

## LINES, LINES, EVERYWHERE—NOT ONE TO CROSS ANYWHERE?

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### Abstract

A wise man once said, “I think, therefore I am.” The wise man was Rene Descartes, a French philosopher, mathematician, and writer. Now while Descartes could “think” up of the Cartesian coordinate system and also lead Western philosophy into rationalism and even further inspire a whole school of thought that was opposed to his way of thinking, he would not have been able to envisage a day when different schools of thought would be debating where to place him in the first place. While most philosophy departments, perhaps confidently, lay claim to this so-called “genius” one wonders how many know that Rene Descartes is regarded as the man behind analytical geometry. Today, while each area in academia would, perhaps conveniently, concentrate on the specific related concepts Descartes indulged in, we cannot ignore the fact that for Descartes (in his time) they all existed simultaneously together; that is, philosophy was not divorced from mathematics and mathematics was not alienated from philosophy.

This paper attempts to look at the significance of imagination, culture, rootedness, and identity in education today. The simple question that comes to mind here is why would technical education need imagination or culture? While technical education, technique, and technicalities have come into strong everyday focus, questions are raised as to why one would need to study anything that lies outside the purview of immediate necessary information, knowledge, learning, and syllabi.

In order to answer the questions raised above, this paper will explore a text by Lorraine Hansberry titled *What Use are Flowers?* In addition, theoretical framework along with other relevant texts from literatures in English will be carefully chosen for the development of the argument within the paper. The paper will be arranged and the bibliographical entries will be made using the latest MLA Style Sheet Handbook.

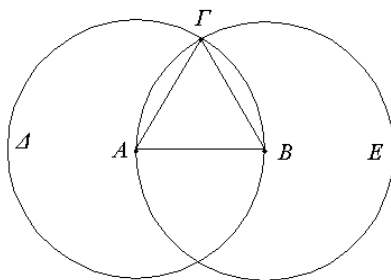
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I picture the vast realm of the sciences as an immense landscape scattered with patches of dark and light. The goal towards which we must work is either to extend the boundaries of the patches of light, or to increase their number. One of these tasks falls to the creative genius; the other requires a sort of sagacity combined with perfectionism. (Denis Diderot, *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature and Other Philosophical Works*, <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/735127-thoughts-on-the-interpretation-of-nature-and-other-philosophical-works>).

In a letter, dated 31<sup>st</sup> March 1791, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote to his brother Rev. George Coleridge these words,

Dear Brother, I have often been surprised that Mathematics, the quintessence of Truth, should have found admirers so few and so languid. Frequent consideration and minute scrutiny have at length unravelled the cause; viz. that though Reason is feasted, Imagination is starved; whilst Reason is luxuriating in its proper Paradise, Imagination is wearily travelling on a dreary desert. To assist Reason by the stimulus of Imagination is the design of the following production. ([web.math.unifi.it/users/casolo/ML/Coleridge.pdf](http://web.math.unifi.it/users/casolo/ML/Coleridge.pdf))

He went on to write a poem “A Mathematical Problem,” that describes the following figure (literally that which you see here).



This is now –this was erst,  
 Proposition the first – and Problem the first.  
 I  
 On a given finite line Which must no way incline; To describe an equi –  
 – lateral Tri –  
 – A, N, G, L, E.  
 Thine ever, S. T. C.  
 Now let A. B.  
 Be the given line  
 Which must no way incline; The great Mathematician Makes this Requisition,  
 That we describe an Equi – – lateral Tri –  
 – angle on it:  
 Aid us, Reasonaid us, Wit!  
 II  
 From the centre A. at the distance A. B. Describe the circle B. C. D.  
 At the distance B. A. from B. the centre  
 The round A. C. E. to describe boldly venture. (Third postulate see.)

