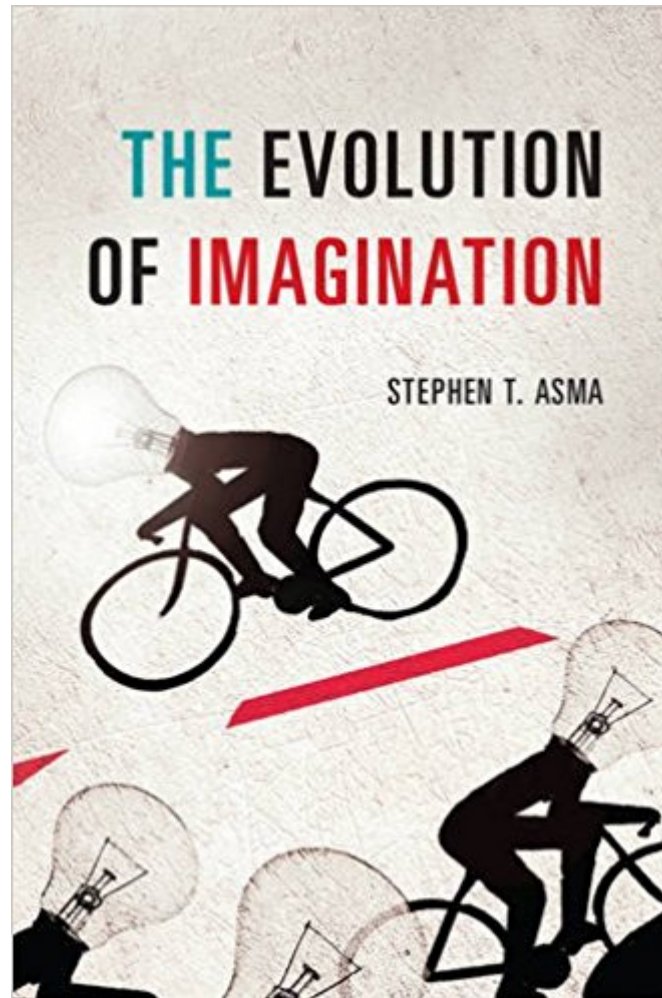




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# The Evolution Of Imagination



## Synopsis

Consider Miles Davis, horn held high, sculpting a powerful musical statement full of tonal patterns, inside jokes, and thrilling climactic phrases—all on the fly. Or think of a comedy troupe riffing on a couple of cues from the audience until the whole room is erupting with laughter. Or maybe it's a team of software engineers brainstorming their way to the next Google, or the Einsteins of the world code-cracking the mysteries of nature. Maybe it's simply a child playing with her toys. What do all of these activities share? With wisdom, humor, and joy, philosopher Stephen T. Asma answers that question in this book: imagination. And from there he takes us on an extraordinary tour of the human creative spirit.

Guided by neuroscience, animal behavior, evolution, philosophy, and psychology, Asma burrows deep into the human psyche to look right at the enigmatic but powerful engine that is our improvisational creativity—the source, he argues, of our remarkable imaginal capacity. How is it, he asks, that a story can evoke a whole world inside of us? How are we able to rehearse a skill, a speech, or even an entire scenario simply by thinking about it? How does creativity go beyond experience and help us make something completely new? And how does our moral imagination help us sculpt a better society? As he shows, we live in a world that is only partly happening in reality. Huge swaths of our cognitive experiences are made up by “what-ifs,” “almosts,” and “maybes,” an imagined terrain that churns out one of the most overlooked but necessary resources for our flourishing: possibilities. Considering everything from how imagination works in our physical bodies to the ways we make images, from the mechanics of language and our ability to tell stories to the creative composition of self-consciousness, Asma expands our personal and day-to-day forms of imagination into a grand scale: as one of the decisive evolutionary forces that has guided human development from the Paleolithic era to today. The result is an inspiring look at the rich relationships among improvisation, imagination, and culture, and a privileged glimpse into the unique nature of our evolved minds.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“The Evolution of Imagination makes a compelling case that we should not, and ultimately cannot, leave our creative roots behind. In the course of this slim but ambitious book on the nature of the imagination, Mr. Asma tells his reader that “sometimes an artist like James Brown will interrupt a long vamp or groove by calling out to the band. Should we take it to the bridge, fellas?” For Mr. Asma the answer has always been “yes. The bridge is the point at which a melody takes what he calls a musical left turn, a moment that initiates artistic improvisation.” Mr. Asma takes readers to the bridge, the site of human creativity, gives them a sense of its thrill, and while doing so leads them through a series of questions that have stymied philosophers for millennia: How exactly does human creativity take place? What is the importance and meaning of the imagination? How did humans first become, in Mr. Asma’s words, the “improvising ape” (The Wall Street Journal) “[A]n ambitious and exciting book about creativity, rich with eclectic disciplinary references and enlivened with personal anecdotes. Charting new territory, Asma emphasizes the biological bases of imagination—sensory perception, emotions and affective systems, neurology, biochemistry, brain size and differentiation, and capabilities for motion and action—and casts these elements in evolutionary perspective.” (Science) “From testing a theory to playing bebop, improvisation is the fount of creativity—it’s even the primal driver in our natural history. So argues philosopher and jazz musician Stephen Asma, who draws on neuroscience and animal behaviour for this intriguing, if occasionally chewy, foray into human evolution. Looking at improvisation from pre-linguistic expression (such as dance) to storytelling, Asma explores how we actively engage the imagination to create our own “virtual realities” and to build just societies, as well as to foster the adaptability we need to negotiate life’s changes.” (Nature) “This is a terrific book. It is a grand, expansive journey through the central role of improvisation and imagination in everything we experience, think,

