

From the root of attention grows imagination

and the desire for change



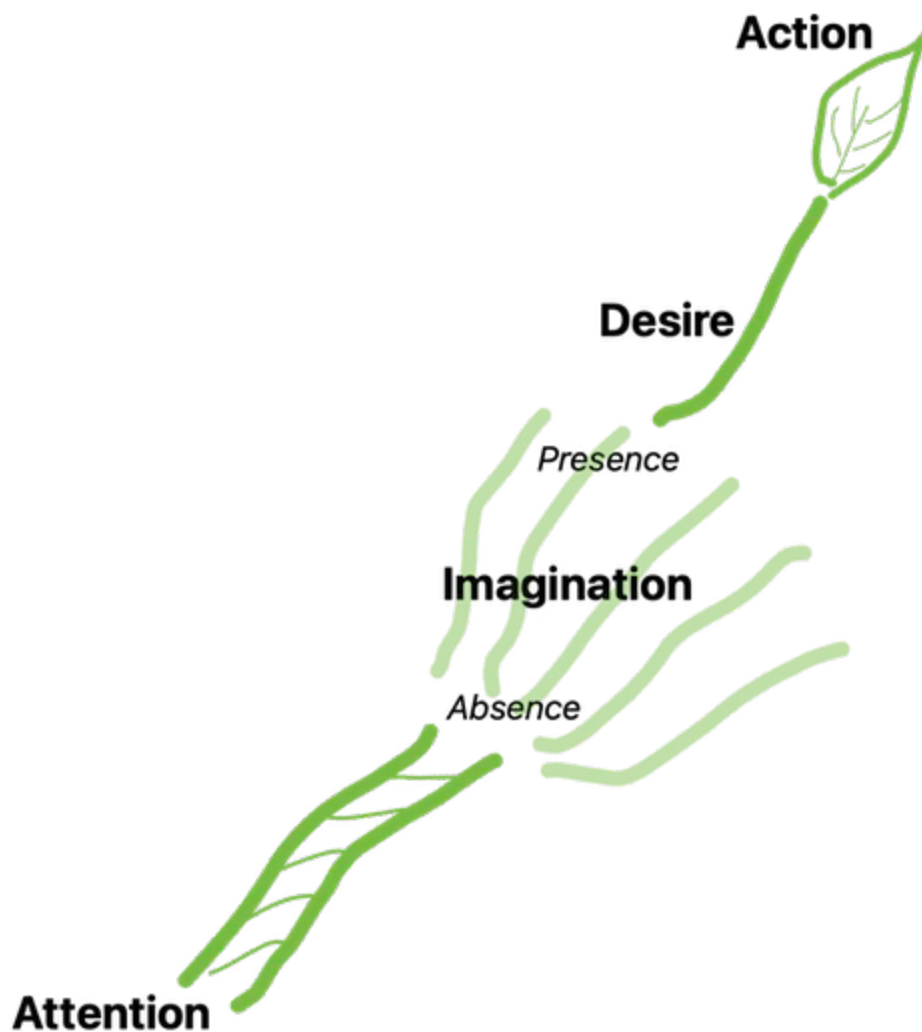
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I bought a chilli plant in the summer and have watched it grow over the past months. It needs to be watered often, and it enjoys direct sunlight and 'tomato feed'. The plant has required my attention and I have given it the attention it needs. As a reward, I use its fruits in cooking on a weekly basis. It has been time and attention well spent.

Throughout the life of the newsletter, I have frequently mentioned the importance of reflecting on one's ways of attending. Today, I want to delve deeper into the key concepts related to attention; to place the topic into the context of reimagining ways out of the current crises in not just attention, but also imagination and desire.



The illustration above visualises the relationships of the concepts I'll address through a metaphor of a tree branch. I am not making claims about cognitive science. Instead, I propose that the image of the growing branch can be helpful in thinking how to redirect one's attention towards ways of regenerative rather than extractive living. We'll return to the image at the end of the essay. Now, let us begin at the root.

✓ **Subscribed**

Types of attention

Attention also changes who we are, we who are doing the attending.
— *Iain McGilchrist: The Master and His Emissary*, p. 28.

As so often, Iain McGilchrist serves as my guide on this path. McGilchrist ties types of attention to his hemisphere hypothesis. The five types — vigilance, sustained attention, alertness, focussed attention and divided attention — reside along two axes, one of intensity and the other selectivity. We either remain alert for various possibilities, or we pay sustained attention and stay vigilant to changing states in the surroundings, such as following a moving object. The intensities of the two stances are different. In addition, we are selective with our attention: we either divide it across multiple things or we give focused attention to something. McGilchrist explains the differences in the context of the hemispheres:

Without alertness, we are as if asleep, unresponsive to the world around us; without sustained attention, the world fragments; without vigilance, we cannot become aware of anything we do not already

know. (...) Overall it appears clear that, of the two main axes of attention, intensity (alertness, vigilance and sustained attention) is reliant on the right hemisphere. — *The Master and His Emissary*, p. 38–9.