And from the point C.  
 In which the circles make a pother  
 Cutting and slashing one another;  
 Bid the straight lines a journeying go.  
 C. A. C. B. those lines will show.  
 To the points, which by A. B. are reckon'd, And postulate the second  
 For Authority ye know.  
 A. B. C.  
 Triumphant shall be  
 An Equilateral Triangle,  
 Not Peter Pindar carp, nor Zoilus can wrangle.  
 III  
 Because the point A. is the centre  
 Of the circular B. C. D.  
 And because the point B. is the centre Of the circular A. C. E.  
 A. C. to A. B. and B. C. to B. A. Harmoniously equal for ever must stay; Then C.  
 A. and B. C.  
 Both extend the kind hand  
 To the basis, A. B.  
 Unambitiously join'd in Equality's Band.  
 But to the same powers, when two powers are equal, My mind forbodes the  
 sequel;  
 My mind does some celestial impulse teach,  
 And equalises each to each.  
 Thus C. A. with B. C. strikes the same sure alliance, That C. A. and B. C. had  
 with A. B. before;  
 And in mutual affiance None attempting to soar Above another,  
 The unanimous three  
 C. A. and B. C. and A. B.  
 All are equal, each to his brother,  
 Preserving the balance of power so true:  
 Ah! the like would the proud Autocratrix do! At taxes impending not Britain  
 would tremble, Nor Prussia struggle her fear to dissemble;  
 Nor the Mah'met-sprung Wight  
 The great Mussulman  
 Would stain his Divan  
 With Urine the soft-flowing daughter of Fright.  
 IV  
 But rein your stallion in, too daring Nine! Should Empires bloat the scientific  
 line?  
 Or with dishevell'd hair all madly do ye run For transport that your task is done?  
 For done it is – the cause is tried!  
 And Proposition, gentle Maid,  
 Who soothlyask'd stern Demonstration's aid, Has proved her right, and A. B. C.  
 Of Angles three  
 Is shown to be of equal side;

And now our weary steed to rest in fine,  
'Tisrais'd upon A. B. the straight, the given line.  
("A Mathematical Problem," Samuel Taylor  
Coleridge, [web.math.unifi.it/users/casolo/ML/Coleridge.pdf](http://web.math.unifi.it/users/casolo/ML/Coleridge.pdf))

While the words "the quintessence of Truth" (quoted above before the poem) might be debated upon, closely scrutinized, and eventually criticized or compromised with, the obvious fascination for Mathematics that Coleridge carried is demonstrated in the poem that was part of the letter he wrote to his brother (quoted above). What is of further interest however, is what Coleridge says about "Imagination." According to this poet of the romantic era (i.e. S. T. Coleridge) "Imagination" was left unfed, was also left thirsty, and further, was heavily burdened in his time and age. If we were to further take into account Coleridge's purpose behind writing a poem based entirely in Mathematics, the actual question would be does reason really need to be stimulated by imagination at all? After all, in many societies and academics alike, we have been and are still busily trying to keep separate that which falls under the broader heading of science and that which falls under the division of humanities. We also have further divisions based on that which is claimed to be pure science as opposed to areas that are off shoots or branches of scientific thinking. And each area of thinking within humanities, that are conveniently called "subjects" while we study, are kept strictly apart so that one way of thinking might not and *will* not interfere with another way of thinking.

This phenomenon is not original to today, this time, our generation or newer generations on the horizon, for Coleridge continued in his letter to his brother,

In the execution of it [the assisting of "Reason by the stimulus of Imagination"] much may be objectionable... I have three strong champions to defend me against the attacks of Criticism: the Novelty, the Difficulty and the Utility of the work. I may justly plume myself that I first have drawn the nymph Mathesis from the visionary caves of abstracted idea, and caused her to unite with Harmony. The first-born of this Union I now present to you... ([web.math.unifi.it/users/casolo/ML/Coleridge.pdf](http://web.math.unifi.it/users/casolo/ML/Coleridge.pdf))

In the above quotation, Coleridge discusses the problems that may arise while writing a poem based on Mathematics. In doing this he does away with the myth that scientific thinking would be the only one that would require proof and proving of a theory. Many areas of humanities including authoring, writing, art, etc. would in fact require a sound argument to survive the world and time as well. Ironically, with or without prior planned agenda, Coleridge not only personifies imagination—making it a personality in its own right—but also disproves the illusion of imprecision, ambiguity, and vagueness that is associated with most of arts and humanities. Fascinatingly Coleridge seeks his defense, of choice and style of poem, in something new, something difficult or complicated and the *usefulness* (or "Utility") of his writing.