and do. Asma shows how our marvelous capacity for improvisation – from knapping flint to childhood play to dancing to musical performance to creative science, philosophy, and art – is grounded in our embodied capacities for perception, bodily movement, emotion, and imagination. To support and develop his comprehensive analysis of how we humans came to be improvisers and how this developed into our most impressive creative activities, Asma draws masterfully on anthropology, genetics, biology, neuroscience, developmental psychology, cognitive psychology, and embodied cognition studies. (Mark Johnson, author of *Morality for Humans*) “This book is appealing in that it does not link creativity with marketing or business innovation, as is currently fashionable, but rather with the nature of artistic endeavor itself and with our understanding of how the mind works. Asma combines his expertise as a jazz performer and philosopher to argue that mental activity, especially in improvisation, is not a matter of symbolic processing, but is rather a matter of emotional reaction and sensory experience. Asma accessibly places familiar arguments from cognitive science within the context of artistic creativity.” (Michael Corballis, author of *The Truth about Language: What It Is and Where It Came From*)

Stephen T. Asma is Distinguished Scholar and professor of philosophy in the Department of Humanities as well as Fellow of the Research Group in Mind, Science, and Culture at Columbia College Chicago. He is the author of numerous books, including *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads*, *The Gods Drink Whiskey*, *On Monsters*, and *Against Fairness*, the latter also published by the University of Chicago Press.

I imagine this comment will evolve, descending into a genealogical description of a monkey on the back pages and celestial branches when heraldry becomes a familiar tree. Not to mention a two-wheeler-dealer pedaling somewhere, . . . in a nutshell. Derangements abound while Asma permutes the theme endlessly evoking new ounces of meaning, improving improvisations, always a little dissonant, miles of lamentations with amplifications. A broad perspective on a topic once measured beyond knowledge. A knot tied a bow line on a bite off moor. Then you can choose. Too read: *The Creative Spark* - Agustin Fuentes - how imagination made humans exceptional. *Monkey Shines* - noblesse oblige.

This is an verbose book. It should have had a rigorous editing. I am sorry I purchased it.

Stephen Asma has a rather eclectic background. He is a musician, and illustrator, and a philosopher

with a number of books to his credit. Among his interests are Buddhism, a topic of a couple of those books. His topic is the imagination. How did human imagination evolve, and what are the theories as to how it operates? He says that the evolutionary psychologists tend to take a fairly mechanistic, domain oriented view of the way humans solve problems. A typical mine circuit to them would be avoiding poisonous plants. Asma says that our improvising skills and imaginative powers almost certainly grow out of general intelligence, not specific modules. Asma writes: "Books about creativity have tended to fall into one of three genres. On the one hand, there have been the breathless and overreaching feel-good paeans to famous entrepreneurs and successful CEO creatives. This kind of book is crammed with amusing but shallow factoids and over-interpreted fMRI studies, all wrapped in a vaguely inspirational glaze. Next, we have the how-to books that give artists a series of exercises to unblock their creative flow. These books are either therapeutic or instructive, or both, and seek to nurture the joy of our inner prodigy. The third genre is the impenetrable academic baffle, chock-full of erudite and cryptic references to Foucault and the hegemonic phallogocentric horizon of being, but otherwise devoid of illumination." He wins me over right there, when he says he doesn't understand Foucault either. He says in the introduction he will be leaning heavily on our primate ancestry to explain the way we are today. "Our intellect is a product and servant of our social life, and the improving imagination is a product of our early intellect. It gave us the behavioral/mental scaffolding to organize and manage our experiences long before words and concepts." The book is organized around a jazz theme, as a jam session in six chapters. But what works in the jazz combo can just as easily be found among any other group dedicated to an activity such as diplomacy, hunting, or product development. Each chapter is divided between real-time, the event being discussed, and a discussion of the evolution of the abilities being discussed. Here follow my reading notes on the first chapter. Others will be included as comments.

