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Imagination Against Evidence-Resistance

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Abstract

Beliefs often fail to respond to counter-evidence in ways that epistemic norms demand. In some situations, evidence is selectively attended in ways that preserve moral, political or social commitments. This paper argues that imaginative skill can facilitate rational belief revision by changing how agents attend to their existing evidence. Drawing on Nick Wiltsher's conception of imagination as a "lens" , I argue that imaginative engagement can alter the salience and attention towards the evidence without itself supplying new evidence or changing the evidential base. Imagining alternative possibilities can create epistemic distance from anticipatory commitments, making otherwise neglected or discounted evidence more salient and thereby enabling agents to appreciate its significance. Further, it can aid doxastic justification where propositional justification already exists by altering the cognitive conditions under which existing evidence can exert its justificatory force. I conclude by arguing that the skill to imaginatively reconsider one's commitments may constitute an epistemic virtue, the capacity of which can be improved through practice.

Keywords: imagination, evidence-resistance, motivated reasoning, belief, salience, justification, attention

I. Introduction

Beliefs often fail to respond to counter-evidence in ways that epistemic norms demand. In some situations, evidence is selectively attended to, discounted, or reorganized in ways that preserve moral, political or social commitments (Festinger et al. 1956, Lord et al. 1979, Anderson et al. 1980, Pyszczynski et al. 1985, Slusher and Anderson 1989, Liberman and Chaiken 1992, Chinn and Brewer 1993, McHoskey 1995, Taber & Lodge 2006, Leeuwen 2014, Ellis 2022, Flores 2024, 2025). For instance, in 2019, the World Health Organization identified vaccine hesitancy as one of the top ten threats to global health, alongside climate change.[1] Amid growing polarization, misinformation, distrust in expertise, and disputes over facts, understanding and mitigating this phenomenon is of increasing practical importance.

This problem has received sustained attention in philosophy and psychology. Existing theories have proposed a range of strategies for improving epistemic responsiveness, including cultivation of intellectual virtues (Zagzebski, 1996), weighing the degree of justification (Lackey, 2011), increased exposure to evidence, and more rigorous argumentation (Fricker, 2007). Yet, these strategies face a persistent difficulty. In many cases where belief resistance is most pronounced, additional evidence or improving the quality of an argument does not straightforwardly produce belief revision. Indeed, empirical evidence on motivated reasoning suggests that more evidence sometimes enables one to defend their antecedent

[1] A general report is found here: https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-2019.

commitments more effectively rather than revising them (Kahan, 2013, Kunda, 1990, Bækgård et al., 2019). Evidence-resistance in this sense is a failure not of evidential access or inference, but of appropriate epistemic uptake (Simion 2023).

I argue that imaginative engagement constitutes an important but insufficiently explored epistemic resource for addressing this problem. More specifically, I explore whether imagination can function as a genuine epistemic mechanism for facilitating rational belief revision in cases where direct engagement with evidence proves unsuccessful. It can facilitate rational belief revision without supplying new evidence or independent justification. Instead, imaginative engagement can alter how an agent attends to and organizes evidence already available to them, making neglected or discounted considerations more salient. Its epistemic role is therefore not to add to the evidential base, but to change the conditions under which existing evidence can exert its justificatory force. In doing so, it enables doxastic justification, when the person already possesses propositional justification. I further suggest that the capacity to engage in such imaginative reorganization can constitute a form of epistemic virtue

I develop this argument through Nick Wiltsher's conception of imagination as a lens rather than a mirror (Wiltsher 2019). On the lens model, imagination can foreground, abstract, and reorganize features of experience rather than merely represent hypothetical states of affairs. This makes it particularly useful for understanding evidence-resistance. If resistance partly consists in an entrenched organization of evidence, one that foregrounds considerations supporting prior commitments while backgrounding contrary ones, then imagination may sometimes loosen or reconfigure that organization. In this sense, imagination can restore a connection between evidence and belief that resistance has disrupted.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section II expands on the cognitive architecture of evidence-resistance and the effects that imagination might have on it. Section III explains the mechanism involved in the process following Wiltsher's lens account of imagination. Section IV illustrates the claim through three motivating examples of fiction, counterfactual reasoning, and social imaginaries. Section V considers objections and limitations, especially the initiation problem.

