But it is an *icon*—whether it is a painted image or a mental image, when its transparency permits the contemplator to see by it beyond it, and because what is beyond it can only be perceived through it." It would be fruitful to compare this account with the "icon" of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159–90.

[29] See Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 30: "Allegory is a more or less artificial figuration of generalities or abstractions that are perfectly cognizable in other ways."

[30] Similarly, Descartes famously criticizes the limits of imagination with the chiliagon argument in Meditation VI. That said, for a study of the way imagination also has a very important "rational use" in Descartes, see Pierre Guenancia, "Les critique cartésienne des critiques de l'imagination," in Fleury, *Imagination*, 43–76.

[31] See Corbin, *Avicenna*, 30: "The *symbol* is not an artificially constructed *sign*; it flowers in the soul spontaneously and announces something that cannot be expressed otherwise; it is the *unique* expression of the thing symbolized as of a reality that thus becomes transparent to the soul, but which in itself transcends all expression. . . . To penetrate the meaning of a symbol is in no sense equivalent to making it superfluous or abolishing it, for it always remains the sole *expression* of the signified thing with which it symbolizes." See also Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Liadain Sherrard and Philip Sherrard (London: Kegan Paul, 1993), 13. Notably, in his 1955 letter to Corbin (cited above, n. 1), Merleau-Ponty mentioned approvingly Corbin's notion symbolism and quoted *Avicenna*, 260: "[The] symbol is mediator. . . . There is no question of disengaging, of 'abstracting.'. . . For the soul, it is a question of at once undergoing and performing a transmutation."

path.[32] Overtly the guide is perhaps just a speaking bird who faces a treacherous trial (and the story is, overtly, mind-numbingly simple).[33] But repeated recitation, modified each time and synthesized with the reciter's independent experiences in differing contexts, unifies the bird's narrative with one's own life. The recital opens one up to a kind of dialogue with a different person one might become; and it opens one to new learning or inundates one's perceptual life with previously unintegrated knowledge. Analogues of such recitals or other symbolic practices can be found across the globe, for example, in the visions of the Fideli d'Amore or elsewhere as crystalized in *Salāmān and Absāl* or the *Pivot of Jade*.[34] And, if the religious examples do not stir us, then perhaps we might envision the way a faithful imagination is necessary for significant aesthetic experiences.[35] In short, without entering into *some* imaginal practice of *some* historically contingent kind (i.e., rooted in *some* particular culture or another), we cannot grasp or perform the shareable, iconic existence that great works—found across the globe—make available.

Of course, despite its ideally mediating role described here, imagination *can* become anarchic or untethered from the role of mediation with the intellect. Hence, the "inseparability of philosophical study from spiritual experience"—that is, the life of the philosophical visionary—is a desideratum for Corbin but not something automatically given to us.[36] When the intellect-imagination alliance fails, the sensorium is stuck being generically supplied merely by the senses, confounded by an arbitrarily creative imagination, or, worst of all, controlled by predominant social, economic, or political forces (e.g., by what Cornelius Castoriadis calls the "instituted and collectively

[32] See Corbin, *Avicenna*, passim, and esp. 33–34. See also Cynthia Fleury, "Introduction: La conscience imaginale," in Fleury, *Imagination*, 16, where she compares Corbin's point to the work of Bernard Rimé, arguing that the imaginal world is "the site of the '*récit*' of continual adjustment of the soul with the worlds that surround it."

[33] Corbin, *Avicenna*, 188–91.

[34] See Corbin, *Avicenna*, 205–41, and *Man of Light*, 56. On the challenges and advantages global diversity affords, according to Ibn 'Arabī, see William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), esp. chap. 9. See also Berger, "Cultural Hermeneutics," 156: "Beginning with a method of philosophical phenomenology, both Eliade and Corbin send us from one civilization to another, back and forth, therefore reminding us that the true humanistic quest takes place everywhere, and on different planes simultaneously." Finally, compare to Simone Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Harper Perennial, 2009), 119: "Among the different forms of religion there are, as it were, partial compensations for the visible differences, certain hidden equivalents." It should be noted, however, that Weil, unlike Corbin, saw the imagination as important in the love of God primarily insofar as one consents, in such love, to having one's imagination *emptied*: "But God has conferred upon [the person] an imaginary . . . divinity, so that he also, although a creature, may empty himself of his divinity" (99).

[35] For example, one may be forever changed by having engaged with a great work of fiction or music. That said, surely almost none of what passes for "aesthetic experience" today would imply a dialogue so significant that one could potentially lose oneself and be re-individuated via the encounter. Our very notion of engaging "aesthetically" seems designed to bolster the instituted ego, to keep the already-extant self "distanced" from the content, and thus to preclude the kind of significant engagement Corbin is after.

[36] Corbin, "Theory," 121.

accepted significations").[37] Hence—and I unfortunately cannot expand on this here—Corbin sees not just personal disharmony but also social-political decline as correlated with the dysfunctional imagination. Societies, cultures, or eras may systemically fail to mediate sense and intellect.[38]

Here, I do not claim to have justified Corbin's conception of the imaginal world. I have aimed merely to emphasize the way it is intended as a distinctive domain or region of being coordinate with one who self-posits her own access to it and who can in turn be shaped by the content she welcomes from it and lives out by way of it. I think, at minimum, that this conception—at once Neoplatonic, phenomenological, and "visionary"—warrants discussion alongside its more well-known phenomenological contemporaries.

II. THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL CONTEXT: SARTRE AND MERLEAU-PONTY

As a way of emphasizing the new—or rather renewed—orientation that Corbin may offer for phenomenology, I thought it might prove helpful

[37] Cornelius Castoriadis, "Culture in Democratic Society," in *The Castoriadis Reader*, trans. David A. Curtis (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 344; and see *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 101–64.