If one were to trace this idea of "usefulness" one would, perhaps, find that every time a new proposition, a way of thinking, a new idea, a new discovery was made that was hindered and stopped, the underlying argument could have stemmed back to "what is the use" of this. Its current form may have been witnessed by teachers, students, academicians, parents, and children, who would have encountered the question, "What *use*..." is *something*, one way or another, at some point of time or another in their lives. While children and students always ask, "What is the use of studying this?" and look for an immediate result in the knowledge that they acquire, teachers and academicians wonder, "What is the use in teaching students who refuse to learn?" or "What is the use of forwarding this argument? What is it going to be achieved; in terms

of changing opinion, policies, latest scenario(s), or the world at large?” While parents try and answer the questions posed by their children, from time to time, with as much diplomacy as possible, they too, perhaps, wonder about the times when similar questions plagued them.

It doesn't end here for this is just the beginning. Other “use” oriented questions keep popping up from time to time. What is the “use” of geography, civics, history, economics, Hindi, Telugu, (or any other second and third languages learnt), social science, home science (are these even a science?!! Can we even call these subjects science in the first place?), arts and craft, calculus, differentiation, integration, litmus tests, Bunsen burners, graphs with at least three readings on a straight line, prisms, magnets, magnetic fields, leaf projects, dissecting insects and frogs, myopia, hyperopia, utopia, dystopia, etc. etc. so on and so forth.

The argument continues. People who study humanities wonder why they had to deal with sciences all their lives; the ones who indulged in sciences wonder what all the fuss is with the over thinking of “issues” that the humanities seem to excel in. While the world of computer science and information technology grows rapidly today, the choice of what to pursue and what to leave behind remains an unsolvable mystery to some, a mirage just out of grasp to some others, and a challenge to be cracked on a daily basis that brings in immense joy for a whole lot of others. This argument would get murkier and more entangled if we follow the route into various departments and schools of thought and within academia that would claim that one cannot indulge in more than one way of thinking at a time.

These entanglements of what one can and cannot indulge in leads to attitudes towards subjects, what one chooses to study, areas that one targets while working or doing jobs—what one looks at in terms of success. As the social definitions fluctuate attitudes also keep shifting accordingly. In India what you choose to study as a subject is of primary importance after a whole run of marks, ranks, and competitive exams. It later turns to what area you choose to gain expertise in, what job you end up going to everyday, and other social parameters of success. So where does imagination fit into all this? Where does imagination place itself in the social or cultural scheme of things?

In order to answer this (the questions raised above) let us consider a situation where no civilization, no society, no countries, nations, no boundaries exist—there are effectively no lines, no maps, no language, no culture, no context, no background. In Lorraine Hansberry's play *What Use are Flowers?* a hermit returns from his voluntary renouncement of society to discover the only survivors of the end of civilization. The survivors happen to be a bunch of unruly children who are “*cruelly savage*” (1.234) in their search for food. After an initial one-sided conversation, where the hermit tries to explain his retirement from society, his vocation before he left, his obsession with time, and his reasons for returning, the hermit realizes that the children in front of him don't understand what he is saying. His anger at their savage behavior prompts him to call them animals but as awareness at their situation dawns on him the hermit remarks, “Why ... you're not playing ... you *are* wild!” (1.237). The recognition that the children have no knowledge of civilized society drives the hermit to test the children. At long last he concludes, “You eat raw meat, don't know fire and are unfamiliar with the simplest implement of civilization. And you are prelingual” (1.237). Having been an English teacher, Professor Charles Lewis Lawson, before retiring to the forest, the hermit takes up the task of teaching the children the English language. The hermit starts the process by teaching the children a few nouns and verbs.

