

Introduction to Part 4: Imagination, Creativity, and Innovation across the Ages

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1 Introduction

Creativity and innovation are claimed to be defining characteristics of contemporary societies. As a 21st-century skill (Trilling and Fadel 2009), creativity, for instance, is considered the engine of capitalist economies, organizational success, and personal growth. It is an important feature of societal discourses that emphasize individuality, originality, non-conformism and the break with cultural norms, a key identity marker for many people and corporations worldwide. We also tend to consider today's rate of creativity and innovation as unprecedented and, in doing so, imagine that there is a sharp divide between the way in which we live now, guided by ideologies of creative agency and personal freedom, and the way our ancestors lived under the weight of tradition, unable or unwilling to think freely and innovate radically. Of course, as this volume demonstrates (see also Glaveanu 2019), creativity and innovation are *not* a modern invention. Even the interest and value we place on them are not as recent as we tend to think (Mason 2017). Practices related to the imagination and to our capacity to create and to (re)create ourselves are arguably as old as our species is (Festinger 1983). And, with the start of recorded history, we have proof of just how much our ancestors did inquire into these abilities that make us human. Classical studies offer us a unique opportunity to rebuild a lost sense of *historical continuity* in our thinking about and practices of creativity and innovation and to learn from the past. How and why this is the case concerns me in this introduction.

The two chapters I focus on here—‘Playing Make-Believe with Objects: Counterfactual Imagination and Psychodrama in Greek Tragedy’, and ‘The Posthumous Future in Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*’—offer contributions to our understanding of imagination, creativity and innovation by studying Greek tragedy. The authors, Anne-Sophie Noel and Karen Bassi, not only construct compelling arguments about issues such as the use of pretence and as-if thinking in play, and the construction of individual and collective futures beyond one's mortality; they also do so by referring to psychological theories in a nuanced and scholarly manner. The main source of inspiration for these chapters are sociocultural theories of the cognitive and affective processes

involved in expanding the possibilities of human existence. Before examining the similarities and differences between these chapters and their relation to contemporary scholarship, let's start from a few basic definitions.

Today, in psychology, imagination is considered the higher mental function involved in the construction of imagery that explores the past, the future, and alternatives to the present (Hilgard 1981). As such, imagination is essential for creativity as the process by which individuals and groups come up with ideas or objects that are new, original and useful, valuable or meaningful (Runco and Jaeger 2012). The distinction between creativity and innovation is often based on the difference between generating ideas and implementing them, with innovation denoting the application of imaginative and creative outcomes (Anderson et al. 2014). While useful for analytical purposes, these definitions are also limiting if not misleading. They give the impression that imagination is largely reduced to imagery, that creativity is judged mainly in terms of end products, and that there is a sharp divide between ideation and action (for more of this critique, see Glaveanu 2014a). These are largely based on Cartesian-inspired separations between mind and body, individual and society, the possible and the actual. In an effort to integrate and transcend such dichotomies, sociocultural accounts of imagination, creativity and innovation start from a relational and developmental epistemology. This means, first of all, that these phenomena are not placed 'inside the head' of isolated individuals, but distributed *in-between* people, objects, places, and across time (Glaveanu 2014b). Secondly, processes and products are fundamentally linked, with processes being products themselves and products coming out of, and supporting, new (creative) processes. Thirdly, the dynamic of imagination, creativity and innovation builds on the reality of humans as embodied, social and cultural beings; beings, more specifically, positioned in shared worlds to which we relate through a range of perceptual, cognitive and affective perspectives, which we exchange with others.

In this brief introduction, I start by identifying themes raised by both contributions that capture something essential about imagination and creativity today and in the classical period: the role of play and pretence, imagining the future, and the role of material objects (section 2). Then I focus on more specific topics raised in the chapters, topics that could and should inform our contemporary understanding of human possibility. These are the imaginative reconstruction of self and identity, and the place of death in creativity (section 3). Both these issues, I argue, reveal something essential about the perspectives involved in creative action and the interaction of these perspectives. Such insights not only contribute to the study of creativity and innovation in the ancient world, but concern us to this day. In fact, there are several

conceptual ‘bridges’ across time that are actively built by these two chapters. I briefly discuss the relation between Greek tragedy and psychodrama, and classical and romantic meditations on death, life and the (dangers of) creation (section 4). I end with some reflections on how classicists and psychologists can continue to learn from each other.