[38] Corbin tends only to allude to political matters, explicitly avoiding political theorizing. That said, he clearly decries "desacralizing" tendencies in Western science, modern "technological" destruction of nature, and contemporary substitutions of "sociology" for theology, and so on. On these themes, see especially Corbin, *Comparative Philosophy*, 26–31. Bostani, in "Henry Corbin's Oriental Philosophy," calls this essay Corbin's "genealogy of contemporary Marxism and totalitarianism based on their theological roots" (1). See also Henry Corbin, "De la théologie apophatique comme antidote du nihilism," in *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris: L'Herne, 1981), 213–58, *Creative Imagination*, 3–38, and *Man of Light*, 1–12 and 51, where Corbin writes: "For what exists in fact . . . is not a collectivity but . . . persons each of whom can help one another to find his own way . . . ; but as soon as there is a wish by some to impose their way on others, the situation becomes once more that of the 'city of oppressors' in the Suhrawardian tale." For a political study of Corbin, see Alain Juster, "Angélologie et politique chez Henry Corbin," *Cahiers d'études sur la Méditerranée orientale et le monde turco-iranien* 7 (1989): 95–105, which suggests that Corbin would have sought broadly to evaluate political systems by accounting for the "loss of personality demanded" by the respective system (100). Finally, on the Iranian political context of Corbin's day, see again Bostani, "Henry Corbin's Oriental Philosophy," 10–11, which cites multiple relevant sources and argues (following a similar thesis by Matthijs van den Bos) that while Corbin proposed no "social or political scheme," he used some terms (e.g., "spiritual Orient"; see n. 6 above) that would later be coopted as a "weapon" by nativist ideologues in Iran. On this claim, see also Afshin Matin-Asgari, *Both Eastern and Western: An Intellectual History of Iranian Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 209, which describes even among Corbin's associates an "anti-Western rhetoric that within a year would become the dominate [*sic*] discourse of the coming Iranian Revolution." Certainly, Corbin's associates are one matter; but I do not see sufficient evidence to support Ali Mirsepassi's more contentious claims about Corbin in *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), for example, that Corbin's position "amounted . . . to *promoting* romantic nationalist currents" of the sort emergent in the Revolution and to doing so "over *against* the rival Enlightenment tradition" (118; my emphases). By contrast, see Corbin's "Situation philosophique," which rejects both "dogmatic confessional" and "sociopolitical" corruptions of religion and denounces confusions of "religion and social system" or "religion and *shari'ah*" (76 and 82). On this point, again, see Juster, "Angélologie," 103, arguing that the currents at work in the Revolution would have, in Corbin's view, amounted to "spiritual treason."

to place his conception of imagination in dialogue with a classic debate between icons Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. This comparison is admittedly artificial, since I see no evidence that he developed his ideas directly in conversation with either of these thinkers. Even so, Corbin's view of imagination can be made to stand out as an alternative in their debate about the perceptual immanence—or otherwise—of imaginable potentialities. The early Sartre, as I will argue, saw the creative imagination as able to enact a content distinct from perceptual content, an enaction it achieves by creatively negating, or "annihilating," perceptual content. Yet, from Merleau-Ponty's perspective, Sartre's view risked making the imagination's content sheerly arbitrary, with imagination's relationship to the perceptual world thus left ungrounded. He therefore defended, against Sartre, the primacy of perception, meaning that imaginary contents are not separate from perceptual potentialities. As I then go on to argue in the conclusion, Corbin would have something to offer in this debate, insofar as his position is able to retain both a strong distinction between imagination and perception *and* a real ground of imagination's contents.

The crux of the debate for Sartre resides in his famous argument in *The Imaginary* (1940), to the effect that the imagination is radically different than perception. Imagination's contents, he argues, stem from a person's creative negation of a perceptually given content. Sartre makes this point by way of several phenomenological descriptions. Among others, the cases he examines include, on the one hand, the act of imagining a friend Pierre as off traveling in West Africa and, on the other hand, the act of interpreting the notes one hears as being the "Seventh Symphony." Pierre in the first scenario and the "Seventh Symphony" in the second are both imaginary objects that stand opposed to the perceptual world.[39]

I will examine each of these examples closely. But to preview where Sartre is going, let me begin with a broad account. As Sartre argues, imaginary objects are "irreal" (*irréel*) entities, which means that to imagine them is to imagine something *opposed to* the perceptually present (real) world.[40] (For example, traveling Pierre is imagined *so as* to be an object not found here and now.) That said, we must bear in mind that Sartre maintains the classical phenomenological view that during perception (of, say, a book), features indispensable to the

[39] When speaking of imagined contents in Sartre, the appropriate term is "imaginary." Corbin's term "imaginal" was his own innovation, intended precisely to signal the realism of imagination discussed here in Section I.

[40] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, trans. Jonathan Webber (London: Routledge, 2004), 125ff. "Irreal" does not mean absolute nothingness; the image is at minimum existent *as* an *intentional act*. See Edward S. Casey, "Sartre on Imagination," in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Paul A. Schilpp (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1981), 139–66, esp. 154ff. See also Roland Breeur, "Du verre dans l'âme: L'imaginaire et sa pathologie selon Sartre," in Fleury, *Imagination*, 97–128. This position is already voiced in Sartre's 1936 work *The Imagination*, trans. Kenneth Williford and David Rudrauf (London: Routledge, 2012), 144: "There are no and there couldn't be any images in consciousness. But the image *is a certain type of consciousness*. The image is an act and not a thing." For an account of some critics of Sartre on this point, see Brann, *World*, 138–43.

perception include not only really present (or what we might call "positive") features (e.g., a book's visible cover); rather, perception always also includes some "non-positive," implicit elements (like the hidden back side of the book).[41] While the latter is hidden, it is still properly *perceptual* (i.e., it is perceived-as-hidden). What will be interesting for our purposes is that, for Sartre, not all of the nonpositive features of human experience are like the back side of the book (i.e., perceived-as-hidden). Rather, as he argues, some of the most important nonpositive features in experience are contents that are *only* imaginable, not perceptible. If such nonpositive *and* nonperceptual contents do feature in experience, they do so only as brought into experience by a different activity than perception, that is, by imagining.[42] What, then, are these contents that are *only* imaginable, and not properly perceptual, according to Sartre?