As an initial process, along with teaching the children the English language, the hermit also designates names to the children. At the time when the hermit is giving out “names” not one



of the children knows what a “name” signifies. It would have, perhaps, been helpful to the hermit not to overlook this fact because as the lessons in the teaching of the English language progress, the hermit encounters questions and doubts that he is at a loss to answer in the absence of a social context. For example in the play *What Use...* we see the hermit teach the children words like ‘Food’, ‘Knife’, ‘Pot’ and action words such as ‘Sleep’, ‘Drink’, ‘Lift’, and ‘Eat.’ When the hermit demonstrates the action the children immediately respond with the appropriate word. Then the hermit teaches the children the word ‘use’; he further teaches them the action of ‘use’ by demonstrating the use of a knife and pot. He also teaches them the verb form ‘using’ and ‘used.’ In his enthusiasm for teaching the children the English language he urges them on, “It [the verb ‘use’] is a vital verb. You *must* master it” (2.241).

The issue of interest here is the teacher’s dilemma where at a later stage when he starts to teach the children words like ‘Flowers’, ‘Beauty’, and ‘Music’, he is baffled when the children raise their hands and ask, “USE?” (3.244). The hermit finds himself unable to answer the question of what use are flowers?, or even “What *use* is MUSIC???” (3.246). He starts to comprehend, too late in the day, that explaining the use of a knife or pot is much easier than explaining the use of flowers, music and beauty. The difference lies in the meaning(s) the words carry. While knives and pots are things that have everyday use to make life simpler and better, flowers or music are words that carry deeper meaning; for flowers and music are meant for feelings that go beyond the mere surface meaning of the words. They aim to please the senses and touch the soul. Trying to explain such complex concepts proves to be the ‘master’s’ difficulty.

What the hermit fails to notice is perhaps the most obvious bit of information at his disposal—the fact that there is an absence of civilization and society. He talks of Beethoven and tries to inculcate a love for the music in the children’s minds and hearts but they respond more because they have to rather than an understanding for Beethoven. Bill Ashcroft in his essay “Constitutive Graphonomy”<sup>1</sup> makes an observation that answers the hermit’s difficulties:

Words are never simply referential in the actual dynamic habits of a speaking community. Even the most simple words like ‘hot’, ‘big’, ‘man’, ‘got’, ‘ball’, ‘bat’, have a number of meanings, depending on how they are used. Indeed, these uses are the ways (and therefore what) the word means in certain circumstances. In his novel *The Voice* Gabriel Okara (1970) demonstrates the almost limitless prolixity of the words ‘inside’ and ‘insides’ to describe the whole range of human volition, experience, emotion and thought. Brought to the site of meaning which stands at the intersection between two separate cultures, the word demonstrates the total dependence of that meaning upon its ‘situated-ness.’ (300)

Thus, the hermit teaches words in a space which lacks a “situated-ness.” In another manner of speaking the teacher in the hermit fails to provide for a context in which the children can situate the meaning of a given word. Interestingly one would at this point state the obvious—that any word could carry several contextual meanings. The shift in meanings of words with the shift in context is an aspect that the hermit cannot envisage as the required environment to carry

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<sup>1</sup> The postcolonial reader includes an abstract from ‘Constitutive Graphonomy: A Post-colonial Theory of Literary Writing’ in Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin (eds) *After Europe: Critical Theory and Post-colonial Writing* (Mandelstrup; Dangaroo, 1989).

out the task is absent. Moreover the hermit's age coupled with the limited time available makes the teaching of the English language nearly impossible.

