

The Role of Value in Creative Imagining

Julia Langkau

Department of Philosophy, University of Geneva

In discussions of imagination's role in creativity, scholars have drawn two relevant distinctions. First, imagination has traditionally been described as *free* or *unconstrained* in creative contexts, while it is considered as largely *constrained* in epistemic contexts. Second, we can distinguish *passive* from *active* creativity: in passive creativity, an idea emerges spontaneously and is displayed in the imagination; in active creativity, imagination is employed deliberately to generate new ideas. This paper argues that there are two different modes of active creativity. The first involves generating ideas in an unguided way; the second involves *value-guided imagination*—a process in which imagining is shaped by attention to what we value. Adding this further distinction helps clarify the role value can take in creative processes and sheds light on the distinction between creative and epistemic uses of imagination.

Keywords: imagination, creativity, value-guided imagining, epistemic constraints

1. Creativity and Imagination

Creativity is usually defined as a subject's ability to produce an idea or artifact that is both novel and valuable (e.g., Gaut 2003; Boden 2004; Paul and Kaufman 2014), where this value may be aesthetic, intellectual, moral, practical, etc. In psychology, the value component is often understood in terms of appropriateness to a given context or problem, distinguishing creativity from innovation (e.g., Runco 2012): creativity is not merely the production of something new; it is the production of an innovation with value. Further, the process by which such new and valuable or appropriate ideas or artifacts are produced is often described as involving features such as spontaneity, consciousness, intentionality, or autonomy (e.g., Gaut 2003; Boden 2014).

To display or establish something new, creativity necessarily somehow leads away from the current state of the world, or at least the part of the world the creating subject is aware of. It thus requires the creating subject's thinking to be *unconstrained* by how the world—currently, or for the

Corresponding author's address: Julia Langkau, email: julialangkau@gmail.com.

subject—is. Arguably, the cognitive capacity best suited for this task is imagination. Imagination serves the cognitive manipulation necessary in generating a new idea or artifact because it is non-truth-bound, it is under immediate voluntary control, it engages with affective and motivational systems and drives inference and decision-making (Stokes 2014, 178–179). To gain knowledge, in contrast, we have to put *constraints* on this otherwise free capacity (e.g., Kind 2016). As Amy Kind puts it:

What distinguishes the epistemically significant imaginings from the epistemically insignificant ones? In my view, the answer has to do with the constraints under which we operate when we engage in the former sorts of imaginings, constraints that are absent in the latter sorts of imaginings. [...] it is our ability to constrain our imaginings in light of facts about the world that enables us to learn from them. (Kind 2016, 146)

Constraints can take the form of intentions or beliefs about the world (I will come back to this below).

While many contemporary theories of imagination remain largely silent on the issue of creativity, two recent books on the nature of imagination address the question of how to account for it (Langland-Hassan 2020 and Hopkins 2024). Other recent work focuses more narrowly on the relationship between imagination and creativity, often in ways that remain compatible with a variety of theories of imagination rather than offering a unified account themselves.¹ The assumption that imagination is not *sufficient* for creativity is uncontroversial: not all kinds, forms or uses of imagination are creative. At the same time, imagination also doesn't seem *necessary* for creativity, as there are creative practices, occurrences or domains of creativity that seem not to involve it. Such domains may be dance or athletic performance, where innovative movements or solutions can emerge spontaneously through embodied practice.

Without providing a general theory of imagination, Berys Gaut (2003) distinguishes two models of the role of imagination in creativity: the *display model* and the *search model*.² According to the *display model*, imagination simply presents the outcome of a creative process that may take place through a different, possibly unconscious mental faculty. With imagination playing a minimal role according to this model, Gaut speaks of *passive* creativity. In passive creativity, “the subject is unaware of the creative process,

¹ E.g., (Gaut 2003); (Beane 2005); (Stokes 2014); (Arcangeli 2022); (Kind 2022); see especially the contributions to (Kind and Langkau 2026).

² In response to Gaut's discussion, Michael Beane (2005) introduces a third model, the connection model. According to this model, imagination plays the role of fruitfully connecting different ideas, which is what then generates new ideas. Only the connection model, Beane claims, really assigns a creative role to the imagination (Beane 2005, 202).

if any, which has occurred to produce the creative outcome. The outcome simply ‘pops into the head’ of the subject, as we say” (Gaut 2003, 156).³ Gaut mentions an example involving Bertrand Russell, who had frequently tried to solve a difficult problem and, one morning, woke up knowing the solution (Gaut 2003, 154–155). However, not all creativity occurs like this. In *active* creativity, in contrast, the creative subject consciously searches for a solution.

Gaut thinks that active creativity is more common and important in the arts than passive creativity, as a painter may well suddenly “see” a painting in the imagination, “but much of the subsequent work will involve scrutinising the painting as it is being made, imagining how it could be improved by altering it in various ways, trying out these changes, observing the results, making more alterations, and so forth” (Gaut 2003, 157). The model that can account for this kind of process is the *search model*. According to the *search model*, artists and scientists use their imagination to explore different possibilities, such as ways to develop a work of art or formulate a scientific theory. The highly creative subject has a strong, powerful imagination in that they are exploring only the relevant possibilities to then select from those possibilities the one that is most valuable or appropriate in the given context: “[...] the process of ‘trying out’ various approaches [...] is to be understood in terms of considering or surveying the relevant portion of logical space, and the process of intention is that of choosing from one of the surveyed possibilities” (Gaut 2003, 157). However, both active and passive creativity concern modes of cognition that appear possible across domains. As psychologist Marc Runco puts it, “Creative thinking is sometimes intentional, deliberate, tactical, and consciously controlled, but other times it is unintentional, unconscious, and seemingly chaotic” (Runco 2012, 602). Structured disciplines such as mathematics or engineering can involve both spontaneous insights and intentional imaginative processes, just as artistic domains like painting or coming up with a story: an idea for a story or the solution to a mathematical problem may either arise suddenly or be gradually developed in the imagination.