II. Effects of Imagination on Evidence-Resistance

Evidence-resistance concerns cases in which agents possess evidence relevant to belief revision but fail to respond to it appropriately. One important source of such resistance is motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990). Desires, identity commitments, values, social affiliations, and affect can influence how evidence is attended to, interpreted, weighted, and integrated into an agent's existing beliefs. Accordingly, evidence-resistance can sometimes be a salience problem where the evidence-resistance can occur before inference (Munton 2025). Salience structure captures the relative accessibility of

information to a subject. Some items are more likely to attract or retain attention than others (Munton 2025, 22). Salience is grounded in dispositions to attend, and these structures determine which information becomes accessible for further processing. So in a way, the agent possesses counterevidence, but their salience structure systematically privileges considerations that support the antecedent commitment and deprioritizes contrary considerations. The resulting failure is therefore not necessarily one of evidential access or inferential competence. It can instead arise from the way evidence is organized and taken up. Examples of evidence-resistance are remarkably diverse, encompassing phenomena such as climate change denial, vaccine skepticism, gun control, national security, politically entrenched identity-based beliefs, etc. Yet it is by no means confined to these conspicuous cases and can be a pervasive feature of ordinary cognition. We exhibit it when we convince ourselves that our children are incapable of serious wrongdoing, or that an unfavorable medical diagnosis is likely mistaken, or our optimism about a sports team's unlikely championship and even in self-directed beliefs such as "I am bad at mathematics" or "I am unlovable." These examples suggest that evidence-resistance is not an exceptional cognitive defect limited to particular social or political groups, but rather a widespread and deeply rooted aspect of human thought.

Imagination becomes relevant to evidence-resistance because it can intervene across these reasonings. It can influence what the agent believes as well as how the agent represents possibilities against which evidence is evaluated. If evidence-resistance can arise because some possibilities are systematically backgrounded while others are made salient, then imagination can sometimes alter that organization. It can make neglected alternatives cognitively available and enable an agent to reconsider the significance of evidence from a different perspective. The relevant epistemic function of imagination is therefore not necessarily to supply new evidence, but to change how existing evidence is encountered.

Interestingly, salience structures concern not just what an agent is currently attending to, but what they could readily attend to (Munton 2025, 24). In other words, they deliver accessibility to modal facts. Imaginative practice can alter what becomes readily accessible. A skillful imaginer can develop a more sophisticated salient structure that enables them to represent more than one possibility. Some cases of evidence-resistance are partly constituted by maladaptive salience structures in which evidence that bears against an antecedent commitment is comparatively inaccessible to attention or systematically deprioritized. Imagination can intervene by restructuring the relative accessibility of that evidence, making previously backgrounded considerations easier to attend to and integrate into reasoning.

Suppose, for example, that an agent possesses counterevidence to an entrenched anti-vax belief and habitually interprets that evidence within a framework that protects the original belief. Merely adding further evidence may invite the same resistance. Imagination can sometimes alter the local salience structure through which evidence is encountered.

Imaginative engagement can help with two distinct functions at two consecutive levels: altering the accessibility to representations different from what the agent already possess and increasing the salience of competing considerations. By representing how the same evidence might appear under a different hypothesis or perspective, the agent may become more capable of recognizing what counts against the original commitment and why. This can ultimately improve the update of existing evidence. Imagination can thereby affect the agent's epistemic relation to evidence without changing the evidential base itself.

Now one might ask that if imagination is not itself evidence, then how can it be epistemically important? One way to answer this is that epistemic improvement is not exhausted by acquiring more justification (Egeland 2021). An agent can improve epistemically by coming to properly base beliefs on justification they already possess. Imagination does not itself add new propositional justification. Rather, it can help satisfy the proper basing condition, thereby turning propositional justification into doxastic justification without conferring any new justification (Egeland 2021, 511). In evidence-resistance, the agent may already possess the relevant propositional justification, but motivationally distorted attention and salience prevent that justification from being properly taken up in belief formation or revision. Imagination can help by restructuring what is salient and accessible, thereby enabling the agent to base belief more appropriately on evidence already possessed.

