Intimations of a New Socioecological Imaginary

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...these complimentary attitudes—awareness of radically different and better future human possibilities, severe criticism of the role of existing social structures in the exacerbation of ecological problems—are ones that I endorse.

—William L. McBride

Ecological reality is intimately linked to social reality. This is not news. It has always been so. But it has never been so in the way it is today. At this historical juncture the sociality of the human world and the ecology of planet Earth are two faces of a single reality. Geologists even have name for it. They call it the Anthropocene. By this they mean, and in the patient way that only geologists can mean it, that humankind is now the single most potent force of terrestrial change. Ecologically, evolutionarily, geologically, what we do now has a greater impact than all the earthquakes, volcanoes, and avalanches, to say nothing of the still-shifting tectonic plates. Imagine that. And this, our Janus-faced reality of planet and world is at a critical impasse. This is a time of crisis, in both the etymological sense—we are at a turning point—and the medical sense—things may go tragically awry. We face a planetary crisis that is a worldly crisis; an ecological crisis that is a social crisis; a crisis of nature that is a crisis of humanity. At risk is neither the end of life on Earth nor the end of humankind, as some are wont to fantasize. At stake is the quality of life for the community of Earth, the extinction of countless species other than our own, the disintegration of
ecosystems of many and varied pedigree, and the unraveling of civilization, such as it is. Whichever way we turn, we are writing the first pages of a new chapter in the saga of the human world and all the rest of earthly nature. If there is anything new under the sun, this is it. The socioecological crisis is the news of the day.

If we are to meet the challenges we face, it seems fair to say that it will take more than a little imagination. This chapter seeks philosophic resources for imaginative responses to our planetary and worldly situation. It draws together two seemingly disparate strands of thought, Jean-Paul Sartre’s theory of imagination and Charles Taylor’s theory of the social imaginary. Unlikely bedfellows though they may be, Sartre and Taylor can help us to understand what it means to re-imagine this burgeoning worldly and planetary crisis, to imagine anew the intimate bond between the social and the ecological, and to expose the very real prospect of a future worth wanting, one in which we enjoy not only a habitable planet, but a livable world. Imagine that.

First, the Child

Imagination is a gift and a tool. The child enjoys the gift in abundance, and works well with it for the most part. She can blur the distinction between the real and the imaginary. He can ignore the line between the perceived and the imagined. He or she—it hardly matters—can take up the real and the imaginary at once. Now he, now she, can see the real and the imaginary together, to the point that the acquired taste for holding them apart, so crucial to growing up, loses its grip, at least for moment. And when all goes well, as it so often does, the line between them disappears entirely for a time, the two blend so seamlessly that the real world and the imagined world are one for a spell. We have all been there.

It was a few hundred yards from our doorstep. Through the orchard and across a broad strip of well-maintained grass, under a stand of prodigious hemlocks, not quite far enough from a spooky old abandoned root cellar, there was a moss- and lichen-covered rock. Half buried in the Earth, awash the needle-filtered shade, it was about the size of my big pushy sister’s big red vinyl beanbag chair. In the thick of spring little sprigs would sprout in the soft moss on the rock, none of which would grow beyond an inch or two. And I would drop to my knees and stare and like magic, though there was none, the surface of the rock became a vast tree- and scrub-covered land, the wettest parts a spreading swamp or a marsh, the half cupful of rainwater that gathered in a little cranny on top of it a pond or a lake, even a sea, according to the scale of the moment. There on that secret deep green planet, in that secret deep green world,
I would walk for miles, trek for days and for years, barely surviving the attack of a giant black ant, riding to safety on a congenial centipede with a heroicsounding name like Tor or Thunder, skirting the swamp lest I get sucked in by the quicksand, and finally standing at a precipice to gaze across the impossible distance from me to the far side of it all. And I would build a little hut of twigs and leaves in a glade by the side of the water, and I would live on fishes and berries and roots in the warmth of a fire, dressed in scratchy wool undergarments, wrapped in pels I’d tanned myself, my boots made of snake skin by a good Indian friend, my best friend a talking bear. A small bit of bark would be my canoe, and I would drift and nap in the center of the still water while my Indian friend shuffled stealthily through the underbrush and my bear friend rested watchfully at the hut and I waited patiently for the fish to bite. And they always did. All my needs met, all my wants satisfied, all my desires fulfilled. And then my grandmother would call me for dinner and I would jump up and run as fast as I could lest I miss the night’s episode of Star Trek. Mountain Man by day. Intergalactic explorer by night. Imagine my confusion.