I will argue that value can take two different roles in creative imagining. First, it can function in the evaluation of new or innovative ideas, allowing the creative subject or an audience to judge which innovations are valuable. Second, value can guide the process of creative imagining itself, shaping the direction and development of ideas from the outset. The first way features more prominently in contemporary philosophical and common psychological approaches to creativity: value judgments or judgments of appropriate-

³ As Dustin Stokes puts this idea: “Truly creative ideas come from nowhere” (Stokes 2014, 159).

ness stand at the end of an otherwise value-neutral process of generating ideas. However, recent empirical research suggests that (subjective) value may already influence idea generation, and I will propose that the influence occurs through guidance by attention. The first way in which value plays a role in creative processes is compatible with the *display model* (in *passive* creativity) and one version of the *search model* (in *active* creativity). The second way is compatible only with the *search model* (in *active* creativity). Importantly, the aim is not to establish that value always guides our imagination in creativity, but rather that there are two different ways in which value can come into play.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the view that locates value at the end of the creative process, exemplified by Peter Langland-Hassan's and Robert Hopkins' accounts of imagination. Section 3 shows that while some empirical work seems to confirm this idea, recent studies are pointing towards a role of (subjective) value within the process of generating ideas. Section 4 then presents my view according to which attention to what the subject values can guide the imagination in creative processes, and section 5 gives some examples to distinguish value-guided imagining from imagining under constraints as well as creative uses from epistemic uses of imagination. I conclude by pointing out how the distinction between value-guided imagination and unguided imagination complements the commonly invoked distinction between constrained imagination and free imagination.

2. Judging an idea or artifact to be valuable

In *Explaining Imagination* (2020), Peter Langland-Hassan defends a reductive account of imagination: our use of “imagination” can be explained by reference to mental states like beliefs, desires, judgments, decisions, intentions and forms of reasoning. But creativity cannot be explained simply by reference to these mental states and forms of reasoning. Langland-Hassan points to the fact that some artists seem to simply wait for their great ideas to appear from the subconscious:

And yet, for all their practice and expertise, and all their tricks and heuristics for facilitating creativity in themselves, these songwriters are still *waiting* ... they are waiting on something else. Their practical skill, theoretical knowledge, goals, values, and desires only take them so far—far enough, I think, to write a passable song, a creative song. But not far enough to write a *great* song. For the latter, something else is required. This “something else” is not an active examination of logical space through the use of non-truth-bound mental states. In trying to explain what it is, they each appeal instead to “the subconscious” [...] (Langland-Hassan 2020, 279)

The author here follows a longstanding philosophical tradition—going back to Plato and Kant—in holding that the highest form of creativity, which gives rise to great ideas or artifacts, cannot merely be an exercise of the imagination. While Plato locates its source in the muses, Kant attributes it to an innate human capacity he calls *genius*. Langland-Hassan likens it to the workings of Generative Adversarial Networks: artists are exposed to art and learn in an unsupervised, implicit and likely subconscious manner how to produce creative work. This view, locating the source of creativity in a realm inaccessible to the conscious mind, is compatible with the *display model*. As we have seen, in the *display model*, value plays a role only when we judge that a certain idea or artifact displayed in the imagination is creative, i.e., not only new, but also valuable.

Robert Hopkins, in *The Profile of Imagining* (2024), develops a view of sensory imagination as constitutively epistemic in nature. Imagining is, simply put, the conjuring of appearances that are appropriate insofar as they align with commitments mirroring expectations in sensory perception. For instance, visually imagining a cube is conjuring perspectival appearances while committing to appropriate other perspectival appearances, where these commitments mirror our expectations in perception. Hopkins calls such sets of perspectival appearances “profiles” and argues that despite building on knowledge about the world when conjuring those profiles, imagining allows for creativity: “We can conjure perspectival properties [...] that we have already encountered, but nothing in my account limits conjuring to those. We can also conjure properties [...] that meet whatever conditions are required for them to count as creative [...]” (Hopkins 2024, 257). Hopkins then proceeds to present two ways in which deploying knowledge of sensory or affective profiles can lead to creative results. First, it can lead to creative results in the combination of several profiles deployed at once, such as the profile of a teacup and the profile of fur, as in Meret Oppenheim’s famous artwork. Such combinations of profiles “show that we may start with knowledge of how things really are, and still end up very far from the familiar” (Hopkins 2024, 257). Second, we might invent or discover profiles, such as the Penrose tribar or the cattle handling system by Temple Grandin, a scientist in the humane livestock handling industry (see Kind 2018): we construct a new set of appearances or profiles and deploy it in sensory imagining.

The way Hopkins’ theory of imagination accounts for creativity again best corresponds to the *display model*. All that is left to the conscious mind is to judge that an idea displayed in the imagination is valuable. Being silent on how the creative subject comes up with new combinations of profiles or entirely new profiles, it offers an especially clear example of this approach: it

merely allows that new ideas are displayed in the imagination as the result of a creative process. Creativity occurs through a mechanism distinct from imagination, possibly operating subconsciously.