This suggests that imagination's contribution to belief revision is often indirect. An imagining need not itself constitute evidence. Its contribution can instead be structural. It can affect which possibilities are entertained, which considerations are foregrounded, which interpretations are available, and how evidence is organized within an agent's reasoning. The epistemic role of imagination is therefore best understood not simply in terms of the content it represents, but in terms of how it shapes the conditions under which evidence is taken up.

This possibility is also visible in work on perspective-taking and social epistemology. Martha Nussbaum emphasizes the role of imagination in making the experiences of others salient (Nussbaum 1997); Iris Young argues that dominant social positions can obscure perspectives that fall outside established frameworks (1980); and Medina connects epistemic injustice to deficiencies in the imaginative resources through which agents interpret unfamiliar experiences (2013). Although these accounts differ in aim, they illustrate a common structure. Imaginative engagement can make considerations intelligible or salient that an existing perspective has rendered obscure.

III. Mechanism

III.i. Imagination as Lens

Wiltsher's lens theory is useful for the present argument because it treats imagination not merely as the reproduction of experience, but as a way of selecting, focusing, and reorganizing aspects of it. A lens can magnify, clarify, isolate, attenuate, and distort (2023, 445). Likewise, imaginative activity can foreground some features of experience while allowing others to recede. This contrasts with what Wiltsher calls an imitation or mirror model. On such accounts, imaginative states are understood by resemblance to corresponding non-imaginative states such that visualizing imitates seeing, imaginative belief imitates belief, and imaginative desire imitates desire. Wiltsher's objection is that this picture obscures something important about imaginative activity. Imagination does not simply reproduce an antecedent experience. It actively works on experiential material by selecting and reshaping it.[2]

This active character is what matters for evidence-resistance. If evidence-resistance operates partly by fixing the way evidence is organized, making some considerations salient while discounting or backgrounding others, then imagination need not defeat resistance by supplying stronger evidence. It can instead alter the perspective through which that evidence is encountered.

Consider Wiltsher's example of imagining winning the lottery. The imaginer need not reproduce an earlier experience of becoming wealthy. Rather, she selectively organizes familiar materials, money, pleasure, freedom, satisfaction, while allowing other considerations, such as financial anxiety or social disruption, to recede. The example is epistemically revealing because it shows that imagination can change which aspects of a situation occupy the foreground without changing the underlying informational material.

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[2] Wiltsher does not assign this view to any particular philosophers who explicitly claim imagination as essentially imitative in nature. However, he emphasizes that how it has been historically described can be well captured through his definition of imitation. For instance, he states that some forms of theoretical basis for imagery theory of meaning and cognition can be found in Hume (Dorsch, 2016) and also in Plato and Aristotle (Rosenmeyer, 1986). Accounts of imagination in terms of counterfactual belief, or pretence is understood in imitative terms in the accounts of Ryle (1949, ch. 8), entertaining unasserted thoughts (Scruton 1974, ch. 7), counterfactual belief (Russow, 1980) and representing as possible (O'Connor and Aardema 2005). He traces the understanding of imagination as imitation in Walton's account of make-believe which is a belief-imitating state of mind, where paintings or fiction acts as props that mandate imaginings (Walton 1990).
For other accounts outside of Simulationism or Waltonism, Wiltsher mentions Lamarque 1981, Paul 2014, Arpaly 2020.
He specifies how Simulation theorists understand the knowledge of other minds as imaginatively imitating first-personal practical reasoning, especially following Currie and Ravenscroft 2003, Goldman 2006, Gallagher 2008, Nichols, Shaun, Stich, Leslie, and Klein 1996).

The relevance to evidence-resistance is therefore structural. Evidence-resistance preserves an established 'lens' that foregrounds some considerations while backgrounding others, thereby shaping what appears salient, plausible, or worthy of consideration in the first place. Imagination can weaken this rigidity by making alternative perspectives cognitively available.

III.ii. Three features of imagination

I argue that three distinct features of imagination make it effective against evidence-resistance. These are its voluntary character, its lack of doxastic commitment, and its capacity to reorganize attention.