We have all been there, even if only I have been just there, by that sea, that lake, that pond, by that particular cupful of water in that particular cranny on that particular mossy rock. I can still conjure it well, and familiar good feelings accompany the conjuring; and a sense of something lost; and a sense of possibility. And now you can conjure a bit of it, too, all your own. Imagine how different your conjuring of that rock top is from mine, how different your accompanying feelings about my imaginary reality. Perhaps our sense of loss and possibility are not so different.

This Unimaginable Reality

We find ourselves in a difficult situation. The catalogue of social ills is long. Institutionalized political corruption. Rampant corporate greed. Entrepreneurial profligacy. Global and systemic economic apartheid. Organized violence at every scale, from the neighborhood to the nation to the transnational. Retrograde education and inadequate healthcare for the many. Knowledge and health for the few. Ubiquitous unrest and turmoil. It is an old story, in its way. And there’s more. The catalogue of ecological ills is long, too, and growing fast. Climate change is here. Ocean acidification is here. Sea-level rise is here. Deforestation. Habitat destruction. Biodiversity loss. Soil degradation. Toxification of land, sea, and air. Extreme weather. Droughts. Floods. Landslides. And the two are one. The social ills and ecological ills coalesce. Overpopulation and resource depletion. Floods and droughts and migration. Obesity, malnutrition, and starvation in nearly equal measure, and nearly one in seven of us with no access to clean water. Oil wars, water wars, gem wars in the offing. Manufactured
famine and preventable disease. And all the lies, too. The clean coal hoax. The hydro-fracking hoax. The tar sands hoax. The nuclear hoax. The corporate organic hoax. The geoengineering hoax. The genetically modified food hoax. The bottled water hoax. And all manner of greenwashing. Eco-this. Enviro-that. Sustainable everything. All of it clean, pure, and natural. Obfuscation, dissimulation, all manner of evasion, everywhere. Our situation is precarious. The prognosis is bleak. Ignorance and denial are epidemic.

But is it true? Is it so bad? Yes, it is. This is reality. Imagine that.

**A Humanist by Any Other Name**

I think Sartre and Taylor can help us to make sense of this, our unimaginable reality, and to imagine a way forward. Admittedly, at first glance, the two seem unlikely conferees for an ecologically inclined philosophical investigation. It does seem fair to wonder how to fit them together for the purposes of a philosophical ecology.

As for Taylor, the consummate Catholic and hermeneutical humanist, it is not so much that he does not fit, or could not fit, into the ecological conversation, as that he has not really said much about it nor been invited into the dialogue in more than a passing way. This is not so surprising. Taylor does here and there nod concernedly at the relevance of “the environment”; and acknowledges more than once the significance of the “ecological movement”; and engages in a number of sustained reflections on the philosophy of nature (in both Hegel and Sources of the Self, though notably not in A Secular Age); and is well-known for his critique of naturalism. Still, he seems to share with his own Hegel a preference for “domains where the work of the spirit is more transparently evident.” Like Sartre, Taylor is principally oriented toward *anthropos*, the domain of human personhood and history and sociality. Thus he explores one side of *oikos*, the lived meaning of household that underlies the worldly sense of economy, with only a passing glance at its nether side, the earthly sense of ecology that is the condition for the possibility of any economy, and so of any personhood, history, or sociality. Still, Taylor has in nowise claimed or implied hostility to nature as such, and his predilection for things human leaves open the possibility of selective use of Taylorian social themes toward ecological ends, as we will see.

As for Sartre, the great infidel and existential humanist, it is a bit more complicated. There are surely good reasons, both biographical and philosophical, to wonder whether and how the smoking, philandering, concrete-loving metropolitanite could ever join the ecological conversation. Not least
among the philosophical reasons—I leave the biographical ones to the reader’s imagination—are his staunch anthropocentrism, exceptionalism, and instrumentalism, to say nothing of his generally impoverished and underdeveloped philosophy of nature. Still, and despite the prima facie evidence against him, there is more than meets the eye on this score. Nor am I the first to see the possibility. No less an interpreter of Sartre than William McBride suggested it more than two decades ago.