The stakes in how we direct attention are not trivial. This has been a theme in McGilchrist's work — he writes about the responsibility that giving attention comes with:

The kind of attention we pay actually alters the world: we are, literally, partners in creation. This means we have a grave responsibility, a word that captures the reciprocal nature of the dialogue we have with whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves. — *The Master and His Emissary*, p. 5.

More recently, in *The Matter with Things*, McGilchrist rephrases the sentiment into attention being “a moral act”.

Attention is not just another cognitive function. Attention is how our world comes into being for us. The altered nature of attention can appear to abolish parts of the world, collapse time and space, eviscerate emotion, and render the living inanimate. It is a profoundly moral act. —TMWT, p. 67.

In some ways, my sustained attention to the chilli plant has put me into a reciprocal relationship with it. My attention to it has altered the world, just a bit. It's an outcome of the proportion of my capacity of attention, some of which I have given to the plant. The attention I have given writing this newsletter has meant that it has been away from something else — for example, I used to follow and watch a lot of football. Not any more, and my world is better for it.

In conversation with McGilchrist, John Vervaeke talks about proper proportioning of attention: “Ratio is the proper proportioning of your

consciousness, your cognition, and your character such that virtue and virtuosity are possible.”

While a part of me is hesitant to read too much into the relationship with the chilli plant, I wonder if that part is the part conditioned into modernity’s wants — tending a plant does not appear very masculine, productive, or transactional. But the satisfaction we get from caring for living things might just be — no, is! — virtuous, an example of Vervaeke’s notion of proper proportioning of attention. It is a move, even if a small one, away from the traps of modernity that erode connectedness and sense of agency:

Increasing technologisation and bureaucratisation of life help to erode the more integrative modes of attention to people and things which might help us resist the advances of technology and bureaucracy, so that in this way they aid their own replication. — *The Master and His Emissary*, p. 471.

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Attention is being in relation

The deliberateness in one’s choices in directing attention leads to the present moment. Peter Brown writes about spiritual practices that embrace the direct, unmediated experience of reality. He speaks about the present moment in ways that echo a right-hemispheric stance and how, in contrast, the left hemisphere seeks focused, singular attention to grab things:

How often do people pay attention to presence? Rarely. People are more interested in what’s going on—how one thing leads to another,

and so on. These are all projections, imaginary constructs based on the apparent patterns that appear in the context of presence. It's not something most people are in the habit of doing because it's generally not thought to be very interesting or valuable. You can't gain anything from it. You can't acquire it, lose it, or do anything with it. It just is. And yet, in actuality, it's the only thing that is. At the end of the day, there's only presence. — Peter Brown: *Liberation Beyond Imagination*, p. 39.

In McGilchrist's terms, such embracing of presence — contentment for being in relation and staying in it, rather than craving something and working towards it — brings about a discovery of values:

Attention, however, intrinsically is a way in which, not a thing: it is intrinsically a relationship, not a brute fact. It is a 'howness', a something between, an aspect of consciousness itself, not a 'whatness', a thing in itself, an object of consciousness. It brings into being a world and, with it, depending on its nature, a set of values. — *The Master and His Emissary*, p. 29.

This brings us back to how sometimes, in the face of everyday things, we immediately recognise their inherent value as true, good, and beautiful — to 'value-ception', about which I have written in the past.

Value is not a flavour that is added for some socially useful purpose; it is not a function or consequence of something else, but a primary fact. Scheler referred to the capacity for appreciating value as *Wertnehmung*, a concept which has been translated into the rather less accommodating English language as 'value-ception'. For him, this value-ception governs the type of attention that we pay to anything, and by which we learn more about it. Our value-ceptive knowledge of the whole governs our understanding of the parts, rather than the reverse. — *The Master and His Emissary*, p. 159.

Value-ception stems from the right hemisphere that sees the wholes, the forest for the trees, unlike the left hemisphere that dominates our current culture. The left hemisphere 'devitalises' what it sees, i.e. sees them inanimate and as objects, ready for the taking for its own, self-obsessed needs. But this comes with the cost of not knowing oneself, not recognising itself in the web of all life, something that, I believe, is at the root of our current predicaments.