First, imagination is ordinarily subject to the agent's voluntary control (Fodor 1975; Noordhof 2002; McGinn 2004; Dorsch 2012; Langland-Hassan 2016; Balcerak Jackson 2018; Kind 2018; Arcangeli 2019; Munro & Strohminger 2021). At first glance, these might seem like a structural limitation that undermines imagination's epistemic credentials. Owing to its voluntariness, it is insufficiently constrained to serve as a reliable guide to knowledge (Myers, 2024, 8). We can imagine houses on the moon, friendship with aliens, an entirely androgynous world, etc. So, it presumably is never truth-tracking. However, in the present context, this very feature is an advantage. Evidence-resistance is often not directly voluntary. Agents do not typically decide to scrutinize threatening evidence more harshly or to interpret congenial evidence more generously (Kahan, 2013, 418). These asymmetries can occur automatically. By contrast, agents can deliberately engage in fiction, counterfactual reasoning, or perspective-taking. The voluntary character of imagination therefore creates a possible point of intervention in a process that is otherwise difficult to control directly.

The volitional characteristic of imagination is also epistemically significant because it helps address the comparative non-volitional character of belief. This can be broken down in two ways. First, beliefs are not typically subject to direct voluntary control (Sinhababu, 2016, 112-114). One cannot simply decide to believe otherwise at will. They are also normatively constrained by evidence. When confronted with sufficiently strong counterevidence, rational agents ought to revise their beliefs accordingly. Second, rational agents are often unable to revise when those beliefs are deeply entangled with identity, affective attachment, or social belonging (Flores, 2025, 710). Evidence-resistance can emerge precisely within this tension between epistemic obligation and psychological resistance. Counterevidence may be recognized at an intellectual level while simultaneously resisted at the affective level because belief revision threatens an established practical and emotional orientation toward the world. Imagination might mitigate this conflict. This is because, unlike belief, it does not require commitment. Its volitional character allows agents to entertain possibilities without immediately incurring the costs.

This allows emotional distance that reduces defensive resistance while still enabling experiential, and at times, first-person engagement with alternative perspectives (Currie and Ian Ravenscroft, 2003).

Second, imagination, unlike belief, does not require commitment to truth (Humberstone 1992; Nichols & Stich 2000, 2003; Shah & Velleman 2005; Gendler 2008a, 2008b; Sinhababu 2013; Van Leeuwen 2014; Kind 2016). It permits the consideration of a possibility without requiring commitment to its truth. This creates a form of *epistemic distance*. The agent can ask what the world would look like if an alternative were true without yet being required to endorse it. This matters because evidence-resistance often arises precisely when revision is experienced as threatening. A belief may be entangled with identity, affective attachment, or social belonging. In such cases, direct counterevidence can immediately activate defensive cognition. Imaginative engagement can suspend the demand for immediate belief revision while still making an alternative perspective cognitively available. Imagination requires the reasoner to inhabit, at least partially, a possibility they are habituated to reject. This is precisely the kind of constrained, reality-directed imagining that Amy Kind describes as epistemically tractable (Kind and Peter Kung, 2016). Activities such as engagement with fiction, representing alternative social imagineries, counterfactual reasoning and the like can illustrate different contributions of this epistemic use of imagination. Examples such as fiction reading helps build skill, while social imagineries and counterfactual reasoning present the alternative possibilities of imaginative representations.

However, one problem is that counterfactual reasoning in cognitive debiasing requires one to slow down and consider the opposite when the agent either does not have the necessary imaginative skill, or the imagination merely supports desired conclusion instead of aiding rational revision. The common feature of most cognitive debiasing strategies is a deliberate decoupling from fast intuitive processing to a shift to slower, analytical processing (Croskerry, Singhal and Mamede, 2013). But this is precisely the kind of strategy that fails against evidence-resistance, because evidence-resistance is not primarily a failure of slow analytical processing. It is slow analytical processing, running in a biased direction. Sophisticated reasoners, who are identity-protective, demonstrate this. They are not failing to think carefully. They are thinking carefully in a motivated way. Imagination cultivation can likely offer a structurally different debiasing route that does not require the reasoner to first suspend their motivated cognition before the intervention can work. Rather than demanding that the reasoner step outside their biased evaluation process, imaginative skill development works by expanding the cognitive environment within which evaluation occurs. A more skilled imaginer who has practiced reality-constrained scenario-tracing, who has regularly inhabited unfamiliar perspectives, and who has developed the habit of following possibilities further than professional habit would permit a richer and more flexible cognitive environment for the evaluation of evidence. Imaginative