In his standard-setting monograph, *Sartre’s Political Theory*, McBride points explicitly to the ecological pertinence of the Sartrean corpus. Though it “would be a gross exaggeration to pretend that Sartre was ecology-minded in the contemporary sense,” McBride writes, “there is an important sense in which, in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre introduces an ecological consciousness.” This suggestion immediately struck me as sound and even a first reading of the *Critique* will confirm it, if only the reader keeps the question close at hand. In “Sartre and Problems in the Philosophy of Ecology,” a little-known paper published in a Polish journal in the same year as the monograph, McBride provides the broad contours of a defense of the claim. I concur wholeheartedly with his ascription of “a certain shift in Sartre’s attitudes and emphases that took place in the years between the publication of *L’être et le néant* and *Critique de la raison dialectique*, a shift that leads him in the latter to treat ecological factors as absolutely central to an understanding of human society and history”; even if I cannot abide his insistence that “the early Sartre is of little use for the more positive task of constructing a suitable ecological ethic.” In keeping with my conviction concerning the broad continuity of the Sartrean corpus—a conviction McBride shares in his own way—the question of Sartre’s relevance to ecological philosophy, if not of any incipient ecological sensibilities he may have possessed, can and should be posed much earlier than the period of *Critique*. The unpacking of any answer must reach back at least to *The Imaginary*, a work that in important ways set the stage for the entire Sartrean philosophical corpus.

Despite any interpretive differences we may have, one thing is clear. McBride and I agree completely on Sartre’s pertinence to an ecological philosophy. I take great comfort in this agreement with such an uncompromising, profound, and generous interpreter of the Sartrean oeuvre, for it seems no small endorsement of the present chapter and of the larger project of which it is a part. So, what would it mean to draw together the concerns of the younger Sartre of *The Imaginary* and the interests of the elder Taylor of *Modern Social Imaginaries*? Could we, by linking these two seemingly disparate strands of thought, render something of our current reality and future imaginary intelligible? Can they help to shed new light on where we are, how we have come to be here, where we are headed, and what we ought to aim for? It is to these questions that we now turn.
Sartre on Imagination

Sartre outlines the central claims of his theory of imagination in the first chapter of The Imaginary (known to many English-language readers as The Psychology of Imagination), a scant twenty pages or so that repays multiple readings. For Sartre, four things stand out: the image is a consciousness, the image is explored in a “quasi-observational” manner, the imaging consciousness “posits its object as a nothingness,” and the image is characterized by its spontaneity. I will add a fifth: the image is embodied.  

As for Sartre’s first point, imagination is an imaging consciousness. Sartre’s sense of the constitutive unity of the conscious act requires it. The image is just a particular kind of consciousness; it is an irrealizing consciousness. It takes as its intentional object an irreal aimed at through the image (e.g., Pierre as absent, to take Sartre’s favorite example, or the extinct Dodo, to take an example more fitting to the purposes of this chapter). It does this in a manner both similar to and importantly different from perceptual consciousness. Perceptual consciousness is a realizing consciousness that takes as its intentional object a real percept (e.g., Pierre as present, or Pierre’s hairy cousin, the endangered Mountain Gorilla). And so too the imaging consciousness takes aim at its object. The difference is that while the percept is posited as existent, the image is posited as nonexistent: “…the image gives its object as a nothingness of being…The characteristic of the intentional object of the imaging consciousness is that the object is not there and is posited as such, or that it does not exist and is posited as nonexistent, or that it is not posited at all.”  

Think again of the Dodo (not there); think of the Gorgon (nonexistent); think of the suffering of plants (not posited). “In perception, knowledge is formed slowly; in the image, knowledge is immediate.” Hence, “…the world of images is a world where nothing happens…Not a second of surprise: the object that is moving is not alive, it never precedes the intention. But neither is it inert, passive, ‘worked’ from the outside, like a marionette: the consciousness never precedes the object, the intention reveals itself at the same time as it realizes itself, in and by its realization.” Sartre qualifies this point in a note late in the text: “There are, on the boarders of wakefulness and sleep, certain rather strange cases that could pass for images displaying resistance.” We do not, in every instance, have complete control over the image, which serves to highlight the ontological status of the image. This is crucial: both the image and the percept are real in Sartre’s open-textured ontological sense, in that they are both actualities, or more precisely, they are both reals—a point more easily accommodated by French
syntax: ils sont l’un et l’autre réels, or ils sont tous les deux réels. They are each and equally real, albeit in distinct modalities of reality.