2 Common Themes: Play, Future-Making, and Material Objects

One theme brought up in this Part of the volume is that of *play* and especially of *pretend play* (for an in-depth psychological analysis of imaginative play, see Harris 2000). Noel’s contribution is centred on make-believe play with objects and counterfactual imagination. Tragedy may not come to mind immediately as a genre within which play and playfulness thrive, and yet this analysis compellingly demonstrates not only the use of pretend play, but its fundamental role in reshaping self-understandings in Euripides’ *Heracles* and *Ion*. In Bassi’s discussion of *Oedipus at Colonus*, pretence strikes a much more sombre note, with Oedipus, for example, claiming that his sons are dead to him. Thus, the broader mechanism of inversion, common in play episodes, here takes on an intergenerational, personal, and political dimension, when the principle that children should not die before their parents is symbolically transgressed.

In all these cases, a fundamental process of creativity and innovation is revealed: our human capacity temporarily to ‘bracket’ *what is*, in order to imagine *what might or could be*, and act ‘as if’ what we imagined were the case. Heracles’ weapons can thus become toys but also, in a much darker turn of events, return to being real weapons within a final play episode with his children. Oedipus uses the means of imagination to reconstruct an alternative and tragic reality that ends up becoming true. We are thus presented here with a much more complex image of play than we have in psychology, in which, for instance, the exploration of negative or even dangerous consequences of playing is rare (see, for example, Hviid and Villadsen 2018). At the same time, the experience of play—and the imagination it sparks in audiences then and now—builds powerful bridges of identification across the ages and makes all these stories eminently human.

Another common theme is that of the *future*, a key concern of imagination, creativity and innovation researchers alike. Each of these processes contributes to what can be called, broadly, *future-making*, by eliciting views of what is ‘not yet here’, building the means that facilitate its actualization, and remaining open to what is to come. Bassi’s analysis of Sophocles’ play revolves around the construction of a posthumous future for both particular individuals and entire

communities. This future, after the passing of Oedipus, includes all those people who outlive him (and, symbolically, the spectators) and is at once open and tragically determined by a past from which ‘the dead make demands upon the living’. Imagined futures, however, are not always meant to be. Heracles, in playing with his children, assigns future roles and prerogatives to every one of them. Noel shows, though, how these imaginings, though unrealized, can still be used by the protagonist to shape an identity and a role for himself (e.g., in a reversal, he becomes the little boat towed by a big ship, represented by his friend Theseus). Future-making remains a powerful engine of creativity and innovation even when possible futures never get to be realized. It is, after all, by imagining things differently that we change our relationship with them in the here and now.

The third theme that brings the chapters in this Part together in their analysis of human possibility is that of *material things*. Objects rarely get to play a part in creativity research and, when they do, they are reduced to the level of representations or mental prototypes (Finke et al. 1992). It is primarily in discussions of play that the materiality of things comes to the fore and can be seen to guide the creative process. Noel makes this point clearly in her examination of make-believe play, when she notes how the sensorial qualities of different objects such as Heracles’ weapons, and their manipulation over time, invite various forms of symbolic identification (they become toys, murderous tools and, finally, living substitutes for his children). In *Ion*, it is again the embodied use of objects that allegorically announces the protagonist’s filiation with Apollo. However, the imagination may also be triggered by the absence of objects, not only their presence. In tragedy, Bassi argues, the material presence of the corpse helps conceal the moment of death. Oedipus’ body is, however, never shown to the audience, further amplifying Ismene’s claim that he is ‘without a tomb’. In this case, material absences cast a long-lasting shadow of symbolic presence over the lives of his children and the survival of the *polis*.

3 Specific Themes: the Possible, Imagination and Creativity

What states of mind invite one to playfully reimagine reality, and what do these acts result in, at a psychological level? Wonder is, by definition, a possibility-enabling type of phenomenon. It is triggered by a realization that more is possible, for our thinking and action in the world, than we previously realized, followed by an exploration, imaginative and embodied, of these often unexpected possibilities. In this way, as I have argued elsewhere (see Glaveanu 2019; 2020), the act of wondering manages to both immerse us into the materiality

of things and detach us from them, allowing a space of imagination and reflection in which we experience 'not knowing' as a productive, generative state. Of course, this can be associated with some negative feelings, including frustration (*vis-à-vis* what is) and fear (of what is to come), but these emotions, when paired with a sense of amazement, sustain rather than close possibilities. It is to be noted that the notion of the *sublime*, rediscovered in the 18th century by philosophers like Edmund Burke, includes elements of wonder and fear when faced with the greatness of nature (Lloyd 2018).

If the sublime and wonder make us aware of a broader space of imagination by pushing the boundaries of our (daily) existence, even beyond the 'natural' order of things (see Daston 2019), then *death* and the *afterlife* are the ultimate borders of what is known and familiar to us. In a creative manner, Bassi manages to connect, in her study of Greek tragedies, the end of life and, with it, of human possibility, with the endless domain of the possible which is the future. She does so by making us aware of the simple fact that not only do other people outlive the dead, but that the dying person can and does imagine a posthumous future, one that, willingly or not, he or she helps bring into being.