Within the framework of the *search model*, value can play the same role it does in the *display model*—appearing only at the end of the imaginative process and in the form of a value judgment. As Gaut presents the *search model*, a judgment concerning the aesthetic, intellectual, moral, or practical value of an idea or artifact is the second step in a two-step process, in which the first step involves unconstrained or value-neutral imagination. The difference between an artist or scientist capable of exceptional creativity and more ordinary cases of creativity, however, lies in the use of the imagination. While the search model might suggest that a more creative person simply has the ability to search a wider range of possibilities, Gaut claims that the secret lies in a pre-selection of possibilities. He compares a chess-playing computer to a human professional: Garry Kasparov, whom he considers highly creative. While the chess computer has the ability to consider a greater number of possible moves, creative Kasparov imagines and explores a smaller number of potential moves, but they are the ones most likely to be valuable. Much of the creative work, Gaut argues, is already present in this selective focus, which is the result of Kasparov's "vast experience, considerable knowledge of chess history, practised technique and his sheer native talent" (Gaut 2003, 278). But this is only one way of understanding the creative process within the *search model*, and below (in Section 5), I will give an alternative interpretation.

The idea that there is an unconstrained phase of imagining followed by a judgment can be found in recent discussions of thought experiments. Thought experiments are prime examples of the epistemic use of imagination, i.e., the aim is to learn something about the world from what we imagine. Yet, Michael Stuart (2020) has argued that in some cases, even when our aim is to gain knowledge, we need to free ourselves from epistemic constraints. Stuart quotes Feyerabend: "'You cannot foresee what kind of silly move will lead you to a new insight or to a new discovery' (Feyerabend 2011, 130–31)" (Stuart 2020, 972) and discusses Einstein's famous thought experiment of chasing a beam of light as an example:

In this thought experiment, we imagine traveling at the speed of light, alongside a second beam of light traveling in the same direction, and then ask ourselves what the second beam of light would look like. After performing this exercise himself, Einstein claims he was able to draw conclusions that helped to inspire special relativity (Norton 2013). But to get to the conclusion of the thought experiment, we must violate constraints, such as having accurate representations of the target system that evolve realistically. First, if you traveled at the speed

of light, you would explode, taking a substantial part of the earth's crust with you (which is important because you cannot see without eyes). Second, you are supposed to consider what a wave of light traveling parallel to you would "look" like, but human eyes cannot "see" lightwaves in the way required by Einstein's thought experiment. Overall, it is hard to identify a single accurate representation in the imagined portion of this thought experiment. Again, either Einstein was breaking rational constraints on imagination and thus imagining "wrongly," or, as I suspect, we should reject the constraint that imagined scenarios should be accurate if they are to produce knowledge. (Stuart 974-975)

As Stuart points out, the scenario itself is imagined without regard for what is physically possible or epistemically accurate; the imagining is not governed by the relevant epistemic values. It is only at the stage of evaluation that epistemic constraints come into play.

As another example, take Judith Jarvis Thomson's thought experiment of the famous violinist, which makes us reflect upon the moral status of abortion. In her 1971 paper "A Defense of Abortion", Thomson challenges the idea that the right to life always outweighs other rights. To make her point as strong as possible, Thomson assumes that a fetus is a person and then gives an argument defending the point that a person's right to life is always stronger than a person's right to decide what happens in and to her body. The conclusion is that abortion is not permissible: "So the fetus may not be killed; an abortion may not be performed" (Thomson 1971, 48). Following the argument, Thomson then asks the reader to imagine a scenario. In the scenario, we wake up and find ourselves connected, without our consent, to a famous unconscious violinist whose life depends on being attached to our kidneys for nine months. The Society of Music Lovers kidnapped us because only our body could sustain him. Having imagined the scenario, we are then asked to agree with the author's judgment concerning the morally relevant question of whether what is happening to us is right. Thomson writes:

What if it were not nine months, but nine years? Or longer still? What if the director of the hospital says, "Tough luck, I agree, but now you've got to stay in bed, with the violinist plugged into you, for the rest of your life. Because remember this. All persons have a right to life, and violinists are persons. Granted you have a right to decide what happens in and to your body, but a person's right to life outweighs your right to decide what happens in and to your body. So you cannot ever be unplugged from him." I imagine you would regard this as outrageous, which suggests that something really is wrong with that plausible-sounding argument [against the moral permissibility of abortion] I mentioned a moment ago. (Thomson 1971, 49)

Although it would be kind to keep the violinist alive, the scenario suggests that we are not morally obligated to do so—we have the right to unplug ourselves. By analogy, Thomson then suggests that even if we grant a fetus has a right to life, it does not necessarily have the right to use someone else's body to survive, especially without consent. Our judgment about the scenario thus has consequences for the question at stake: whether the right to life always outweighs other rights, especially in the case of abortion.

This thought experiment illustrates how moral considerations can be left out of the imaginative process itself, even though the aim of the thought experiment is to establish a moral truth. We are first asked to imagine a scenario, without evaluating its components; for example, we are not invited to judge whether it is wrong that we are being kidnapped by the Society of Music Lovers. Such elements are accepted as given and serve only to inform our moral judgment at the end, specifically regarding the permissibility of unplugging ourselves from the violinist. Just as epistemic constraints are lifted in Einstein's light-beam case, moral considerations are irrelevant to the imaginative process in Thomson's violinist case. The imaginative process is unconstrained by beliefs about what is morally right.

In both examples, the imaginative process unfolds "freely", unconstrained by epistemic or moral values, and with such considerations only playing a role at the stage of assessing the implications of what has been imagined. Note that the literature on constrained vs. unconstrained imagination is usually not concerned with truths in the moral realm. However, we can extend the idea of constraints to any imaginative project in which the application of appropriate constraints serves to align the imagining with the project's aim. In what follows, I will also speak of values as constraining the imagination. This is meant as a shorthand for the idea that any beliefs or knowledge about what is true, morally right, or aesthetically desirable are grounded in or informed by the relevant values.