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AKI JÄRVINEN · NOVEMBER 29, 2024

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I suggest that our relationships with plants, and other living things we take care of, is indicative of the right hemisphere's perception of time as continuous (versus the fragmentary perception of the left). It thus enables us to embrace longer-term views, rather than desiring the instant gratification that characterises our culture these days.

I believe the essential difference between the right hemisphere and the left hemisphere is that the right hemisphere pays attention to the Other, whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves, with which it sees itself in profound relation. It is deeply attracted to, and given life by, the relationship, the betweenness, that exists with this Other. By contrast, the left hemisphere pays attention to the virtual world that it has created, which is self-consistent, but self-contained, ultimately disconnected from the Other, making it powerful, but ultimately only able to operate on, and to know, itself. — The Master and His Emissary, p 93.

And nature is the essence of connectedness, as the visionary poet William Blake wrote:

The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way. Some see nature all ridicule and deformity... and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself. — William Blake ([link](#))

✓ **Subscribed**

Imagination: making the absent present

To imagine is to represent without aiming at things as they actually, presently, and subjectively are. One can use imagination to represent possibilities other than the actual, to represent times other than the present, and to represent perspectives other than one's own. Unlike perceiving and believing, imagining something does not require one to consider that something to be the case. Unlike desiring or anticipating, imagining something does not require one to wish or expect that something to be the case. — [Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy](#)

In the previous post, I wrote about the crisis of imagination that disables us in thinking our way out of modernity/coloniality, or its namesake, the Machine. When modernity and its fruits, and the story of the Machine, is present all around us, it is difficult to break away from their stranglehold on our imagination.

Modern philosophers developed the basic understanding of imagination as *presence-in-absence* — the act of making what is present absent and what is absent present — Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagination*, p.3.

In that stranglehold, we are unable to make what is absent present, to imagine, as Richard Kearney summarises above. Kearney points out how the particular cultural and historical conditions that prevail today influence our ways of imagining; our use of imagination is therefore quite differently conditioned than the one of those who lived in the Middle Ages or in antiquity. In contrast to those ancient times, our imagination is bombarded with images in an entirely different rate and scale. But the force that motivates the bombarding, the baggage of modernity, is what makes it difficult to break through to the other side. Our freedom to imagine is limited, it seems.

This is quite contrary to how the founding phenomenologists, such as Edmund Husserl, saw the uses of imagination. Kearney refers to Husserl and Heidegger and suggests that “imagination is the very precondition of human freedom”, as it allows us to “surpass the empirical world as it is given here and now to project new *possibilities* of existence.” (Kearney, p. 6.)

I recently listened to the synthetic biologist Michael Levin in a conversation, saying how our imagination is terribly bad in conceiving other potential lifeforms, not based on carbon, out there in the universe. This might be a telling example of how we should fix our shit — using our imagination — on this planet, before even trying to imagine what is out there, lightyears away. As it turns out, we are equally bad in imagining how to deal with facing facts about the limits of this planet.



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What kind of imagination do we need, then, and how should we use it? Scholars of imagination have distinguished between different functions of imagination. For example, *creative imagination* refers to how we combine ideas in unexpected and unconventional ways. *Sensory*

imagination refers to experiences where we, despite the absence of the particular stimuli, perceive in our mind's eye particular things and events (Currie and Ravenscroft, Recreative Minds). What I call for here is Currie and Ravenscroft's third category, *recreative imagination* — "an ability to experience or think about the world from a perspective different from the one that experience presents", as the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy puts it.

For McGilchrist, this is no less than the way to truth:

Imagination is far from certain, of course; but the biggest mistake we could make would be never to trust it - never to believe in it - for fear of being mistaken. For truth requires imagination. It alone can put us in touch with aspects of reality to which our habits of thought have rendered us blind. — *The Matter with Things*, p 768.

My point here is to suggest that the properly proportioned attention (as discussed above) is the ground from which recreative imagination can emerge from, for regenerative ends. But we need more than images in the mind, a jolt to the system, and that is where desire comes into play.

Desire for action

To desire is to want something to be the case (...). Standardly, the conative attitude of desire [i.e. "the ability to apply intellectual energy to a task to achieve its completion or reach a solution"] is contrasted with the cognitive attitude of belief in terms of direction of fit: while belief aims to make one's mental representations match the way the world is, desire aims to make the way the world is match one's mental representations. — Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy.

Unfortunately, much of contemporary desire in the world is causing suffering because it is directed towards seeking status within modernity's confines. Most times, moving away from the objects that

modernity conditions us to cling to, is a gradual process. It is the awakening of the imagination towards alternative possibilities, but desire provides the nudge into action and behaviour change.