What manner of distinction? How distinct? The being of the percept and the being of the image differ fundamentally. The distinction is phenomenological:

In the world of perception, no “thing” can appear without maintaining an infinity of relations to other things…Hence a kind of overflowing in the world of “things”: there is, at every moment, always infinitely more than we can see; to exhaust the richness of my current perception would take an infinite time…But in the image, on the other hand, there is a kind of essential poverty. The different elements of an image maintain no relations with the rest of the world and only two or three relations between themselves: those, for example, that I could note, or those that it is presently important to retain.  

If in perception we must take time to discover and explore the percept’s infinite facets; in imagination we spontaneously create and augment and supplement the image’s intrinsic finitude. Sartre is emphatic on this point too: “I can keep an image in view as long as I want: I will never find anything there but what I put there.” The image is, as it were, the ad hoc consciousness par excellence.

As for my additional point concerning the embodied nature of the image, it is not something Sartre dwells on, but it is critical to a responsible interpretation of his theory—and of his thought as a whole. Here, I will say simply this: for Sartre consciousness is embodied and the body is conscious. He never believed otherwise, and it is impossible to argue otherwise on a responsible reading of the textual evidence. He could not be more emphatic in Being and Nothingness: “Being-for-itself must be wholly body and it must be wholly consciousness; it can not be united with a body. Similarly being-for-others is wholly body; there are no ‘psychic phenomena’ there to be united with the body. There is nothing behind the body. But the body is wholly ‘psychic.’” And so it is in his earlier theory of imagination. The image is embodied, for the whole body constitutes the image: “…the image is not a simple content of consciousness among others, but is a psychic form. As a result, the whole body collaborates in the constitution of the image…produced by the intentional animation of certain physiological phenomena.” In an idiom appropriate to the larger task of this chapter, we might say that the body is the real earthly ground of worldly imaginings. But this is to anticipate a later stage in the argument.

If it needs to be said, Sartre was ambivalent about the imaginary. We catch a glimpse of the roots of this ambivalence in his taxonomy of consciousness: “To perceive, to conceive, to imagine: such are indeed the three types of consciousness by which the same object can be given to us.” On the one hand, he saw a radical gap between conception and perception: “…we can never perceive a thought nor think a perception. They are radically distinct phenomena: one is knowledge conscious of itself, which places itself at once in the center of the object; the other is a synthetic unity of a multiplicity of
appearances, which slowly serves its apprenticeship.” His example is a cube. When we perceive a cube, we perceive it one side at a time, one aspect at a time, even as our constitutive perceptual processes hold it together for us in the percept, as this very cube. When we think the concept “cube,” when we conceive a cube, it is given all at once. “I am at the centre of my idea,” as Sartre puts it, “I apprehend its entirety in one glance.” If perception aims at the concrete (that cube, this Earth, our world), conception aims at the abstract (cube, planet, world) Thus, as Sartre reiterates in Being and Nothingness: “We can not...perceive and imagine simultaneously; it must be either one or the other.” (And, I should note, a similar radical disjunction holds between the image and the concept: “To say that an object is given as imaged and as conceived at the same time is as absurd as to speak of a body that would be solid and gas at the same time.”) Imagination differs from both conception and perception.

On the other hand, it can influence the both. Sartre acknowledged, or at least hinted at a certain capacity of imagination to refine and concentrate and intensify experience—and so by extension, we may infer, to augment our percepts and concepts, though he never says as much.

It must not, however, be believed that the irreal object, a final term, an effect that is never itself a cause, is a pure and simple epiphenomenon and that the development of consciousness remains exactly the same whether or not this object exists. Certainly, the irreal always receives and never gives. Certainly there is no way of giving it the urgency, the exigency, the difficulty of a real object. However, the following fact cannot be ignored: before producing the roast chicken as imaged, I was hungry and yet I did not salivate…One could not therefore deny that my hunger…underwent a significant modification while passing through the imaging state. [It was] concentrated, made more precise, and [its] intensity increased.

To repeat, and despite the tensions, Sartre unequivocally affirmed a common ground between imagination and perception, “the two great functions of consciousness”: both the perceived object and the imagined object possess a real being. When reals collide, things happen.