Note also that neither Einstein's nor Thomson's thought experiments are typically regarded as instances of creative thinking. Rather, they are commonly taken to be paradigmatic cases of epistemic uses of imagination, since they yield knowledge about the world. Yet, they do involve an unconstrained phase of imagination, which can be seen as an instance of a creative use of the imagination, even though the imaginative project as a whole is epistemic. This allows us to say that an imaginative project may be epistemic overall while nonetheless containing imaginative phases that exhibit features characteristic of a creative use of the imagination.

One may also criticise the comparison of thought experiments to cases of creative thinking on the grounds that they might not accurately reflect the cognitive processes of their authors. Indeed, the cognitive processes of

the authors may have differed significantly from the thought experiments as they are ultimately presented, which may in fact only retrospectively serve to illustrate the relevant insights. However, thought experiments nonetheless illustrate a way in which one could arrive at the relevant conclusion, and by engaging with them, readers can themselves arrive at that conclusion via the very route the thought experiment lays out. What matters for our purpose is that thought experiments typically involve two phases: first, the construction of a scenario that is unconstrained by the relevant values, whether epistemic or moral; and second, the evaluation of what would be the case, epistemically or morally, in the actual world.

I will now show that empirical research on creative thinking within the GENEPORE model is based on a similar assumption: a value-neutral or unconstrained process of generation of ideas is followed by a value judgment concerning which idea is the best or most appropriate one. In creative thinking, both phases can recur many times, but they are nevertheless considered two distinct phases. This two-phase approach corresponds closely to what Gaut (2003) describes as the *search model* of the role of imagination in creativity. However, as we will see, more recent empirical research points towards a second possible role of value.

3. The two-phase approach to creative thinking in empirical work

Many current models and studies on creative thinking agree that the process involves at least two interacting components: the generation of ideas or combinations, and the evaluation of these ideas in terms of their appropriateness. The generation phase involves producing novel or unusual combinations of elements without concern for practicality, usefulness, etc. This is often referred to as involving *divergent thinking*: “undirected, uncensored, uncontrolled thinking” (Runco 2012, 604). While *convergent thinking* “typically leads to conventional and ‘correct’ ideas and solutions rather than original options”, divergent thinking alone “would lead to wild ideas, some of which might be creative, but many would likely be unrealistic, useless, and irrelevant” (Runco and Acar 2012, 66) (for the distinction between *divergent* and *convergent* thinking, see Guilford 1956). The evaluation phase, therefore, is crucial: it involves judging, refining, or rejecting ideas based on specific criteria. Insufficient evaluation leads to trivial or inappropriate outputs. At the same time, too much evaluation can obstruct the process. As Oded Kleinmintz et al. note, “excessive control might sabotage creativity as it may lead to the premature closure of ideas that could be further developed” (Kleinmintz et al. 2019, 134).

The key insight is that creativity depends not just on the generation of novel ideas but on a balanced relationship between generation and evalua-

tion. This dynamic is articulated in the GENEPORE model (Finke et al. 1992), which proposes that creativity involves the generation of “pre-inventive structures” followed by their exploration (“GENEPORE” stands for the two phases of “generation” and “exploration”). Participants in an experiment were asked to take simple patterns, such as letters, numbers, and geometric forms, and combine them in novel ways in the imagination. They reported that the resulting shapes or patterns were rarely predictable just by looking at the individual components. Instead, they explored various combinations in their imagination and observed whether anything interesting would emerge from the process. The initial structures can be abstract or ambiguous and are not yet complete ideas. As Finke describes: “subjects can often take simple patterns such as letters, numbers, and geometric forms, imagine combining them in novel ways, and then discover creative patterns and symbols that result from their combination” (Finke 1990, 382–383).

While previous research has focused on the generation phase, emphasizing associative thinking and memory processes, the evaluation phase has remained relatively underexplored. The assumption has been that creative ideas must balance originality and adequacy, but how these dimensions are assessed was unclear. Moreover, while prior studies hinted at subjective preferences influencing creativity, the cognitive and neural mechanisms underlying this influence were not well understood.

More recent empirical work has further explored the role of evaluation in creative thinking. Researchers distinguish between objective and subjective evaluation. Objective evaluation typically involves statistical methods—for example, an idea’s originality is scored based on how infrequent it is across a sample—and ideas mentioned by fewer people receive higher scores. In contrast, subjective evaluation relies on originality, appropriateness, or quality of an idea based on the subject’s experience or intuition. Subjective evaluations of ideas can account for complex and context-sensitive judgments, such as whether an idea is surprising yet fitting or imaginative in a meaningful way (Runco and Acar 2012, 71). A series of papers from the same research group (Lopez-Persem 2024, Battistello et al. 2025 and Moreno-Rodriguez et al. Forthcoming) proposes a three-subprocess framework for evaluation: (i) monitoring ideas’ originality and adequacy, (ii) assigning subjective value based on individual preferences, and (iii) selecting the idea with the highest subjective value. Their experimental results show that subjective value influences idea selection; preferred ideas are produced more quickly, suggesting that valuation “energizes” the creative process:

Model fitting and simulations showed that subjective value drove the selection of an idea among potential candidates, in three main findings. First, we found that, during the creativity task, preferred ideas

were provided faster than less valued ideas. These results suggest that the likeability of an idea energizes its production, emphasizing the potential underlying motivational role of valuation in creative idea production. Indeed, valuation leads to behavioral energization, meaning that subjective values predict how much effort is put into an action, or in our case, how fast an action is performed, reflecting motivation. Second, computational modeling revealed that an idea's subjective value relies on a combination of its adequacy and originality. This result aligns with the view that adequacy and originality are critical dimensions of creativity, consistent with the product-based definition of creativity, and previously proposed as the guiding factors of idea selection. Third, we observed individual differences in how adequacy and originality contribute to subjective value, and, interestingly, individuals favoring originality tended to be more creative (as measured by a battery of creativity tests and questionnaires). This indicates that individual preferences play a role in creativity. (Battistello et al. 2025, 4–5)

A study by Moreno-Rodriguez et al. (forthcoming) similarly argues that individuals assign subjective value to their ideas based on an integration of originality and adequacy, and that this valuation process actively guides creative thinking. Using fMRI images as evidence, it identifies distinct neural correlates for originality (Default Mode Network), adequacy (Executive Control Network), and subjective value (Brain Valuation System), showing how these networks interact to support creative evaluation. The study shows that the human reward system encodes the subjective value of ideas during the creative process.

This selective presentation of recent empirical findings suggests that value could play a role in the generation of ideas, and hence during the imaginative process (in active creativity) rather than only at the end of the imaginative process. While this research does not establish a specific role for value in the conscious process of imagining, it does suggest that generation and evaluation are not strictly separate processes. The next section will work toward a proposal of what the role of value in creative imaginative processes could be.

4. Value-guided imagining

The two-phase approach to creative thinking—supported by empirical models and captured in the *display model* as well as the *search model* of imagination in creativity—treats evaluation as a distinct stage that follows idea generation. On this view, imaginative activity first produces a broad range of ideas without the relevant constraints, which are then assessed for their value or appropriateness. Antti Kauppinen (2025) challenges the idea that

such a two-stage process could define creative agency, particularly in artistic contexts. He invites us to imagine that the two phases were executed by two people. While Anna randomly generates ideas, Belle assesses them. From this scenario, Kauppinen concludes that it is hard to see creative agency in such a process, because: “One doesn’t know what she’s doing, and the other is no more creative than a listener who recognizes a good riff without ever having come up with one” (Kauppinen 2025, 247–248). Kauppinen rightly points out that purely random generation followed by evaluation is insufficient for creative agency. Psychologists like Runco and Acar, as well as Kleinmintz et al., however, emphasize the necessity of a skillful interplay between divergent and convergent thinking in the creative subject—and while such skillful interplay may be underexplained, it must involve more than Kauppinen’s scenario is suggesting. However, I won’t address this issue here and instead look at how Kauppinen tries to solve the problem he sets out to solve in his paper: the problem of creative agency.

Kauppinen introduces the distinction between a *guiding aim* and an *aspirational aim*. A guiding aim is a rule or pattern that one can follow during a process—for example, folding paper according to a set of steps to make an origami crane. An aspirational aim, by contrast, is an aim with an evaluative component, such as to create a beautiful painting, which can be instantiated in various ways. Unlike guiding aims, aspirational aims thus do not provide explicit rules, but nonetheless somehow influence the creative process, and the question Kauppinen raises is how exactly such aims can guide creative activity.

On Kauppinen’s account, creative agency does not consist in a sequence of blind generation followed by evaluation, but in the agent’s capacity to perceive or conceive possibilities or affordances as salient in light of an aspirational aim.⁴ The aspirational aim is crucial to how we perceive possibilities or affordances, and it figures in the definition of creative perception: “Aesthetic creativity fundamentally consists of perceiving or conceiving, in a raw material or medium, novel affordances or solicitations that serve an aesthetic aspirational aim, and shaping it so that some such possibilities are realized” (Kauppinen 2025, 253). Aspirational aims thus determine which affordances or possibilities stand out to the creative subject as worth pursuing at the moment they are perceived. The creative subject is active not by selecting among independently generated options, but by recognizing certain possibilities as promising relative to the aspirational aim.

⁴ Kauppinen expresses skepticism concerning the role of imagination in creativity (2025, 250), but I take imagination to play a central and indispensable role across artistic domains (see also Stokes 2014).

In contrast to Kauppinen, I do not take aspirational aims to explain why particular possibilities stand out as salient in the moment of imaginative engagement. I propose that in a creative process, imagining, and in some cases also perception, can be guided by attention to subjective value from the outset. By “attention to subjective value” I mean that as we imagine, our focus is selectively drawn to features, possibilities, or aspects that we find significant or worthwhile.⁵ Surely, a painter aims to create an impressive painting, a poet to write a beautiful poem, and a scientist to discover the correct theory. In what I call *value-guided imaginative processes*, however, attention is directed not toward value relative to such an aim, but toward the value of what is being imagined in the moment. The guiding role is not played by a prior specification of what would count as an instantiation of the aspirational aim, but by the felt value of emerging possibilities themselves.

This point can be illustrated by Louise Glück’s retrospective testimony concerning the writing of her poem “Song”, published in her 2021 collection *Winter Recipes from the Collective*. In an interview with Adam Moss in *The Work of Art: How Something Comes from Nothing* (2024), Glück describes how she started creating the poem from a single sentence that appeared to her in a dream: “Leo Cruz has white bowls, I think I must get some to you.” She recalls waking up, writing the sentence down, and having the immediate sense that “this is a gold mine,” despite the fact that, as she emphasizes, “there’s nothing distinguished about the sentence” and that “the language is very plainspoken” (Glück, in Moss 2024). What mattered to her was not a prior conception of what the poem was meant to achieve, but a felt sense that something could work out, as if “some very large fish was toying with me under the water” (Glück, in Moss 2024). In the process, she changed the sentence to “Leo Cruz makes the most beautiful white bowls; I think I must get some to you”, which is now the opening line of the poem.