We can unfold Sartre's point by looking again at his example of imagining a traveling Pierre.[43] For Sartre, Pierre qua imagined will have some particular features—for example, a certain gait, or dirty shoes—that the imagining consciousness itself decides freely to place there. Indeed, Pierre as a whole is imaginary, that is, he is explicitly presented to me by my imagination *as opposed* to the perceptible present (and also as opposed to the real Pierre of my past). Imagined Pierre, we might say, draws my attention away from the perceptually present world—that is, Sartre's "real"—and focuses it instead on something "irreal" (*irréel*).[44] This imagined nonpositivity (i.e., imagined Pierre) is therefore different than the book's back side. The latter fits as an integral part of the whole perceptual field, and my attention here is precisely *to* the book, including its absent sides.[45] Thus, its back side must appear "continuous" with its front, with the table on which it sits, and so on, all of which determine its limits and bounds.[46] But in the case of imagining Pierre, by contrast, I am *expressly* subtracting the object from

[41] See Sartre, *Imaginary*, 121 and esp. 180–81. See also Kathleen Lennon, *Imagination and the Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2015), 36.

[42] Sartre, *Imaginary*, 122 and 181–83. Also, we should bear in mind that perceptual nonpositivities could serve as occasions for imagination, but they are not needed as its motivator (181). Even so, consciousness is always in a *situation* and hence always requires a "concrete and precise motivation for the appearance of a certain particular imaginary" (185). Sartre's emphasis on the situat*ed*ness of consciousness should be compared to Corbin's discussion of it as actively situat*ive*, for example, in *Spiritual Body*, 16.

[43] Note our language here: We imagine *a Pierre*. We thus already have a clue, here, that we are imagining something different than the singular *Pierre*. We have departicularized Pierre, leading Breeur, in "Du verre," 117, to comment that imaginary objects "escape *by their essence* the 'principle of individuation.'" Hence, imagination, since it presents a departicularized Pierre-object, presents a Pierre that negates not only the perceptual present, but also the particular features of the Pierre I have perceived in the past. If the imagined Pierre wears the same shirt he wore when I last saw him, imagination still presents this detail *as alterable*, that is, as a product of my free choice. See Sartre, *Imaginary*, esp. 7, 50, 90, and 120ff.

[44] Perceptual consciousness is thus "realizing" consciousness whereas imagining consciousness is "de-realizing." See Sartre, *Imaginary*, 180. See also n. 48.

[45] See Sartre, *Imaginary*, 181. See also Breeur, "Du verre," 110–11.

[46] See Sartre, *Imaginary*, 16, 122, 155, and esp. 181.

the perceptual field so as to attend to something not bounded by the determinations of perception, that is, to something intended *as withdrawn.* Sartre's phenomenology thus defends the principled distinctness in kind of the imagination's act and its contents from those of perception, since imagination stands in an "annihilative" (*anéantissant*) (but also creative and freely projective) relationship to perception's field.[47] In short, traveling Pierre can *only* be imagined; the very terms of his imaginary existence are that he is posited by imagination *so as* to be nonperceptual.[48] (Of course, if I experience "hallucination," Pierre might for a time come to cloud out my present perceptual world; but this will be a special case, as Sartre argues, in which I momentarily lose track of reality due to imagination's sway.)[49]

Now, the other of Sartre's examples that I mentioned—that of the person experiencing a set of sounds as being the "Seventh Symphony"—works to flesh out something not emphasized by the first example. That is, it reveals to us just how common the operations of the imagination are as already imported within the whole of our everyday human experience. For, although imagination's object always annihilates the perceptual field, Sartre argues that even the typical experience of listening to a song involves a contribution by imagination *with* what is provided by perception.[50] That is, the song qua song is only experienced if imagination posits a new, irreal object—the "Seventh Symphony"—which transforms mere perception. Without this contribution one would be left with an experience of mere unorganized notes, that is, of mere perceptual content. As Sartre writes:

I am therefore confronted by [*en face de*] the Seventh Symphony but on the express condition that I hear it *nowhere,* that I cease to think of the event as current and

[47] Sartre, *Imaginary,* 120ff; and, e.g., 181 (italics removed): "Thus the imaginative act is at once constituting, isolating, and annihilating [*constituant, isolant, et anéantissant*]." See also Breeur, "Du verre," 112–13: "[The term] 'annihilation [*anéantissement*]' by no means signifies the silence or mortification of sensations . . . [nor] that consciousness of external things would be excluded or suppressed . . . [nor] a consciousness isolated from the world or from all sensible contact. . . . Annihilation (or 'de-realization [*déréalization*],' nihilation [*néantisation*],' etc.) rather signifies that the things and their presence are lived in a manner opposed to that of perception."

[48] See Breeur, "Du verre," 124, which parses annihilation into two negation acts occurring at once: first, "positing *a nothing*" (i.e., an irreal object, or image); and, second, "*nihilating* the real" (i.e., the way imagination acts in relation to the perceptual givens). On "annihilation" compared with Husserlian "neutralization," see Brann, *World,* 126 and 133.

[49] Hence, per Sartre, *Imaginary,* 148–59, the question at stake in hallucination is, "How do we abandon our consciousness of spontaneity, how do we feel ourselves passive before the images that in fact we form?" (149). Ultimately, he argues that the spontaneity cannot be lost completely: "[The] spontaneity of consciousness, I have often said, is one with the consciousness of that spontaneity and consequently one cannot be destroyed without the other" (151). The fusion of imagination's spontaneity and perception's passivity cannot ever be complete: "nothing in fact proves that the patient realizes the fusion of the two spaces" (149; translation modified). For more on the "pathology of the imaginary," see Breeur, "Du verre," 124–29. As we shall see below, Merleau-Ponty will argue that cases like hallucination—which are special cases for Sartre—in fact represent the rule; they point, contra Sartre's thesis, to the *original togetherness* of perception and imagination.