skill development is a form of epistemic self-improvement that is specifically effective against evidence-resistance because it operates at a different level than the mechanisms motivated reasoning deploys. It is not a better argument, nor a more forceful presentation of evidence. It is the cultivation of a cognitive faculty that makes the motivated reasoner's identity-protective gatekeeping less comprehensive by expanding the cognitive landscape so that more of reality becomes accessible through routes the gate does not cover. One of the most distinctive features of imagination however is that it does not present its contents as evidence. Unlike belief, it does not make truth-apt claims about the world. Rather than confronting the agent with competing evidence, imagination can invite the consideration of possibilities "as if" they were true. Imagination, especially viewed as a lens, does not merely imitate alternative contents. It allows agents to adopt alternative perspectives from which the world, their beliefs, and the available evidence may be viewed differently. In doing so, it can allow agents to entertain scenarios that might otherwise be resisted or dismissed.

This matters because, in the context of motivated reasoning, resistance is often triggered not merely by information but by the felt threat posed by counterevidence to deeply held beliefs. Imagination remains available as a space in which alternative possibilities can be explored without immediately demanding commitment to their truth (McGinn, 2007, 600-603). It involves a form of decoupling in which possibilities are supposed rather than asserted. Through this, attention can be redirected toward aspects of a situation that an ingrained perspective may obscure. While evidence says, "believe this," imagination provides a counterfactual, "consider what it would be like if this were true." More importantly, imagination allows one to view a situation through a different lens before deciding whether belief revision is warranted. Interestingly, in the literature of the epistemology of imagination, this world-insensitivity of imagination is usually deemed as its weakness in any kind of epistemic contribution (Myers, 2024, 7). However, in cases of evidence-resistance, this apparent weakness can become a distinctive strength. Because imagination does not present its contents as truth, it does not immediately trigger the biased defensive mechanisms. Its epistemic value, therefore, lies not primarily in providing new evidence but in reorganizing how existing evidence is seen, interpreted, and weighed. In this way, imagination can function as a mechanism of epistemic reframing, creating the conditions under which motivated reasoning may be weakened, and belief revision becomes psychologically possible.

Third, imagination can redirect attention (Nanay 2023; Wiltsher 2023; Cochrane 2025). Because imaginative activity selectively foregrounds and backgrounds features of a situation, it can make evidence salient that an established interpretive framework had rendered peripheral. Its epistemic contribution therefore need not lie in producing new evidence and justification. It can instead alter which existing reasons are noticed, how they are organized, and what significance they are

assigned. Importantly, imagination can help an agent make proper use of justification they already possess (Egeland 2021). It can help satisfy the proper basing condition, thereby turning propositional justification into doxastic justification without conferring any new justification. In evidence-resistance, the agent may already possess the relevant propositional justification, but motivationally distorted attention and salience prevent that justification from being properly taken up in belief formation or revision. Imagination can help by restructuring what is salient and accessible, thereby enabling the agent to base belief more appropriately on evidence already possessed. As Wiltsher claims, imagination can operate as a lens that foregrounds, backgrounds, isolates, and reorganizes aspects of what is represented (2023).

These three features jointly explain how imagination can intervene between evidence and belief. Altering the perspective with which individuals approach new evidence, instead of altering the content of the corrective evidence, is practically helpful in at least two different ways. First, it helps subjects maintain their status as good reasoners. When deeply held beliefs are received with counter-evidence, it hurts – the more central the threatened beliefs, the more it hurts. It generates the unpleasant feeling of cognitive dissonance, which motivates subjects to somehow squish the counter-evidence within their frame of revered beliefs. For example, counter-evidence about climate change can challenge a person's belief that they are moral and rational, threatening their positive self-image. To defend their self-esteem, they may experience strong cognitive dissonance. By contrast, when individuals use their own imagination to question their deeply held beliefs, their self-image as moral and rational remains intact as they are using their own rational aptitude, while at the same time undergoing genuine epistemic change.