Both the real and the irreal are real, permeated throughout by nothingness. This “quality of nothingness that permeates the whole process and its concomitant capacity to transform experience are of the utmost importance. For ‘the imaginary is in every case the concrete ‘something’ towards which the existent is surpassed...that in relation to which the totality of the real is surpassed in order to make a world.’ This is a point to which we will have to return, and a good place to turn to Taylor’s social imaginary.
Intimations of a New Socioecological Imaginary

Taylor on the Social Imaginary

I originally encountered the concept of a “social imaginary” nested deep within Taylor’s monumental tome, *A Secular Age*. In his mercifully short earlier monograph, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Taylor devotes a chapter to exploration of the notion itself, in preparation for his outline of its modern inflection. He defines a social imaginary thusly:

> By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and image that underlie these expectations... There are important differences between social imaginary and social theory. I adopt the term imaginary (i) because my focus is on the way ordinary people “imagine” their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories and legends. It is also the case that (ii) theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.

This passage is exemplary of the clarity of Taylor’s prose, so a brief comment on the import of Taylor’s threefold clarification will suffice.

First, a social imaginary is always an unthematised image of social existence. It is an image not so much envisioned as it is lived; and even when we envision it, by definition we live the envisioning. We each carry with us some social imaginary—perhaps more than one, perhaps many more of them today than in the past—but a social imaginary is not an image we can easily conjure, and we do not necessarily or even ever think about our social imaginary. Rather, we each enact a social imaginary, in and through our social practices, most of them just the ordinary routines and rituals of daily life, most of them pregnant with the larger meaning of us, and some of them informing extraordinary transformative interventions aimed at unlikely but possible new futures (about which more below).

The pivotal point is that we are in the realm of practice here. Taylor wants us to keep lived experience and workaday conduct in sight. The social imaginary is neither magical nor mysterious. Above all, it is not theory, it is part and parcel of conduct proper.

The understanding implicit in practice stands to social theory in the same relation that my ability to get around a familiar environment stands to a (literal) map of this area. I am very well able to orient myself without ever having
adopted the standpoint of overview the map offers me. Similarly, for most of human history and for most of social life, we function through the grasp we have on the common repertory, without benefit of theoretical overview. Humans operated with a social imaginary well before they ever got into the business of theorizing about themselves.28

Thus Taylor insists, “The social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society.”29 However many imaginaries there may be, however many there may have been, it is an old and common business.

This brings us to Taylor’s second point of clarification. As ordinary, a social imaginary is not the possession of a select few; it is a “populist” notion, in the descriptive rather than prescriptive sense of the term. By definition a social imaginary is seated in the “popular imagination.” It describes a popular (i.e., broadly shared, even if not universal) sense of how things are with the world. In this way, and far from being a mere figment of the imagination, the social imaginary is very much a part of the real world. It is always diffuse, inchoate, inarticulate, yes; and it is always efficacious, too, the shared possession of masses of ordinary people. A social imaginary orients the daily conduct of large swathes of ordinary society—by extension orienting the dynamic stability of society as a whole. For good and for ill and for all, a social imaginary is a powerful force, taken up each day in a multitude of ways by myriads of persons making their day-to-day, and building histories, sculpting worlds, and sketching futures along the way.

Third, because a social imaginary (and the more loosely related collections of them that tend to engage “us” today) has this real influence on the real world, it is by default, a legitimizing force in the world. A living social imaginary permits a diversity of individuals, despite the mixed counterthrusts of pathology, idiosyncrasy, and creativity, to share in the construction of a single world, one recognizable to all, or at least to most, as the world in which we live. Every social imaginary is, in this sense, a self-fulfilling prophecy: the world is as it is because this is the way the world is; and the way the world is is the way the world is supposed to be. A social imaginary makes the world seem right and natural and desirable.

A few further points are implicit in Taylor’s own clarifications, and directly pertinent to the concerns of this chapter. First, the social imaginary possesses a certain recalcitrance to change—Sartre would call it being or inertia, Taylor might call it integrity, I will emphasize its integrativity—and this resistance to change in the imaginary must not be underestimated, especially by those who would seek to change the real. As a facilitating story of how things are with the world, the social imaginary exerts a gentle but pervasive grip on individuals and groups. It is easy to talk about how the world is and how it ought to be. It is exceedingly difficult to change it. Any concrete change in the world must work out its proposed refashioning of already recalcitrant social, political, and
economic structures \textit{against} the steady tide of a living social imaginary, the murky undercurrent of imagined meaning and mattering that contributes so much to the drift of how things are with the real world.