[50] See Jonathan Webber, "Philosophical Introduction," in Sartre, *Imaginary,* xxvi: "[The] world as I find it is already structured as a result of the activity of my imagination."

dated, and on the condition that I interpret the succession of themes as an absolute succession and not as a real succession. . . . To the extent that I grasp it, the symphony is *not there*, between those walls, at the tip of the violin bows. Nor is it "past" as if I thought: this is the work that took shape on such a date in the mind of Beethoven. It is entirely outside the real [*hors du réel*]. It has its own time, which is to say it possesses an internal time, which flows from the first note of the allegro to the last note of the finale, but this time does not follow another time that it continues and that happened "before" the beginning of the allegro, nor is it followed by a time that would come "after" the finale. The Seventh Symphony is in no way *in time*. It therefore entirely escapes the real [*échappe . . . au réel*]. It is given *in person*, but as absent, as being out of reach [*hors de portée*]. It would be impossible for me to act on it, to change a single note of it, or to slow its movement. Yet it depends, in its appearance [*apparition*], on the real [i.e., on the notes, the performance, etc.].[51]

The clue to imagination's operation in this case—and the clue as to why the "Seventh Symphony" cannot be experienced via perception (or "realizing consciousness") alone—resides in the markedly negative features at work here: the "Seventh Symphony" is *not* there, *no*where, *not* in time, *out of* reach. Yet my experience is distinctively *of* the song, which means that imagination's radical negativity has nevertheless made its object alter my experiential whole. Importantly, the notes and performance are still heard; but they are not merely heard. They are heard, now, strictly in light of the song. Sartre's term for this altered state of the perceptual is to say that percepts—sounds, performance, and so on—become, in light of the imaginary, the analogues or *analoga* of the imagined thing, that is, of the "Seventh Symphony." Percepts are not the imaginal object itself; but they stand in its "service" as its material substrate and experiential co-condition.[52] Put differently, my activity of perceiving the perceptual sounds has become, here, subordinate to the irreal object, or to my de-realizing activity of imagining.[53]

Sartre's account thus relies heavily on two key elements: Imaginary nonpositivity (e.g., Pierre, the "Seventh Symphony," etc.) is purely intentional and distinct in kind (because consciousness therein negates rather than realizes) from properly perceptual elements (i.e., from both positive elements, like the visible book cover, and nonpositive elements, like the

[51] Sartre, *Imaginary*, 192.

[52] Hence, the sounds take on the *irreality* of the imaginary song, just as colors (which, in perception, would be positive) take on, in a painting, the *irreality* of the imaginary object presented. See Sartre, *Imaginary*, 190–91.

[53] See Sartre, *Imaginary*, 57–93 on the *analogon*. See also Breeur, "Du verre," 120–21 and 126 on the extreme ways *analoga* can subordinate, dominate, or eventually—in hallucination—completely de-realize percepts. For the Husserlian background to Sartre and a discussion of the several kinds of *analoga* (including "affective" ones), see Di Huang, "Accounting for Imaginary Presence: Husserl and Sartre on the *Hyle* of Pure Imagination," *Sartre Studies International* 27, no. 1 (2021): 1–22. The *analogon* should likewise be placed into conversation with Nelson Goodman's distinctions between "score," inscription, performance, and so forth, in *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), esp. 99–123 and 177–221. Webber briefly initiates a critical comparison with Goodman in "Philosophical Introduction," xv–xvii. Finally, for a critique of the *analogon*, see Casey, "Sartre," 146–54.

book's hidden back side). And this separate source of nonpositivity—that is, imagination's negative act, its irreal object—can and often does pervade and inform regular experience, transforming our percepts into *analoga*.

This is the point where Merleau-Ponty's implicit and explicit engagement with Sartre comes into play. As I will argue here, Merleau-Ponty in effect rejects Sartre's attempt to establish a difference in kind between perceptual and imaginary contents. He will ultimately argue that even imaginary contents, as described in Sartre's examples, are not truly negations of the perceptual field but serve, in fact, to actualize potentialities which are offered in and by the perceptual-bodily field itself.

We can see the outlines of Merleau-Ponty's position in the lectures published as "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man," where he engages directly with Sartre's analysis. He begins by agreeing in part with Sartre: "When the object is totally absent without a representative, I make use of certain elements in my present perception which are analogous. To imagine is always to make something absent appear in the present, to give a magical quasi presence to an object that is not there."[54] Yet, later in his analysis, it becomes clear that he is in fact quite skeptical of Sartre's particular treatment of how such cases occur:

> [Sartre's] initial phenomenological analysis determines the essence of the image as a false presence, as a nothing which tries to present itself as a something. . . . But in the second part of the book this fundamental definition of the image is placed in question when the author analyzes certain states where a clear distinction between the perceived and the imaginary cannot be made [e.g., hallucinations]. If the image were nothing but what was first said—empty and absent [i.e., an annihilation of perception]—we would never confuse it with a perception, and illusions would be hard to understand. Thus in so far as Sartre raises the question of illusions [or hallucinations] in the second part, he necessarily suggests the possibility of a situation anterior to the clear distinction [*antérieure à la distinction claire*] between perception and imagination which was made at the start.[55]

What emerges here is Merleau-Ponty's skepticism regarding Sartre's principled separation between imaginative and perceptual powers. As we saw

[54] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man," trans. John Wild, in *Primacy*, 60. This translation stems from the version of "Les sciences de l'homme et la phénoménologie" collected by the Centre de Documentation Universitaire in Paris. A French republication dating it to 1952 can be found in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Parcours Deux: 1951–1961* (Paris: Verdier, 2000), 49–126. A different version of the text is noted below.

[55] Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology," 74; brackets added for clarity (see Merleau-Ponty, *Parcours Deux*, 97). See also the version (noted by the editors as being a summary) in *Bulletin du Groupe d'études de psychologie de l'Université de Paris* 4, no. 7 (1951): 394–404, in which this statement ends by saying that Sartre's distinction "is called into question on the occasion of certain states (like illusions), in which the perceived and the imaginary are indissoluble [*le perçu et l'imaginaire sont indissolubles*]." Compare to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures, 1949–1952*, trans. Talia Welsh (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), esp. 181–82 and 450–55.

above, for Sartre there is a possibility, in special cases of hallucination, that imagination's contributions can cloud out or almost seem to fuse with the perceptual. Merleau-Ponty runs with this semblance of fusion, treating it not as an odd or exceptional case but, rather, as the clue to something "anterior" to the perception-imagination distinction itself. At this anterior level, the potential contents which the imagination may eventually come to actualize are not grasped as ultimately distinct from the sorts of contents that are perceptible.