Second, this alteration is more effective because it makes subjects more immune to misinformation in the future. Altering cognitive mindset through counterfactual thinking encourages sensitivity towards the evidence received and promotes modal evaluation. So instead of passive acceptance of any evidence, be it in favor or opposed to one's beliefs, it helps subjects to question each piece of evidence equally, in a way to justify strengthening or revising their beliefs.

IV. Motivating Examples

The preceding argument identifies a mechanism. The following examples show different ways in which that mechanism can operate. Counterfactual reasoning can directly redistribute attention across competing possibilities, fiction can cultivate flexibility in perspective, and social imaginaries can alter the background assumptions that determine which interpretations are intelligible. These examples differ in scope, but each illustrates imagination's capacity to change the organization of evidence without itself becoming evidence.

IV. i. Counterfactual Imagination and "Consider the Opposite"

Counterfactual reasoning provides a direct case. "Consider the opposite" strategies ask agents to imagine circumstances under which their initial judgment might be mistaken or an alternative hypothesis might be correct (Arkes et al. 1988, Mussweiler et al. 2000, Koehler 1991). Prompting participants to 'consider the opposite' significantly reduced both biased judgments and attitude polarization, whereas simply instructing participants to be objective proved ineffective (Lord, Lepper and Preston, 1984, 1237).[3] Subsequent research has corroborated these findings, demonstrating that corrective strategies such as counter-explanation and considering the opposite can mitigate a range of judgmental errors, including belief perseverance (Anderson and Sechler, 1986), overconfidence (Hoch 1985), and hindsight bias (Davies, 1992). Counterfactual thinking has also been shown to mitigate misinformation about COVID-19 (Bertolotti and Catellani, 2023). Their significance for the present argument is not that imagined alternatives supply new evidence. Rather, they force attention toward possibilities and considerations that the agent's initial judgment may have excluded.

This changes the structure of evaluation. Instead of processing evidence entirely within the framework supplied by the antecedent belief, the agent is required to represent a competing possibility and ask what would follow from it. The intervention therefore works by redistributing attention across possibilities rather than by adding another premise to the evidential base.[4]

This is especially important for evidence-resistance. A motivated reasoner may be perfectly capable of slow, sophisticated reasoning while directing that reasoning toward the preservation of an antecedent commitment. The problem is

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[3] For more details, see their other work, Charles C. Lord, Lee Ross and Mark G. Lepper, "Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: The effects of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence," (1979): 2098–2109.

[4] In another experiment, adults from the United States and the United Kingdom who had refused vaccination were asked to rate their belief in five common false claims about vaccine safety, such as claims that vaccines are dangerous, cause infertility, alter DNA, create new variants, or provide less immunity than natural infection. After completing either the counterfactual or control task, participants read factual corrections addressing these claims and then re-rated their beliefs. The results showed that those in the counterfactual condition made significantly larger reductions in misinformation beliefs than those in the control condition. On average, misinformation beliefs decreased by about 40% more among participants who had generated counterfactuals. Effects were observed across most of the targeted false claims and across demographic groups. Even among individuals who initially endorsed particularly strong misinformation, counterfactual thinking facilitated greater correction. Other studies show that imaginatively simulating a social interaction can, in some respects, produce effects similar to those generated by actual interpersonal contact. This possibility motivated Crisp and Turner to investigate whether imagined intergroup contact could serve as a mechanism for improving intergroup relations. (Crisp, R.J., Stathi, S., Turner, R.N. and Husnu, S. (2009), Imagined Intergroup Contact: Theory, Paradigm and Practice. 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2008.00155.x)
Their review of the evidence revealed that imagined contact was associated with a range of positive outcomes, including more favorable attitudes toward outgroups, increased attribution of positive characteristics to outgroup members, reduced intergroup anxiety, and diminished stereotype threat. Studies reported improvements in younger individuals' attitudes toward older adults, heterosexual men's attitudes toward gay men, and Mexican participants' attitudes toward Mestizos, among other cases.

therefore not always insufficient reflection. Counterfactual imagination can intervene at a different level by expanding the space of possibilities within which reflection occurs.