As Taylor also repeatedly emphasizes, the social imaginary is thoroughly wrapped up with identity construction. The depth of the problem of change, real change, comes in part from the fact that the social imaginary is at least as much about our sense of who we are as it is about what we do and why we do it. It is part of “the very formative horizon of my identity.”\textsuperscript{30} The social imaginary is an integral part of becoming the kind of persons we are, and equally integral to staying that way, so it is no small thing to challenge it. Of course, this is just a peek into Taylorian can of worms that need not be opened here.\textsuperscript{31}

So, what of the two of them? What of Taylor’s and Sartre’s theories together? What of the imaging consciousness in relation the imagining collective?

\section*{Conjuring the Conjurer}

Though everything Taylor says is in Modern Social Imaginaries is broadly consistent with what Sartre says in The Imaginary, their immediate concerns are obviously different. By definition, the domain of the social imaginary lies outside that of the image per se, and so beyond the phenomenological descriptions of the constitutive imaging consciousness and the imaginary life of individuals that concerned the early Sartre. Whether one focuses on the formal qualities of Taylor’s sense of the imaginary as a social trope—as I primarily do here—or on the substantive history and currency of the modern social imaginary with which Taylor is principally concerned, the imaginary in question is a \textit{collective} imaginary, animating the social body, as it were, and spread across the world, as Sartre might put it. Taylor wants above all to show us that we each \textit{and} together forge and sustain an imaginary, even as it is given to us. It is \textit{our} social imaginary, even as some of us may demur—the possibility of which demurrals is, not incidentally, fundamental to Taylor’s understanding of the modern social imaginary. Dependent as it must be on the particularities of any \textit{given} we, a social imaginary is \textit{our take}, a tacit story that is \textit{told by us about us for us}. It is the story we tell ourselves about who we are and what we are like, about how we have come to be this way and how we ought to be. It is an odd sort of story in that it is one we always hear even as we never tell it. Indeed, we may say, following Sartre that we will find in a social imaginary only what we have put there ourselves.

A simple but nontrivial key to the distinction between Sartre and Taylor is evident in their respective orientations: on the one hand, we have the younger
Sartre’s interest in the individual; on the other, the elder Taylor’s interest in the group. To give the distinction a little flesh: if the early Sartre was concerned with the static and genetic phenomenology of the individual image—that is, with the description of the eidetic sense of stable objects and the genesis of those objects in the lived imaginative experience of the individual; the elder Taylor, though far from a self-described phenomenologist, might be said to be more concerned with the generative phenomenology of the collective imaginary—that is, with the description of how historical and intersubjective structures of identity come about through the interface of lifeworld and lived meaning-making and collective experience.32

There is, of course, no individuality apart from sociality. And so there is an immediate (which is not to say, unmediated), embodied, and felt meaning of sociality that permits creatures like us (and, we know to a moral certainty, that permits many other sorts of creatures, both much like and very unlike us) to engage and experience the particular ecologies of our local environments—and permits increasing numbers of us, to wonder at the broader ecologies of our regional and global environments. Sentient-experiential-linguistic beings like us always work with and in and from and through some often inchoate but always operative sense of placement and engagement, and both with and amidst others and with and amidst an encompassing ambience. This is the situation. Whether we are concerned with the constitutive activity of an individual imaginary à la Sartre, or the passive relief of any social imaginary à la Taylor, the imaginary is always an imagining in medias res. And this felt sense of situated engagement that accompanies and is intrinsic to all experienced sociality, whether imaginary or real, is wholly and crucially ecological. Experience, whole-cloth, is socioecological. Hence the merit of Sartre and Taylor taken together. Together they elicit the contours of what might be called an emergent-construct, an angle on a new socioecological imaginary that is at once given and taken. It might be called—in the spirit of Sartre’s remarkable and underappreciated Search for a Method—a “historical and structural” socioecology. For here theory, praxis, and prospect coalesce.