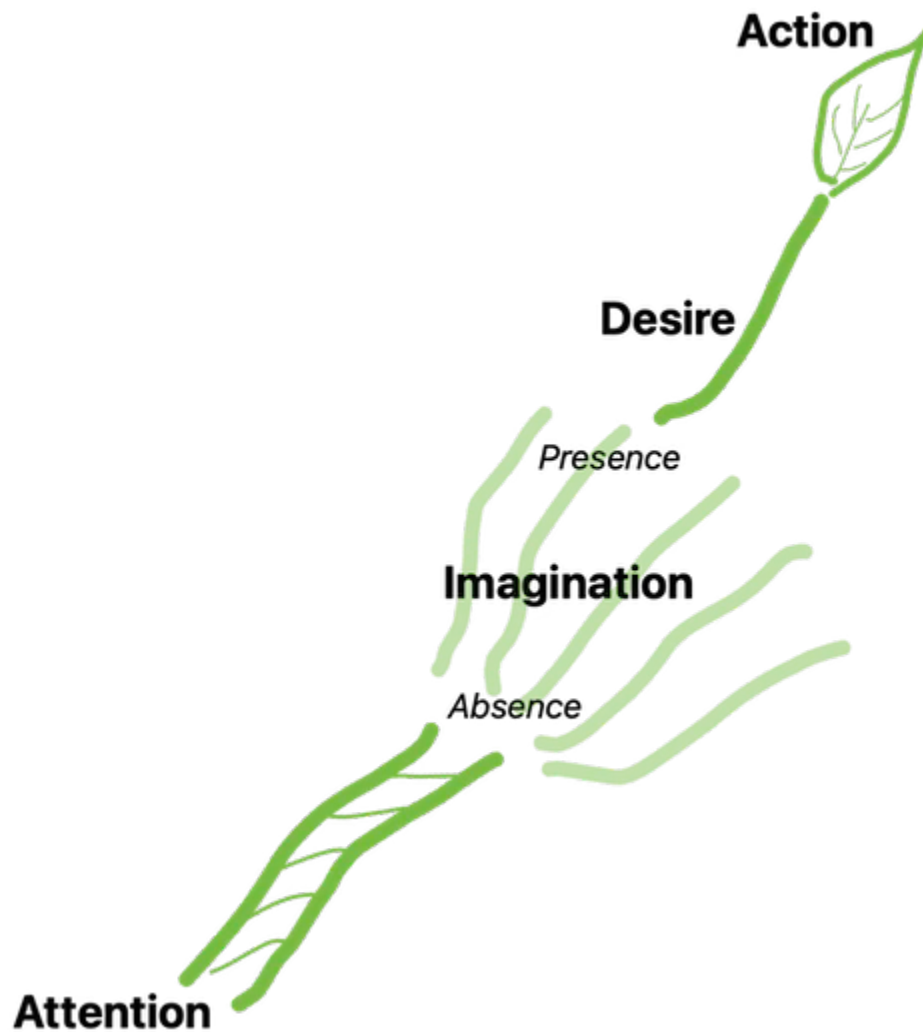
Becoming aware of the values that underpin modernity is a step towards using imagination in the service of knowledge. The [Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy](#) summarises some recent scholarly views about the relationship of imagination and knowledge as follows:

knowledge concerning one's values—are inaccessible by imaginings; only actual experiences can confer these types of knowledge. For example, one cannot really know whether one wants to become a parent without experiencing being a parent because parenthood itself can transform one's values. If one cannot reasonably imagine oneself with radically different values, then plausibly one cannot appropriately imagine the values associated with the outcomes of one's actions.

This leads us to the relationship of imagination and action, and how desire plays a role in propelling the imaginings into actions. “(M)any philosophers hold that imagining is like believing except that it does not directly motivate actions.”

Using imagination is typically associated with dissociation from action (and, conversely, e.g. with pretence and daydreaming) — yet, imagination has a role in the acquisition of knowledge; knowledge that can inform actions. Thought experiments are a special case that can shed light on complex issues that are difficult or impossible to physically test.

Yet, The Machine constraints not only our imagination but also our actions. As we toil within its machinery, it sucks our energy, making us walk as if under a spell rather than taking steps towards the other side; the woods instead of the city; the living instead of the inanimate; the intellect instead of imagination.



So, we come back to the image of the branch and how at its root, properly proportioned and directed attention gives birth to imagination and its outcomes. One of which, through desire for change, blooms into a new leaf as an embodiment of another way to live.

Thank you for reading.

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With love and kindness,

Aki

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