The relevant epistemic effect is again one of uptake. By making a competing possibility representationally available, imagination may make evidence that supports that possibility more salient. It can therefore alter how the agent evaluates existing evidence without itself determining which belief should ultimately be adopted.

IV.ii. Fiction and Epistemic Perspective

Fiction provides an indirect route. Its epistemic value does not primarily lie in supplying evidence. Rather, sustained engagement with fictional perspectives can cultivate the capacity to represent experiences and possibilities that would otherwise remain difficult to access from within an established interpretive framework.

The relevant mechanism is perspective expansion. A reader who imaginatively occupies an unfamiliar standpoint may become better able to notice features of a situation that were previously backgrounded. Nussbaum's work on literature and moral perception is useful here: fictional engagement can make unfamiliar lives, concerns, and experiences salient by directing attention toward them (Nussbaum, 1998).

The epistemic significance of fiction therefore lies less in what a particular narrative proves than in what it trains the reader to notice. Fiction can exercise the capacity to move between perspectives and to recognize that the same evidence may appear differently once different features are foregrounded. In the terminology of this paper, fiction can cultivate imaginative flexibility. This is why the Harriet Beecher Stowe example should be used cautiously. Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) need not be treated as evidence that fiction directly caused political conversion. The more defensible point is that narrative can make morally and socially relevant features of a situation salient in ways that abstract description may not. The example illustrates the mechanism of imaginative foregrounding, not a causal claim about political change.

IV.iii. Social Imaginaries

Social imaginaries illustrate the same mechanism at a broader level. Evidence is interpreted against background assumptions about what forms of social organization are possible, natural, or inevitable. When those assumptions become entrenched, some interpretations of social evidence may never become serious candidates for consideration.

Imaginative activity can alter this modal background. Prison abolitionism is one example among many that illustrates how imaginative reframing can do epistemic work that empirical evidence cannot. Abolitionist theorists do not merely argue that

existing prison systems are unjust or ineffective, but they invite imagining "what if prisons are not a natural feature of society?" (Davis, 2003, 10,17). This challenges the background assumption that makes the existing institutions appear inevitable, thereby opening conceptual space for alternative interpretation of familiar facts.

Similar structures appear in imaginative projects that represent alternative social futures. Afrofuturism and Indigenous Futurism challenge the representation of Black and Indigenous identities as exhausted by histories of oppression or disappearance by constructing alternative futures in which different forms of existence are imaginable. The epistemic importance of such imaginaries lies in altering the modal background against which existing social arrangements are valued.

Social imaginaries therefore operate at the level of background possibility rather than individual pieces of evidence. They show that evidential uptake can depend partly on which possibilities an agent is capable of treating as live. Imagination can contribute epistemically by enlarging that space.

V. Initiation Problem and Other Objections

A central objection concerns initiation. On Wiltsher's account, imagination is active, effortful, and attention-dependent. It must be initiated and sustained by the agent. Evidence-resistance, by contrast, often operates without conscious intention. If an agent is already disposed to resist evidence because revision threatens an identity, value, or social commitment, why would that agent voluntarily undertake an imaginative exercise that might undermine the very belief being protected? If an imaginer happens to chance upon a novel that questions their beliefs, or she feels like imagining alternative realities one fine morning, then imagination is not functioning as a reliable epistemic mechanism. It is functioning as a lucky accident. Epistemology has long distinguished between beliefs that are true by luck and beliefs that are properly justified (Ichikawa and Matthias, 2026, 8). Wiltsher's characterization of imagination therefore appears, initially, to make imagination less rather than more suitable as a mechanism for overcoming motivated reasoning.

The response requires distinguishing the initiation of a particular imaginative episode from the cultivation of imaginative capacity. My argument does not require agents to spontaneously imagine against their own commitments at the moment those commitments are threatened. Rather, imaginative flexibility can be developed in contexts in which no particular belief is presently under threat. In reading fiction, repeated engagement with narratives that demand the reader to entertain unfamiliar perspectives can develop a standing temperament to entertain alternatives. Likewise, repeated practice in counterfactual reasoning can establish a habit of asking what evidential situation would look like under a competing hypothesis. Wiltsher argues

that imagination is an active phenomenon that structures how people perceive what is relevant, plausible, or conceivable (Wiltsher, 2019, 25).