Yes, someday, if dreams come true, people will wake to realize that they take the intrinsic linkages between social truth and justice and ecological relations and processes for granted—much as, following Taylor, many awoke one day to find that they took the new link between the modern moral order and their sense of personal identity and social legitimacy for granted. If dreams come true, someday people will awake to find that their collective imaginary is a socioecological tale, one told for so long so compellingly by so many that they hardly know they are telling it. This is a point Taylor insists on: any collective imaginary is of necessity characterized by its passive emergence. In this sense, on the one hand, the new socioecological imaginary, if and when it completes its limping and faltering emergence, will have come about seemingly of its own accord. On the other hand, understood in a manner consistent with the early
Sartre’s static/genetic phenomenology of the image *qua* imaging consciousness, the new socioecological imaginary will, again, of necessity, be a *construction*, a product of the active and spontaneous character of the imaging consciousness. Yes, the new socioecological imaginary must *emerge* of its own accord. Sartre would readily admit this. But it will emerge only insofar as we must *construct* it. As with all things imaginary, if we are to find it, we must make it, for we can only find there what we put there. This is a point Sartre would insist upon: any imaginary, individual or social, will of necessity be characterized by its *active spontaneity*. In this sense, the new socioecological imaginary, if only it keeps limping and faltering along, will have come about intentionally—in both the phenomenological and ethical senses of the term.

And, if it needs to be said, the two demands are not mutually exclusive. Far from it. There is no good argument to be made that only the active or the passive run the imaginary show on theoretical grounds, and there is certainly no good reason to prefer one over the other on practical grounds. Let the chips fall where they may, but we have pick them up in order to drop them, again and again. Indeed, where matters of collective imaginaries are concerned—social, political, economic, *socioecological*—the passive-emergent and active-constructive dimensions are reciprocally implicative and mutually inflective. Each entails the other (the passive moment), as each transforms the other (the active moment).

Again, we will find in the new socioecological imaginary only what we have put there *ourselves*, and this precisely to the extent that we have *put it there*, through the patient work of history and daily conduct. Moreover, as we work imaginatively on the real, imaginaries work on imaginaries too: “the interplay of social imaginaries, new and traditional, [help] determine their respective courses.”

It is a matter of *give* and *take*. The new socioecological imaginary will be a new “given” only and exactly to the extent that it is also a new “taken.” This point cannot, I think, be overemphasized: every given must be taken in some way. This is the dialectical heart of free organic praxis—to invoke the mature Sartre’s preferred index for human engagement—of a realizing praxis no less than of an irrealizing praxis.

If, as Sartre insists in the second volume of the *Critique*, “the possible is a structure of the real,” this is only so. I insist, because we must pass through the imaginary on the path to the possible. Nor, I should note, is any of this inconsistent with Taylor’s understanding of things imaginary. The imaginary is a structure of the possible, and so it is a structure of the real, even a more fundamental structure than possibility itself, for what can reveal the possible in the real if not imagination? Taylor knows this too: “Like all forms of human imagination, the social imaginary can be full of self-serving fiction and suppression, but it is also an essential constituent of the real. It cannot be reduced to an insubstantial dream.” Sartre accepts this, of course; he is just less sanguine than Taylor, I think, for fear we might lose our grip on the real. If the primacy of the imaginary lies in its necessity, its peril lies in the illusion of its
sufficiency. On this Sartre was unequivocal: the worst thing we can do is to prefer the imaginary over the real.

Still, his ambivalence notwithstanding, Sartre could not be clearer about the priority of the imaginary. “Thus the imaginary,” he tells us late in his study, “represents at every moment the implicit sense of the real.”

This, too, is a matter of give and take: “The imaginary appears ‘on the ground of the world,’ but reciprocally all apprehension of the real as world implies a hidden surpassing toward the imaginary.” All consciousness is always, even if not only, an irrealizing consciousness insofar as all consciousness of the world is, by definition, an implicit question posed to the world and thus displays the world as at once imagined, possible, and real. Some imagined possible always underlies the actual, just as some possible imaginary sustains the real. The irreal, itself, is a structure of the real; so the irrealizing power of imagination is a necessary condition for the possible; and so it must be for the realization of any possibility.

Last, but not least, we must not forget that all of these points are made with freedom in the background. For both Sartre and Taylor, there is no imaginary apart from freedom. There is no individual imagination that is not free. As for Sartre, imagination is no mere happenstance; it is the surest index of our freedom: “…imagination is not an empirical power added to consciousness, but is the whole of consciousness as it realizes its freedom; every concrete and real situation of consciousness in the world is pregnant with the imaginary in so far as it is always presented as a surpassing of the real...The irreal is produced outside the world by a consciousness that remains in the world and it is because we are [...] free that we can imagine.” There is no social imaginary that is not freely lived. As for Taylor, “our social imaginary constitutes a horizon we are virtually incapable of thinking beyond.”