Indeed, in his 1954–55 lectures posthumously published as *Institution and Passivity*, Merleau-Ponty's divergence from Sartre on this point is quite clear: "Simply, Sartre is mistaken by means of his rigorous distinction between the 'sensory' and the 'non-sensory.'"[56] And: "From the moment that there is an *analogon*, and this *analogon* is apprehended as 'evoking' the real being of the absent object, imagining consciousness *is not empty*."[57] What is at stake here, for Merleau-Ponty, is how we should explain the way that, for example, in a perceptible musical performance (e.g., "Seventh Symphony"), imagination's contribution *matches* the perceived sounds. How could an "annihilating" imagination—withdrawing from the present, drawing nothing from *out of* perception—manage to project anything other than sheer emptiness or arbitrary contents? And if imagination can project a radically new imaginary content, how is Sartre to explain the way that this content coordinates with perception? In the case of the "Seventh Symphony," several persons can come together to know this shareable and specific imaginary pattern. What, then, explains how and why each of them comes up with the same definite pattern? If several people can, when perceiving certain notes, each come to grasp those notes as "Seventh Symphony"—but if also, as Sartre holds, the imagined reality ("Seventh Symphony") is *different in kind* than the perceived notes (e.g., if negating consciousness is positing a distinct and new object: "Seventh Symphony")—then why do *just these* perceived sounds call my imagination to produce *just that* song? Merleau-Ponty is thus unpersuaded that a separate, negative, or "annihilative" act could import that positive, determinate meaning (i.e., "Seventh Symphony") into my experience, *unless* that meaning itself were already rooted in the perceptual field to begin with. In short: Sartre, he suggests, leaves us with no ground—or, rather, with a ground merely of a sheerly arbitrary and negative "creativity"—for the determinate

[56] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954–1955)*, trans. Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 155.

[57] Merleau-Ponty, *Institution*, 148; my emphasis. See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Possibility of Philosophy: Course Notes from the Collège de France, 1959–1961*, trans. Keith Whitmoyer (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2022), 62: "With Sartre, one unloads what is positive in the image onto the *analogon* in order to be free to define the imaginary negatively." Compare to Lennon, *Imagination*, 44.

content that imagination properly imagines.[58] Sartre would leave unexplained (or he would explain only *ex machina*) how percepts become the *analoga* of imagined content (e.g., how sounds and notes correlate with the posited "Seventh Symphony"). Merleau-Ponty does not doubt the presence of that content per se (i.e., we *do* experience these notes as the "Seventh Symphony" and not merely as disordered sounds) but he is skeptical regarding Sartre's account of the source of that content.[59]

While Merleau-Ponty thus maintains skepticism regarding Sartre's account, there is in fact evidence that he also wanted to stake out his own, even stronger, and more positive phenomenological account of cases like these. In the passage quoted earlier, we recall, he suggested, that there is "a situation anterior to the clear distinction between perception and imagination." Certainly, we could read the terms "clear distinction" in this quote in an *epistemic* way, meaning that the anterior "situation" to which he refers might merely be a situation in which a person fails, subjectively, to distinguish imagination and perception (even though they really are distinct). That would be an epistemic failure. But we could also read Merleau-Ponty to intend something *ontological*; that is, he could be taken to mean that imagination and perception (and their contents) are not really distinct from one another in their original, anterior situation.

This is a contentious point, but this latter, stronger reading seems confirmed, for example, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, when Merleau-Ponty argues that the unseen element in the visible field "is not the Sartrean *imaginary*: presence to the absent or of the absent. It is a presence of the imminent, the latent, or the hidden—Cf. Bachelard saying that each sense has its own imaginary."[60] If each sense has its own imaginary, this means that any supposed perception-annihilating imaginary contents or structures of meaning are, in fact, deep potentialities offered by our perceptual field itself. That is, Merleau-Ponty seems to bring closer together the two kinds of nonpositivity that Sartre tried to keep separate: perceptual nonpositivity (e.g., the hidden side of the book); and imaginary nonpositivity (e.g., Pierre, the "Seventh Symphony"). Indeed, Ed Casey and Kathleen

[58] Note that Sartre explicitly denies, at *Imaginary*, 184–85, that the imagination is "arbitrary," on the grounds that it is acts only in a "situation," and it is "always *the world denied from a certain point of view*." However, he also notes that consciousness is free from all "particular reality" in the situation; anything can be freely negated (186). See nn. 42 and 63.

[59] See Lennon, *Imagination*, 40.

[60] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Working Notes," in *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 245. See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Sensible World and the World of Expressions: Course Notes from the Collège de France, 1953*, trans. Bryan Smyth (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 162: "Sartre defines the imaginary as unobservable, etc. And yet it is embodied in an analogue. Hence [the] difficulty for Sartre of maintaining the absolute distance between the imaginary and the real. This distance exists. But perhaps it isn't that between the unobservable and the observable, or perhaps at least this distinction exists *within the perceived world itself*" (my emphasis).

Lennon both take, mutatis mutandis, this overall stronger interpretive position. Casey argues that Merleau-Ponty advocates "a type of perceptual absolutism in which all mental acts, including imagination, are subsumed under perception. The alienation between the imaginary and the real is overcome at the price of a systematic subordination of imagining to perceiving."[61] And, as Lennon argues, "For Merleau-Ponty we experience the world as offering possibilities to our bodies. . . . Although he also claims that, individually, we can use almost anything as the basis for an image, the work of the artist requires a certain publicness. It must *suggest the form* which imaging consciousness can take. The implication seems to be that the individual reading of the artwork must be, in some sense, demonstratively anchored in what has been presented to us."[62] If this is right, then Merleau-Ponty goes beyond mere skepticism regarding Sartre's annihilating imagination. Rather, he asserts more strongly that *all* supposedly nonpositive contents—that is, not just the hidden side of the book but also the imagined Pierre or "Seventh Symphony"—are, if actualized, in fact actualizations *of* that which is latent in the perceptual-bodily field as such.[63] If this is Merleau-Ponty's view, then the imaginable contents would be merely "an invisible inner framework" and "secret counterpart" of the visible world which "appears *only* within it."[64]

If one criticizes Sartre's *analogon* in this stronger way—asserting that the perceptible world contains *all* potentialities for *all* the different forms that human experience may eventually draw from out of it—then certain puzzles would seem to arise, at least from Corbin's perspective. Yes, in the case of

[61] Casey, "Sartre," 157.