ONE : The Second Universe-----Counting Off

Asma leads off with the description of a Pleistocene hunting party. First he notes the human evolution required to throw a spear. It is a strong test capable of twisting and the experience that tells the hunter where the animal is likely to go and how to throw the spear so that the animal and spear collide at the right moment. Then, speaking of the group, he says that hunting party is by definition an improvisational activity. The hunters continually update their knowledge about the animals, weather and so on and make their best guess as to what will bring success.

-----Some Crucial Ingredients

Asma names some characteristics of improvisation, quickly adding that it is not a definition but merely characteristics. These are: spontaneity, intuitiveness, adaptivity, making do with deficient resources, natural or self-imposed disciplines, emergency or high-stakes conditions, and it is simultaneously performative

and compositional. For all that it is a matter of making it up on the spot, it is usually woven from a number of clichés, well-known moves that have only to be modified. Asma calls this functionally promiscuous. The list of characteristics goes on: improvisation is flexible practice, involves the mixing or hybridization of frames (separate disciplines, like genres of music), humor, and emotion or affect. Asma says that improvisation requires prerequisite "imaginative faculties." These are the basic mammalian complement of short and long-term memory, representational systems and social learning.

-----The Captain or the Muse? Asma introduces a useful metaphor and says it is nothing more than that. "The captain" would be a part of the brain that has executive control over the creative process, consciously selecting what to do and what not. "The Muse" would be an abandoning of executive control to simply let creativity flow through your consciousness. Asma cautions us that these metaphors are not useful by themselves, but taken together they do emphasize two phases of the imaginative process.

-----Metaphysical Imagination A discourse on monsters, and belief in same. Conjuring them up is a feat of imagination.

-----A Second Universe The cross-fertilization that takes place in imagination. Borrowing metaphors from other contexts. The "counterfactual:" things that might be or might have been; the perfect reposit that you did not come up with when needed.

Question: do animals possess an ability to handle counterfactuals? Our humanoid ancestors? How and when did we acquire our powers of imagination? Our ancestors made hand axes of knapped flint for a million years, during which time the design changed little. Did they have the ability to conceive the finished product in advance, or did they merely learn to copy existing axes? Imagination or rote? When and how did we start to imagine things that could not be real? Asma shows the full-bodied (viz, obese) Venus of Willendorf. One calls to mind the beautifully exaggerated animal drawings in the caves of southern France. Language facilitates imagination. Asma asks what it was like before our ancestors developed language, which most agree was only a couple hundred thousand years ago.

-----Philosophical Missteps Asma refers to the philosophers suggesting that imagination is a middle faculty between our essential perceptions and our mind (the realm of concepts and judgments). Asma raises the objection that it is not a dichotomy, conceptual forms on one side and sensual perception on the other being brought together and matched in the mind. There is more going on in the middle than philosophers imagined.

-----You Are an Expert Improviser Asma describes jazz improvisation as watching and listening very attentively to the leader of the session, taking subtle clues that indicate when a solo riff is coming, the change in key signature, or the end of the piece. He offers another example, speaking a foreign language. When speaking to local people (Chinese for him, Ukrainians for me) you often get the drift of a conversation but not the

whole thing. Rather than stop and ask them to get you back on track every time, you have to wing it and try to steer the conversation to something you will understand. As time goes by  
it's all too slowly it's all too you gradually become more adept at improvisation and also learn a bit of vocabulary. Asma goes into other examples from business negotiation to emergency medicine. The key elements of improvisation, given above under the heading "crucial ingredients," apply to all of them. That's my review through Chapter One. The remaining chapters, covered as comments, are: TWO : The Creative Body THREE : Drawing, Dreaming, and Visual Improvisation FOUR : Spinning the Yarn FIVE : Blowing Away the Self SIX : The Politics of Imagination It is a well-done book on a topic that has interested philosophers since Plato. It is hard to conceive of a better person to address the topic. Asma's final chapters deal with the current state of humanity and morality. He is an optimistic liberal, but not preachy about it. One may not agree in full, but his openness to discussion makes it all a pleasure to read.

Let Stephen take you for a ride. Follow him as he builds a compelling theory that human imagination is the core inherited function that makes Homo sapiens truly human. That all forms of art, symbol making, music, dance and even language itself are all part of the evolution of a selected brain function that allowed us to cope with extreme environmental changes and challenges. He stands, or dances, on the shoulders of Darwin and Dewey and makes a cogent and catholic argument that is well supported and informed by many disciplines. This book will inspire your imagination and motivate your creative mind.

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