Crucially, the aspirational aim—such as writing a poem about loss, longing, or survival—does not appear to be concrete enough to guide what Glück “sees” in the sentence. At the moment of discovery, the aspirational aim plays no role in explaining why this sentence, rather than countless others, stands out as promising. Instead, Glück explicitly describes herself as seeing and feeling something in the sentence itself. She states: “I can hardly explain to you why I so love that line. [...] to me it was one of the most beautiful lines I had ever written in my life,” adding that she “saw things in it that had not been realized,” and that she could “see them, feel them, even if I didn’t know

⁵ Note that this requires there to be a sense in which we can attend to what we value in imagination in a similar way as in perception. Following Sartre and Wittgenstein, Hopkins thinks we cannot observe the intentional object of our imagining, and this marks a crucial difference between perception and imagination (Hopkins 2024, chapter 2).

how to give them form.” The sentence is valued not because it serves a prior aspirational aim, but because of what it already appears to her to contain.

What guides the creative process, on Glück’s description, is thus not an aspirational aim determining which affordances are salient, but the value she sees in the sentence itself. That perceived, subjective value, expressed in her love for the line, her sense of its beauty, and her feeling that it contains unrealized possibilities, guides her imaginative exploration as the poem develops. Even though her aim is to write a poem, it is this felt value that directs the imaginative process.

Where Kauppinen explains salience by appeal to aspirational aims, I thus propose instead that salience can be explained by attention to value within the imaginative process itself. Imaginative processes can be guided by values—epistemic, moral, or aesthetic—without presupposing an aspirational aim that fixes the value of certain possibilities to be pursued from the outset. Further, Kauppinen rejects a two-stage model on which imaginative possibilities are first generated in a value-neutral way and only subsequently evaluated. I take it to be one way for creativity to proceed. Einstein’s and Thomson’s thought experiments exemplify, or at least illustrate, cases in which the imagining itself is unguided, yet the imaginative project takes place under constraints, which are imposed at the end of the process.

5. Value-guided imagining vs. constrained imagining

In this final section, I will give examples of value-guided imagining from the epistemic, moral, and aesthetic domains and distinguish it from the standard contrast between “free” and constrained imagining. I will further discuss the question of what may distinguish creative uses of imagination from epistemic uses of imagination beyond the distinction between “free” imagination and epistemically constrained imagination as it is discussed in the literature.

Imaginative processes are often guided by *epistemic values*—such as truth, understanding, or coherence—especially in contexts like scientific reasoning or everyday problem-solving. These cases have previously been described as constrained by knowledge and beliefs about the world. Kind (2016) distinguishes two kinds of constraints at work: the reality constraint and the change constraint. The reality constraint requires that, in epistemically significant imagining, the imagined scenario represent the relevant aspects of the world as the subject takes them to be. When we imagine whether a sofa fits through a doorway or whether a suitcase fits into an overhead compartment, our imagining is constrained by beliefs about the actual size, shape, and spatial relations of the relevant objects. The change constraint, by contrast, concerns how imagination departs from reality. When an imaginative

project involves introducing a change such as inserting an object into a space or altering a feature of a situation, the imagination must track the relevant consequences of that change, rather than introducing further alterations arbitrarily. Epistemically constrained imagining thus departs from the actual world only in controlled ways: it represents the world as it is taken to be and/or modifies it in ways that are licensed by the aims of the imaginative task. These constraints explain how imagination can be used to learn about the world. However, my point is that they do not by themselves explain how imagination proceeds.

This can be illustrated by the following case. Joshua Myers (2021) asks us to imagine planning a trip and trying to decide which piece of luggage to take along:

You pick out a piece of luggage, but are unsure as to whether it will fit into the overhead compartment. In order to learn about whether your luggage will fit, you imagine trying to fit your luggage into the overhead compartment on an airplane at various orientations. When you imagine your luggage moving into the overhead compartment at a certain orientation, you imagine it fitting comfortably inside the compartment. (Myers 2021, 7)

Constraints explain how I can determine whether the luggage fits, but they do not fully explain the process of imagining. What guides me in the process is that, at every step, I remain concerned with the real-world situation. As I imagine, my attention is directed toward the relevant features of the imagined scene. Beliefs about the size of the piece of luggage and the compartment serve as background constraints and inform the process, but what directs my imagination is how I visually represent and manipulate the spatial relations between the two. Throughout the imaginative process, I remain guided by *epistemic values* concerning whether one fits into the other. By contrast, in Einstein's thought experiment, epistemic considerations do not guide the imaginative process in this way at all. They may play a role in the background in the form of intentions: the aim of the thought experiment is, after all, to figure out some as yet unknown truths about the world. But constraints enter only at the stage of evaluating the consequences of the imagined scenario.

Moral values can direct imaginative exercises in ethical reflection. When preparing for a difficult conversation, for instance, we may imagine different scenarios guided by considerations of empathy and fairness. We may avoid imagining actions we take to be wrong or unjust, and instead focus on those that align with our moral commitments. What shapes the imaginative process is the agent's focus on actions that align with their sense of what is right or just. By contrast, in Thomson's thought experiment, the imagining is not

being guided by attention to moral values, e.g., when we are asked to imagine the kidnapping. Moral evaluation enters only at the stage of assessing what follows from the scenario, rather than at the stage of constructing it.