[62] Lennon, *Imagination*, 43; my emphasis.

[63] For Sartre nothing perceptual can be imaginary *unless* radically negative consciousness relates to it and fundamentally transforms it. Thus, Sartre (*Imaginary*, 188) only superficially seems close to Merleau-Ponty's position. There, Sartre says, "Thus the imaginary represents at each moment the implicit sense of the real," and "all apprehension of the real as world implies a hidden surpassing towards the imaginary." While this sounds like Merleau-Ponty's point, notice that Sartre's *argument* here is that all consciousness, even realizing consciousness (i.e., perception), always already implies, in the background, imagination's power to negate. This is because imagining power is a constitutive feature of consciousness *as such*, for Sartre. It is for that reason alone that he can speak of apprehension of the real (i.e., perception) as *implying* a hidden imaginary surpassing. Being-in-itself has no such implicitness; only the presence of consciousness allows for an implicit sense of the real. In short, imagination is not disclosive in the way perception can be for Sartre. See n. 67 below.

[64] Merleau-Ponty, "Working Notes," 215; my emphasis. See also Lennon, *Imagination*, 48. For a very creative reading of Merleau-Ponty giving primacy to *the imaginary*, see Annabelle Dufourcq, e.g., in "The Fundamental Imaginary Dimension of the Real in Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy," *Research in Phenomenology* 45 (2015): 33–52. See also her *Merleau-Ponty: Une ontologie de l'imaginaire* (Dortrecht: Springer, 2012): "So long as we take certain necessary precautions, it is not excessive to assert that, for Merleau-Ponty, *Being 'is' the imaginary*" (400; my emphasis). While she cautions that things cannot be "reduced" to the imaginary mode, nevertheless she treats the imaginary's indefiniteness as infusing *all being* with flux: "[Other] ontological models are possible, but they remain gripped . . . by the fluttering and the motion characteristic of the imaginary mode of being" (401). Thus, if Casey reads Merleau-Ponty as advocating *perceptual monism*, Dufourcq finds in him a commitment to an all-pervasive *imaginary element* (or *apeiron*). See also n. 68.

the "Seventh Symphony" it seems plausible to hold that percepts must suggest or awaken us to the imaginable. After all, even Sartre agreed that the imaginal meaning in this case *is* also perceptual, if by that one means simply that the imaginary *transforms* the perceived world itself into an *analogon* of what is imagined. One could easily argue, therefore, that listeners of the song are activating imaginative interpretations "suggested by" their perception, using Lennon's terms. But to go as far as Merleau-Ponty's "perceptual monism," as Casey calls it, (if this is indeed his position) seems more difficult to reconcile with the other examples of imagination Sartre cites. In the Pierre case, for instance, Sartre argues that we seem creatively free to posit more and more detailed contents whose links to our perceptual field seem tenuous at best. For example, if one decides to invent increasingly wild features of an imagined Pierre—indeed, if one endows him with bright pink shoes or a severely drunken gait—it becomes increasingly difficult to argue that these exact imaginary possibilities are made available by one's current *perceptual* field. At that point, the term "perceptual" risks having been stretched so far as to be able to subsume, a priori, anything at all that could be real for us. If there is then something special and unique about perceptual life as such, in distinction from other strata or ways of existence, then we may worry that such a severely expanded concept of perception would lose track of it.[65]

III. CONCLUSION: CORBIN'S RELEVANCE?

Given this reading of the Sartre/Merleau-Ponty debate, the relevance of Corbin's path should immediately be evident. On the one hand, Corbin can be understood as in agreement with Merleau-Ponty's critique of Sartre's supposedly annihilative, empty, or ungrounded imaginal power. (A nondisclosive function—or merely negatively disclosive function—of imagination is possible for Corbin, but it is undesirable and precisely dysfunctional.[66]) A sheerly

[65] Compare to Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl, in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997): "[All] things would be mixed together in the same place, and there would be no distinction" (465d). The danger of a collapse of all distinctions into primordial indefinition (e.g., into a One or an *apeiron*) would be a danger present, mutatis mutandis, in an imaginal monism as much as in a perceptual one. See n. 68.

[66] See Corbin, *Creative Imagination* (179–82), on the modern imagination's unfortunate transformation into mere *fantasy*, that is, a type of creativity that fails to be disclosive of any special domain of being. In this sense, he argues that to think of imagination as using an ex nihilo creativity simply serves to mask its noetic function: "[The] degeneration of the Imagination into a fantasy productive only of the imaginary and the unreal is . . . the hallmark of our laicized world for which the foundations were laid by the preceding religious world" (182). Nevertheless, Corbin admits that creation *does* have a "negative aspect" insofar as it "puts an end to the privation of being which holds things in their occultation; this double negativity, the nonbeing of a nonbeing, constitutes the positive act. In this sense it is permissible to say that the universe originates *at once in being and in nonbeing*" (186; my emphasis). Hence, it would be worth comparing the way Corbin walks back slightly his rejection of ex nihilo creativity in this passage with the way that, *inversely*, Sartre and Castoriadis were prone to qualify their endorsements of an ex nihilo creativity. Sartre, that is, reminds us that pure

negative imagination does not seem possible in cases involving the genuinely *shareable* (albeit not necessarily intellectual, nor discursive) reality of some imaginal contents or patterns.[67]