This is why imagination is better understood here as a skill rather than merely as an episodic mental occurrence. Kind argues that imagination's improvability by practice and control proves it to be a stable cognitive capacity that exists independently of any particular occasion for its exercise (Kind, 2022, 35). The process of imagining consists in manipulating mental material in particular ways; imaginative skill concerns how competently, flexibly, and appropriately those manipulations are performed. An individual who has developed this capacity may therefore be better positioned to represent alternatives when evidence challenges an antecedent commitment. Whereas imagination as a process operates on certain mental states to produce certain others through some steps of refining, clarifying, etc., the skill is the ability, proficiency, and judgment in executing those steps. In other words, whereas the process comprises what is being done, the skill comprises how well it is done. The imaginative exercise merely excites what was always a genuine epistemic resource. If imagination is a one-off, accidental event, then reading fiction would have a limited epistemic scope. But because it is also a skill, it is by its own virtue something that can be deployed, improved, controlled, and made more reliable over time.[5]

The epistemic proposal is consequently dispositional rather than episodic. The relevant question is not whether an evidence-resistant agent will deliberately initiate an opposing imaginative exercise whenever motivated reasoning occurs. It is whether cultivating imaginative flexibility can make alternative possibilities more readily available when an agent encounters evidence that conflicts with an existing commitment.

This does not eliminate the initiation problem altogether. A cultivated imaginative capacity does not guarantee that an agent will exercise it when resistance is strongest. Nor does imaginative skill guarantee that the alternatives entertained will be epistemically appropriate. Imagination should therefore not be understood as a reliable debiasing procedure that automatically corrects motivated reasoning. Its role is more modest: it can improve the agent's capacity to reorganize attention and represent competing possibilities when ordinary evidential engagement has become rigid.

This qualification also clarifies the different roles played by fiction, counterfactual reasoning, and social imaginaries. Fiction may cultivate flexibility in perspective without directly targeting a resistant belief. Social imaginaries can enlarge the range of possibilities that an agent treats as intelligible. Counterfactual reasoning can then deliberately bring competing

[5] Data from mental rotation experiments, and Bayesian computational accounts show imagination's improvability and that it is not a fixed capacity distributed unequally and unchangeably across people. For more details, see Andrea Blomkvist 2022, 119.

possibilities into the evaluation of particular evidence. These practices operate at different levels, but each can contribute to the standing capacity required for more flexible epistemic uptake.

The initiation objection therefore limits, but does not defeat, the account. Imagination need not guarantee rational revision in order to possess epistemic value. Its contribution lies in making agents better able to reconsider the organization and salience of evidence when antecedent commitments would otherwise constrain that reconsideration.

VI. Conclusion

When empirical evidence fails the motivated reasoner, imagination offers what empirical evidence cannot- a non-empirical route around the gatekeeping apparatus that motivated reasoning constructs. In this paper, I have argued that such imaginative engagement is not epistemically lesser but genuinely helpful, provided it remains reality-constrained, evidence-responsive, and oriented by truth-seeking rather than desire. To answer the why question, I have focused on the different attributes of imagination– its ability to circumvent the barriers imposed by motivated reasoning, its ability of representing alternatives in a way that empirical evidence cannot, and lastly, its disposition of being a cultivable skill. Granted that imagination can have these effects, and the transformative effects of imagination have been documented by historians and social and political theorists, the underlying cognitive and epistemic mechanisms responsible for those effects have received comparatively little attention. This paper takes an attempt to do that.

More work needs to be done to formulate accounts of how imaginative scaffolding interacts with deeply entrenched identity-protective cognition across different social groups, especially the normative boundary between virtuous reality-constrained imagining and identity-reinforcing imagining that remains undertheorized. Absent a clear understanding, we lack a conceptual means to differentiate between the constructive epistemic function of imagination in relation to epistemic normativity and its destructive epistemic function in fantastical, conspiratorial, or wishful thinking.

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