Amy Kind (2016) discusses the difference between free imagining and imagining under constraints by appealing to the distinction between the literary genres of fantasy and science fiction:

In an essay that attempts to explain what science fiction is and how it is to be distinguished from related genres such as fantasy, Campbell suggested:

The major distinction between fantasy and science fiction is, simply, that science fiction uses one, or a very, very few new postulates, and develops the rigidly consistent logical consequences of these limited postulates. Fantasy makes its rules as it goes along . . . The basic nature of fantasy is “The only rule is, make up a new rule any time you need one!” The basic rule of science fiction is “Set up a basic proposition—then develop its consistent, logical consequences.” (Campbell 1966)

Our imagination often works analogously to the way that Campbell describes the genre of fantasy as working—completely without constraint. But ideal imagination works analogously to the way that Campbell describes the genre of science fiction as working. (Kind 2016, 151)

While it is true that fantasy is not constrained from the outset in the same way, the author does not simply make up rules at random. The absence of constraints, together with the aspirational aim of writing a fantasy novel, does not explain how the story is generated. Rather, the author’s imagination is guided by *aesthetic values* such as harmony, emotional resonance, formal balance, or genre-specific considerations. Similarly, Glück’s description of writing her poem suggests that her imagination does not proceed at random. Beginning from a single sentence that struck her as valuable, her imaginative exploration is guided by what she finds beautiful, promising, or significant in the line itself. What shapes the development of both the poem and the fantasy novel is not a prior conception of what it is meant to achieve, but an ongoing attention to the value the author finds in what they are imagining.

Imaginative processes can thus vary along two dimensions: whether they are constrained by certain beliefs, and whether they are guided by attention to value. While constraints determine what may or may not be imagined, guidance concerns how imagination actually proceeds. Guidance explains the imaginative activity: which possibilities are explored, which features are foregrounded, and how the imaginative process develops over time.

It seems, however, that whenever imagination is guided by certain values, it is also at least implicitly constrained by those values. The luggage case suggests that value-guidance determines which possibilities are taken to be live options and which are not. This can be represented, at least retrospectively or in principle, in terms of beliefs, intentions, or evaluative judgments, even though the relevant constraints may not play a role during the imaginative process. Hence, it is correct that in the luggage example, our imagining is constrained by epistemic values, but beliefs and intentions are not the driving factor of the imaginative process.

However, constraint by a value or set of values doesn't imply guidance by the same value or set of values. Some cases of imagining are guided by one set of values while being constrained by several others. In the moral example, where one prepares for a difficult conversation, imagination is guided by moral values such as fairness or empathy. However, moral values are not the only ones constraining the imaginative process: epistemic values also function as constraints, since the exercise concerns a real upcoming interaction and therefore cannot depart from what is taken to be true about the world. One may not, for instance, imagine responses or circumstances that are known to be impossible or radically unrealistic. However, appealing to the fact that our imagining is constrained by epistemic values in this case does not at all explain how the imaginative process proceeds. Similarly, a painter's imagination may be guided by aesthetic values such as balance or harmony, while remaining constrained by the properties of the materials being used. The painter may imagine variations that are aesthetically promising, but cannot imagine effects that are known to be physically impossible given the medium. Being constrained by a value is therefore not sufficient for being guided by that same value.

Gaut's interpretation of the Kasparov case can now be challenged. On the two-phase approach, Kasparov first skillfully generates candidate moves and then evaluates them according to the relevant constraints. However, one may also understand Kasparov's attention as being guided throughout by values such as elegance, surprise, or strategic coherence, which shape his attention and exploration of possibilities. His imagination is constrained by the rules of chess, but it is guided by values that structure how he imagines the game unfolding.

How, finally, should we distinguish creative uses of imagination from epistemic ones? Intuitively, epistemic imagination exhibits fidelity to how the world is taken to be. In the literature on constrained imagination (e.g., Kind 2016), imagining is epistemically significant insofar as it remains subject to epistemic constraints. Creative uses of imagination, by contrast, are not required to remain subject to epistemic constraints. We can propose

a parallel criterion for value-guided imagining. Imagining guided by epistemic values aims at correctness with respect to the world, whereas imagining guided by non-epistemic values permits departure from or revision of the world rather than merely tracking it, and thus does not impose a requirement of fidelity to how the world is taken to be. A value-guided imaginative process is thus creative if and only if it is guided by values whose satisfaction does not require fidelity to the actual world as it is taken to be.

Whether an imaginative project is an epistemic or a creative one therefore seems to depend on how we use our imagination: how it is guided or constrained. Both thought experiments introduced above, Einstein's light-beam case and Thomson's violinist case, would count as cases of the creative use of imagination, but they are also epistemically relevant, because the second phase can impose epistemic constraints in the form of value judgments. Both cases contain a *creative phase*, but they constitute an *epistemic project*. Both are thus cases of what we could label "epistemic creativity", expressing that the imagination is used in a creative way, but to establish truths about the world; in the case of Einstein's thought experiments, radically new truths about the world.

6. Conclusion

Creativity has been defined as the ability to produce something new and valuable. However, the role that value plays within the creative process has received little attention. Most accounts, particularly in philosophy and psychology, assume that evaluation occurs after a value-neutral exploration of possibility or imaginative generation, where the value of an idea is assessed only afterwards. In this paper, I have challenged the generality of the two-phase framework by proposing that value can also guide the generative phase of the creative imaginative process itself. According to a second way of understanding the *search model* of imagination in creativity, value shapes how we explore ideas and determines which paths we are pursuing. In value-guided imagining, attention to what the subject finds valuable shapes how imaginative possibilities are explored. I have argued that aspirational aims do not play a significant role in which possibilities become salient in the unfolding of the imaginative process. This is not to say that aims play no role in creative activity; rather, they may provide motivation and the necessary frame for the project.