Nevertheless, on the other hand, to commit to the perception-immanent status of all imaginal potentialities, as the stronger reading of Merleau-Ponty does, would not seem necessary or obvious to Corbin. Imaginal potentialities, in other words, need not be treated as primarily modeled on or originally sourced from the perceptual-bodily field. While agreeing with Merleau-Ponty's insistence on a real ground for imaginable contents, Corbin can argue that not all positive bases for structures or contents must be (nor could they be) derived from *any* single stratum of being, whether it is the perceptible world, consciousness, the "life world," Nature, or whatever else one may wish to name this One.[68] Different strata have different rules, functions, proprieties, contents, that is, differences in kind. Indeed, imaginable contents, as Corbin has argued, are different in kind from other strata since for their actualization they require creative, perceptual beings who practice a self-posited openness, and specifically an openness to content patterns somewhat shareable between those who may be utterly disconnected in space or time; and these patterns not only have some link to intellect but also modify the very capacities—including the entire perceptual field—of the ones who share in them.[69] Perhaps it thus does more justice to the concept of "perception" not to stretch its scope too far, as the stronger reading of Merleau-Ponty does, but rather to emphasize that the perceptual realm comprises just one domain of possible reality (i.e., one always somewhat passively experienced, with close analogues in other animals, etc.). For Corbin, perception's objects certainly are radically distinct from the completely non-spatiotemporal forms of the intellect, and thus perception requires

human spontaneity is nonetheless always situated, already in *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Hill & Wang, 1960), 77–83. Castoriadis likewise reminds us that even ex nihilo creativity is neither *in nihilo* nor *cum nihilo*. See Cornelius Castoriadis, "Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary," in *Castoriadis Reader*, 321.

[67] For Sartre's explicit denial of imagination as disclosive, see *Imaginary*, 104: "the image teaches nothing"; 167: "*there is no imaginary world*"; and 169: "[in] the imaginary world, there is no dream of *possibilities*."

[68] Hence, Corbin clearly does not propose that the imaginal world is the *only* real world, nor is it all-pervasive or primary. This would be a self-contradictory proposition since the imaginal world is only what it is *because* there are other truths (e.g., objective truths of an intellectual and perceptual order) which it mediates. Hence, Ali Mirsepassi, in *Iran's Quiet Revolution: The Downfall of the Pahlavi State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 19, surely misspeaks in saying that for Corbin "the 'imaginal' is the *only* truly objective reality, while the material is disparaged" (my emphasis).

[69] For Sartre's attempt to cut off any temptation to such a "Platonizing" reading of his aesthetics examples, see Sartre, *Imaginary*, 193, where he notes that the imaginary object is a "perpetual absence. We must not picture it (as does Spandrell in Huxley's *Point Counter Point*—as do so many Platonists) such that it exists in another world, in an intelligible heaven."

mediation with intellect via another distinct faculty that can share in both, that is, a distinctive capacity of imagination with its own distinctive objects.

Furthermore, perhaps Corbin would have an additional argument available to distinguish imagination and perception, that is, one drawing from his 1955–56 Eranos lectures (collected as *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn ʿArabī*). There, he writes:

> It is because revealed being is Imagination that we require a hermeneutics of the forms manifested in it. . . . We do not interpret something that has nothing to teach us and signifies no more than what it is. Because the world is theophanic Imagination, it consists of "apparitions [*apparitions*]" which demand to be interpreted and transcended. And for that very reason it is only through the Active Imagination that consciousness, awakened to the true nature of the world as "apparition," can transcend its data and thereby render itself capable of new theophanies, that is, of a continuous ascent. The initial imaginative operation is to typify . . . the immaterial and spiritual realities in external or sensuous forms, which then become the "cipher [*chiffre*]" for what they manifest. . . . In short, because there is Imagination, there is *ta'wil* [i.e., hermeneutics]; because there is *ta'wil*, there is symbolism; and because there is symbolism, beings have two dimensions.[70]

This passage must certainly be contextualized within Corbin's grand exegesis of medieval mystic Ibn ʿArabī's view of an incessant divine creation via universal imagination (which he calls "theophany").[71] But what we can draw from it here is the way that genuine "apparitions" are to be distinguished from what Corbin elsewhere calls a mere "appearance" (*apparence*).[72] The latter "signifies no more than what it is"; that is, it shows up without any demand, without any exigency for an interpretation. An *appearance* is thus, in Corbin's view, a being that lacks a living relationship to potentialities revealed by intellect or self-opened by imagination. By contrast, an *apparition* is something that does not merely show up and announce itself to be complete as it is, but rather shows up as both linked to and separated from a grander potentiality (which remains, nonetheless, a potentiality proper to itself and to be itself) which it can be.[73] Because it is separate from its broader truth but also related to it, any "apparition"

[70] Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 208–9; my emphasis and clarifying brackets and very slight modification of the translation. On the meanings of *ta'wil* rejected by Ibn ʿArabī, see Syamsuddin Arif, "Ibn ʿArabī and the Ambiguous Verses of the Quran: Beyond the Letter and Pure Reason," *DINIKA: Academic Journal of Islamic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2017): 225–48. See also Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 199–202.

[71] According to Corbin, for example, in "Situation philosophique," 87–91, even those for whom there is a theophany will clearly also know, at the same time, "that the divinity in essence remains always beyond." This double awareness—i.e., two poles providing genuine orientation—grounds the true *Ecclesia spiritualis*, as distinct from any supposed "incarnate" (or, as Corbin sometimes says, "socialized") positive "church."

[72] Corbin, *Spiritual Body*, 28–29.

[73] Corbin, "Situation philosophique," 87, further clarifies that the image shown by the apparition does not thereby become "incarnate" in the apparition (as red color would inhere in a red object); an apparition merely "shows" the image (as a mirror would do) and leaves the image itself "in suspense." Compare Corbin's apparitions to "signature" and "paradigm" in

can be read, at once, both in critical and in charitable lights: for example, as falling short of what it can be; but also, possibly, as still indicating something of the broader potentiality of its true nature.

In short, the very possibility of the perceptible object showing up *as* insisting on the need for interpretation—regarding its causes, its value, its selfhood proper—is not something *given* by the perceptual field itself. Another way that Corbin explains this, as he hinted above, is to say that a certain duality—his term is "dualitude [*dualitude*]," as distinct from "dualism"—is requisite for an appearance to become an apparition.[74] Dualitude is required because, on the one hand, the percept should show itself as separate from an original and as falling short of it; and, on the other hand, the percept should show up as a faithful "image," that is, as in relation to an original that demands and enables greater exhibition. By contrast, if any single stratum of being (whether perception, imagination, intellect, etc.) were asserted to be the only real structure, or the structure of all structures, then it would follow that this dualitude would necessarily be lost or deemed mere ambiguity or illusion. By contrast, for Corbin, the dualitude not just of instances of perception but *of perceptual being as such* is that which, as provided by imagination, originally allows the whole of one's experiential field (as well as of one's own present self), to become a distanced version of itself, and thus to be both critically scrutinized (for improvement) and charitably interpreted (for salvaging its good versions).[75] The perceptual must show up *as also* imaginal so that its own goodness can be, if not thereby immediately fulfilled, then at least longed for, that is, at least *sensed as absent*.