In this instance, at least, everything hangs on the adverb. There comes a time with every living social imaginary when some people can and do manage to think beyond it.

**To Cross This Busy Intersection**

Now, phenomenological descriptions can discover, for example, that the very structure of transcendental consciousness implies that this consciousness is constitutive of a world. But it is evident that they will not teach us that it must be constitutive of one such world, which is to say precisely the one where we are, with its earth, its animals, its people, and the history of its people.

—Jean-Paul Sartre
We live not simply in a troubled time or a troubled place, but on a troubled planet in a troubled world. We live in the Anthropocene, which promises to be a particularly troubled epoch if we are to trust the geologists. And we have nowhere else to go. We may flee this or that difficult circumstance, as many of us have and many more of us will—toward the warming poles, away from the creeping coasts, higher into the melting mountains, off of the shrinking islands, further from the encroaching deserts, nearer to the drying rivers—and all our flight will be, as it must be, from one place to another on this one troubled planet in this one troubled world. It is difficult to imagine just how it will all turn out in reality. Imagine what you will, and know this: real ostriches never bury their heads in the sand. They just know when to get close to Earth so that they might better keep track of what’s going on in the world. Head low. Eyes open. Safe for the moment, though not secure.

Imagination is a gift and a tool, and in every imaginable context. As we develop and mature, the line between the imaginary and the real becomes clearer, firmer, even preferred. And so it should. Cars are real, after all, and to imagine that they are made of marshmallow or that you are made of some diaphanous ether as you cross a busy intersection would surely lead to difficulties—if you believed it. Still, just crossing the street involves a good bit of imagination, carefully winnowed by perception of the real. The child may imagine what she will. I ask her to hold my hand and I tighten my grip and look both ways twice before we cross. I know how easy it is for her to take up the gift of imagination. She is Wonder Woman, after all, so Wonder Woman had better hold my hand. I help her across the street, even as she knows it is Wonder Woman who helps me to cross the impossible distance from here to the far side of the world. We arrive safely at the other side and I release her hand and she shakes her invisible golden lasso from my wrist and I check the time and decide whether to walk or take a bus or hail a cab to get to our appointment. And all the while I pretend that it is not my supple, if little appreciated imagination but my hold on reality that has kept us safe on our journey. I imagine against all the evidence that it is my firm grip on the real has allowed me to reach my decision, and that I only need to hang onto it to get us to our destination on time. The child, of course, knows that that’s just silly. She runs ahead to fight for truth and justice. Perhaps she knows that we will have neither unless we imagine both. Perhaps she knows, too, that truth and justice are matters of imagining an ecologically habitable planet and a livable world for all of Earth’s inhabitants. And perhaps she knows that will have neither habitability nor livability unless we aim for both. Then again, perhaps I only imagine the wisdom of the child.

One thing we do know, and to a moral certainty: where matters of worldly flourishing are concerned, our own earthly flourishing and that of the broader community of Earth upon which any world worth wanting depends, it will behoove us to employ all of the richness of our peculiar, perhaps singular variety of experience. And among our peculiar strengths is our capacity to imagine, a
power surely shared by many of our earthly cohabitants, but one which we seem to have in spades. If we want to take aim at a habitable planet, to say nothing of a livable world, we had better imagine hitting a single target. For just as surely as the social and the ecological have always been inextricably bound up with each other, so the real fate of this planet and of any possible world are inextricably bound up with the imaginary.

**Notes**

5. William L. McBride, “Sartre and Problems in the Philosophy of Ecology,” *Acta Universitatis Lodzienis – Folia Philosophica* 8 (1991): 69-80, p. 74. I thank Bill for pointing me to this article during a conversation at a reception for the Center for Philosophy & Public Policy at the 2011 meeting of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association. At the time of our conversation, the study from which this chapter is drawn was in its final stages of completion. Note: The epigraph for this chapter appears on page 80 of his article.
15. *The Imaginary*, p. 137.
16. This discussion expands upon an interpretation developed briefly in my “Reading Catalano’s Reading Sartre,” *Sartre Studies International* 17:2 (2011), pp. 81-88.
32. In this regard I have learned much from Anthony J. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995).
37. *Ibid.*, p. 188.