In the play *What Use...* the children form the silent audience who are receiving the knowledge given to them. From the discussion so far it's clear that the children can grasp the meaning of words like 'Food', 'Eat', 'Drink' but find the task of understanding words like 'Flowers', 'Music', 'Beauty' taxing. Once taught the uses of a pot or a knife they can easily apply the simple logic to perceive the uses of food or water or even 'to sleep' but fail to see the immediate use of words like 'Flowers', 'Music', 'Beauty' and the objects they signify (mean). This leads them to ask the question, "USE?" (3.244) when the hermit tries to teach them words which are connected with aesthetic feeling rather than those words that cover simple needs in terms of meaning.

Thus, while 'Music' means the beauty of sound that the hermit can hear in Beethoven's composition, to the children it is merely sound that they laugh at initially, imitate soon after, and finally question in terms of its immediate function. And further, the hermit is taken aback at the children's questioning the use of flowers and music. It is the question, "USE?" (3.244), that the hermit receives in response to introducing the children to words and concepts like 'music' and 'flowers', that indicates the fact (to him) that the meaning of the words that the hermit wanted to convey has not been communicated effectively.

If one continues to read the play one will find that the same argument is applicable to the names assigned to the children which the children do not understand in the absence of a cultural and social context. While the hermit struggles to teach concepts like gender differences, procreation, the wheel, steam, life and death, along with flowers, music and beauty, the absence of culture and society become more significant and glaring. What the hermit and the children seem to lack is imagination. In the former's case his is a restricted imagination fossilized in time and an age and era gone by (of the yester year) and in the latter's case it does not exist in terms of being rooted in a particular culture defined by lines, boundaries, countries, nations, societies, civilizations and so on. What perhaps we tend to overlook, most of the time is that all imagination is rooted and lies in culture and society.

So in conclusion while the hermit and the children may struggle in their respective spheres, one is forced to wonder why we have to struggle in our respective environments. Why do we as human beings, civilized social beings, restrict imagination? Why do we assume that a vision, imagination or a dream should have to *be* the arena of a writer, a poet, an artist, or a philosopher? After all, isn't imagination required to be able to see a Z axis? How did we forget the stories of the apple falling on Newton's head that gave us gravity, or the humorous one where he boiled his watch and was supposed to have marked time on an egg? What happened to Eureka and the dream of the snake eating its own tail? Why are we as humanitarians restricting our narratives? And why are we not allowing scientific minds to dream? Why do we have all these boundaries that we choose not to transgress?

On a final note, Albert Einstein once said, "I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world." Einstein also believed that, "Logic will get you from A to Z; imagination will get you everywhere" and on a lighter note that, "Imagination is everything. It is the preview of life's coming attractions." For Lauren Bacall, "Imagination is the highest kite that can fly", and Nancy Hale says, "Imagination is new reality in the process of being created. It represents the part of the existing order that can still grow."

While Pablo Picasso felt that, “Everything you can imagine is real” and claimed that, “I paint objects as I think them, not as I see them”, it was Mohammed Ali who said that, “The man who has no imagination has no wings.” Carl Sagan says, “Imagination will often carry us to worlds that never were. But without it we go nowhere.” So if we are clipping the wings of imagination are we in effect, at the end of the day, not going anywhere—not moving forwards or backwards or left or right—or in any visible direction?

The questions that have been raised above, and throughout this paper, have perhaps resulted in the Choice Based Credit System(s) (CBCS) in Indian academia today. While the CBCS might have been in application at the university level, and in undergraduate programmes offered at central universities, it has become mandatory in terms of application for (almost all) undergraduate programs in under graduation colleges throughout the country today. With the implementation of the CBCS the strict boundaries that were maintained within academia are melting to some extent. Today one can, as an undergraduate student in India, look forward to pursuing a course that lies beyond the boundaries of science, humanities, commerce, business application, and further still subject specific boundaries. While it is a step forward into the future, there are yet “miles to go” before we can produce a Descartes or a Coleridge in our academia today.

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