It is undeniable that death and creativity have a complicated relationship. On the one hand, destruction is for many at the very heart of the creative process—doing away with the old in order to move on from it (Schumpeter 1942). On the other, we actively use our creativity in order to 'hold on' to life and engage in creative work in the hope that our ideas and creations will exist long after we are gone. In fact, according to terror management theory (Routledge and Arndt 2009), it is precisely the prospect of our own mortality and the terror associated with it that we 'manage' through engagement in creativity and innovation, even if we often are not aware of it. Whether these rather psychoanalytical considerations are correct or not can be debated, but Bassi's point is that 'death's inevitability both limits and promotes confidence in a human future'. 'What was' shapes 'what will be' through its obstinate presence in the 'what is' of individuals and communities.

This future, open and constrained at the same time, is defined not only by the actions of creative actors, but also by their *roles and identities*. Noel makes a compelling claim in this regard. She raises the issue of the construction of the self as a creative process. Building on Vygotskian scholarship, she argues for the emergence of the self through imaginative play (an argument also made by the pragmatist G.H. Mead 1934). Most importantly, play episodes offer protagonists an opportunity to re-discover and re-fashion themselves, sometimes with therapeutic effects. These acts of re-creation, coming out of experiences of trauma, are central to the identity of many creative people, from Antiquity to this day. It is a testament to the idea that imagination and

creativity are essential for resilience, healing processes and personal growth. This potential is embedded in the fact that we all occupy various social roles throughout our existence, roles we acquire and learn in interaction with others. It is by taking the perspective of these others and exchanging positions with them, initially in play and games (Gillespie 2006), that we can take some distance from given roles and identities and experiment with other possibilities of being. Both Heracles and Ion illustrate this social and psychological dynamic in their quest for (a new) identity. Today, there is increased interest in the relation between creativity, identity and the self (Karwowski and Kaufman 2017), but a conceptual shift is needed to see creativity as part and parcel of the human self and not only as an antecedent or consequence of it. And there is more to learn, as Noel's chapter demonstrates, about the complex relation between possible selves, pretend play, and the imaginative shaping of one's life course.

4 Bridges across Time

Until now I have been focusing on both shared and specific themes in this Part of the volume. I have argued that some of them are 'old' concerns for the community of imagination, creativity and innovation researchers (e.g., for play and playfulness, future-making and creative identities), while others are attracting more and more interest nowadays (e.g., materiality and death). But there are even more notable historical resonances between the chapters that cut across the ages and describe interesting trajectories of thinking about what makes us creative and, ultimately, human.

If we take the issue of imaginative play, we can draw, as Anne-Sophie Noel does, a line between its use in Greek tragedy and in modern forms of psychodrama. But this line becomes more of a pathway, with its own ups and downs, when we consider the place and value of play and of imagination across history (for details, see Kearney 1988). In a similar way, the idea of death and its relation to creativity, aptly captured by Karen Bassi, has a longer history culminating in the story of *Frankenstein*, a novel that embodies the Romantic revival of ancient myths (it is not accidental, after all, that Mary Shelley gave her book the alternative title of *The Modern Prometheus*). While Oedipus accepted and even welcomed his demise, many creators actively fight it, becoming fascinated by Promethean transgressions of the natural order. By creating life out of death, Frankenstein disrupted death's contribution to the future and suffered the consequences for it.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, there are more things than expected that can bring classicists together with imagination, creativity and innovation researchers. It is undeniable that classical Antiquity was an age of creativity, but this does not mean that we should be interested in it as a grand depository of past creative products, including the several plays examined here. We would do well, as psychologists, to focus on these resources and texts as a dwelling place for ideas and processes that can shed new light on our present-day studies and concerns. If creativity is less of a modern idea than we think, then learning from the (distant) past can at the very least prevent us from reinventing the wheel of how imagination, creativity and innovation 'work'. And it can reveal new fieldwork for social scientists and humanities scholars alike (Glaveanu and Yamamoto 2012).

What is there to be gained by classicists? The chapters included in this Part demonstrate the usefulness of engaging with psychological research in the areas of play, imagination, and creativity. There are many other theories to be discovered, some of which have been referred to above (e.g., terror management theory, possibility studies). And there are interdisciplinary conversations to be held on how classical and contemporary theories and research could be placed in a creative dialogue for the benefit of both communities. The present introduction advanced some themes of common interest and pointed, briefly, to what can be learnt from them. In the end, if creativity really does come *out of difference*, as suggested by socioculturalists (Glaveanu and Gillespie 2015), then it is not agreement between scholars that we should be looking for. Constant exchanges, new interpretations, and (in)tense dialogues are what this volume, and other initiatives like it, are keen to foster.

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