Introducing value-guided imagining sheds light on the distinction between epistemic and creative uses of imagination by showing that the familiar contrast between constrained and unconstrained imagining does not exhaust the ways imagination can be regulated. Besides being constrained, imaginative episodes can be guided by attention to value. This matters for

the distinction between epistemic and creative uses of imagination because epistemic uses are not simply those in which imagining is constrained, and creative uses are not simply those in which imagining is “free”. Epistemic projects can contain imaginative phases that are not guided by epistemic values at all (as in the “free” construction phase of a thought experiment), and creative projects can contain phases that remain constrained by epistemic considerations (for instance, by what is physically possible in a medium). The upshot is that the distinction between epistemic and creative is best applied at the level of phases within a project: some phases are epistemically guided, while others are creative in virtue of suspending that guidance and exploring possibilities under non-epistemic value-guidance or in an unguided way.

The distinctions introduced at the beginning of the paper can now be restated in a more fine-grained way. The contrast between passive and active creativity tracks whether imagination merely displays an outcome or is deliberately employed in a search process, but it also leaves open different modes of active search. The contrast between free and constrained imagination tracks whether fidelity to how the world is taken to be is required, but it leaves open how imaginative processes proceed. The new distinction proposed here tracks whether imaginative search is shaped by attention to value, and so locates a further role for value within the imaginative process itself.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank audiences in Geneva, Paris, and Barcelona, as well as an anonymous reviewer, for their very helpful feedback. This research was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Bibliography

- Arcangeli, M. (2022). The creative side of recreative imagination, in P. Engisch and J. Langkau (eds), *The Philosophy of Fiction*, Routledge, pp. 77–96.
- Battistello, G., Moreno-Rodriguez, S., Volle, E. and Lopez-Persem, A. (2025). Subjective valuation as a domain-general process in creative thinking, *Communications Psychology* 3: 1–13.
- Beaney, M. (2005). *Imagination and Creativity*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes.

- Boden, M. (2004). *The Creative Mind*, 2 edn, Routledge, London.
- Boden, M. (2014). Creativity and artificial intelligence: A contradiction in terms?, in E. S. Paul and S. B. Kaufman (eds), *The Philosophy of Creativity: New Essays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 224–244.
- Finke, R. A. (1990). *Creative Imagery*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ.
- Finke, R. A., Ward, T. B. and Smith, S. M. (1992). *Creative Cognition*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Gaut, B. (2003). Creativity and imagination, in B. Gaut and P. Livingston (eds), *The Creation of Art*, Cambridge University Press, New York, pp. 148–173.
- Guilford, J. P. (1956). The structure of intellect, *Psychological Bulletin* **53**: 267–293.
- Hopkins, R. (2024). *The Profile of Imagining*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Kauppinen, A. (2025). Creativity, spontaneity, and merit, in A. King (ed.), *Art and Philosophy: Essays at the Intersection*, Oxford University Press, pp. 239–260.
- Kind, A. (2016). Imagining under constraints, in A. Kind and P. Kung (eds), *Knowledge Through Imagination*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 145–159.
- Kind, A. (2018). How imagination gives rise to knowledge, in F. Macpherson and F. Dorsch (eds), *Perceptual Imagination and Perceptual Memory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 227–246.
- Kind, A. (2022). *Imagination and Creative Thinking*, Elements, Cambridge.
- Kind, A. and Langkau, J. (eds) (2026). *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Imagination and Creativity*, Oxford University Press.
- Kleinmintz, O. M., Ivancovsky, T. and Shamay-Tsoory, S. G. (2019). The twofold model of creativity: the neural underpinnings of the generation and evaluation of creative ideas, *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* **27**: 131–138.
- Langland-Hassan, P. (2020). *Explaining Imagination*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Lopez-Persem, A. e. (2024). How subjective idea valuation energizes and guides creative idea generation, *American Psychologist* **79**: 403–422.

- Moreno-Rodriguez, S., Béranger, B., Volle, E. and Lopez-Persem, A. (Forthcoming). Creativity involves the subjective valuation of ideas via the brain valuation system.
- Moss, A. (2024). *The Work of Art. How Something Comes from Nothing*, Penguin Press, New York.
- Myers, J. (2021). Reasoning with imagination, in C. Badura and A. Kind (eds), *Epistemic Uses of Imagination*, Routledge, New York, pp. 103–121.
- Norton, J. D. (2013). Chasing the light: Einstein's most famous thought experiment, in M. Frappier, L. Meynell and J. R. Brown (eds), *Thought Experiments in Philosophy, Science and the Arts*, Routledge, New York, pp. 123–40.
- Paul, E. S. and Kaufman, S. B. (eds) (2014). *The Philosophy of Creativity*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Runco, M. A. (2012). Creative and imaginative thinking, in S. Vilayanur (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior*, 2 edn, Ramachandran, Academic Press, pp. 602–605.
- Runco, M. A. and Acar, S. (2012). Divergent thinking as an indicator of creative potential, *Creativity Research Journal* **24**: 66–75.
- Stokes, D. (2014). The role of imagination in creativity, in E. S. Paul and S. B. Kaufman (eds), *The Philosophy of Creativity: New Essays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 157–185.
- Stuart, M. T. (2020). The productive anarchy of scientific imagination, *Philosophy of Science* **87**: 968–978.
- Thomson, J. J. (1971). A defense of abortion, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* **1**: 47–66.