Hence, to conclude: In agreement with Sartre, Corbin could argue that a power of imagination as distinct from perception is central to human experience. Whereas Sartre may yet fail to fully articulate a stable basis for imagination's contributions to human experience, Corbin theorizes exactly that basis, that is, the real mediating patterns between intellect and sense, between

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Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009).

[74] On Corbin's concept of "dualitude," see the conceptual history offered by Daniel Proulx, in "La dualitude comme identité mystique chez Henry Corbin," *Caietele Echinox* 41 (2021): 45–58, esp. 48, where Proulx shows that Corbin employs this concept not merely to describe the relation of "mystical union" between an empirical person and their more authentic self or guide but also to describe "the dual structure of *all beings*, which makes being cohere, which does not divide it" (my emphasis). It is this latter extension that I explore here. For some additional references in Corbin, see, e.g., *Creative Imagination*, 308 n. 48 and 318 n. 78, where the term is contrasted with "dualism" and serves to characterize a "fundamentally dialogical situation" wherein there is no "third phase which absorbs dualitude." See also Corbin, "Iranian Studies and Philosophy," in *Voyage*, 55, and Corbin, *Avicenna*, 20, 67, and esp. 87, where Corbin describes the individuation of beings as a relational process wherein the "individuation necessarily individuates the two terms of the relationship."

[75] On the importance of imagination as enabling us to relate to the perceptual world as a whole, compare Corbin to Sartre's related point at *Imaginary*, 184: "[The] act of positing the world as a synthetic totality and the act of 'standing back' from the world are one and the same act."

form and percept. (I say he "theorizes this," but for Corbin the imaginal world, as Section I argued, can only be accessed through partaking in its performance, not by a theorization which would keep oneself separate from alteration by the contents of the act.) Similarly, if Sartre remains vulnerable to the accusation that he intentionally minimizes the implicit depth and potentialities of the perceptible world so that he can bring in ersatz imagination to supply missing depth, Corbin is not vulnerable to this sort of objection. For, a properly functioning imagination in Corbin's account is precisely one which is in service *to* intellect and *for* perception. Hence, naturally or normally, perception *does* have the practically "infinite" depth and richness Merleau-Ponty wants to find in it; it is not necessarily "flat" or "without depth."[76] In this sense, Corbin's perception-independent imaginal world may well be that which, alone, could ground and fulfill the very promise Merleau-Ponty believes he finds as given in perception. But this is so precisely because *distinct* imaginal and intellectual powers and contents do orient, or should normally be orienting, perception such that it emerges as "apparition."[77] The power to provide this requisite dualitude, and thus to reveal and fulfill perception's promise, cannot be a form merely "of" perception—nor of any single stratum of being—alone.

To be as succinct as possible, at the risk of oversimplifying: Without imagination, perception does not live up to its own promise (indeed, it would not show up with promise at all). But with intellectually informed (i.e., symbolic) imagination, it shows promise and at least begins to live up to it, mainly because its own proper promise is to be a pointer, an index, or a symbol. Imagination thus serves perception: To grasp the imaginal X is to grasp that which, alone, can guarantee that the perceptual X will be perceived both as the same X and also as merely part of the story of X. This is in fact the only adequate way to begin to treat *any* percept; we must not ask the perceptible world to be the *only* story, if we are to love it for exactly what it can be, that is, that way of being or becoming which does not need to be complete or perfect in order to be good in its own way, that is, to be good qua image, or good qua becoming.[78] Hence, only in light of the imaginal do critique and charity—or authentic hermeneutics—regarding perception become possible.[79] This, I think, is how imagination *orients* perception in the analysis of Corbin.[80]

[76] See Lennon, *Imagination*, 44.

[77] See especially Corbin, *Comparative Philosophy*, 4–5, where Corbin distinguishes phenomenology, as *sōzein ta phainomena*, from mere "history of philosophy" or "historical criticism."

[78] For readings of Plato sensitive to similar themes, see, e.g., John Russon, "We Sense That They Strive: How to Read (the Theory of the Forms)," in *Retracing the Platonic Text*, ed. John Russon and John Sallis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 70–84; and John V. Garner, *The Emerging Good in Plato's "Philebus"* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017).

[79] See Corbin, *Comparative Philosophy*, 15: "[To] unveil that which reveals itself while remaining hidden in the *phainomenon*. . . . It's a matter of leading the observer to a point where he allows himself to see what it is that lies hidden. This essentially is what hermeneutics is."

[80] Hence, again, "Orient" is ultimately a nongeographical and transhistorical possibility for all humans. See nn. 6 and 38 above.

Unfortunately, perception's very exigency for its imaginal, orienting other can be historically lost or ignored. If, today, we can still feel an alienation of intellect from our senses—if we can sense a demand and a promise in the perceptual world pointing beyond itself (or even if we can sense these as lost)—then we have not, in fact, lost all awareness of the imaginal world. That said, to the extent that this sense is lost, I do not think Corbin would, with insensitivity, simply blame us for being unimaginative. Rather, the problem is more global and political than anything an individual alone could be blamed for: "Unimaginal life"—or what is the same, life subjected to an incoherent and arbitrary flood of images—is a problem broad and shared. It is a collective way of life that has been historically instituted. In this sense, Corbin's path to the true orient, that is, his search for a nongeographic but world-saving orientation, points above all, I think, to the need for more research on the collective instituting activities around us that either destroy or promote our access—or remind us or fail to remind us of our access—to the imaginal world. The emergence of its light for us is not indifferent to material conditions or historical exposure. Fortunately, if Corbin is right, then we do still live in a world filled with potential guides; they wait patiently for us.