Interactivism Imagined: Imagination as a Procedural Capacity in Interactivist Model

Interactivism is a naturalistic model that aims to describe the whole person without dividing human beings into separate mental and bodily substances. It rests on three core ideas: metaphysics of process instead of substance, the emergence of properties from organized processes, and normativity as inherent in far-from-equilibrium living systems. In this paper, I first outline these ideas and their supporting notions, such as situation images, apperception, and multi-level value structures. I then use the interactivist framework to conjoin two concepts of imagination: Immanuel Kant's transcendental imagination and William Blake's imaginative powers. Drawing on Heidegger's reading of Kant, I argue that imagination, as the synthesizing power that unifies the manifold of intuition and grounds being-in-the-world, can be recast in interactivist terms as a procedural capacity structuring internal and external representations, operation as differentiation process, both in basic perceptual recognition and in higher-level evaluative processes. Turning to Blake, I interpret his critique of empiricism and his emphasis on poetic genius and imaginative perception as anticipating an interactivist account of aesthetic motivation and value reconfiguration. Finally, I suggest that integrating Kantian and Blakean insights allows us to articulate imagination in interactivist vocabulary as a family of processes that both constitute perception and guide the seeking of richer interactions, thereby contributing to a normative vision of human flourishing.

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Interactivism is a model with the ambition of describing "The Whole Person", as the title of the latest book by Mark H. Bickhard suggests. That is, in naturalistic terms, not as a being partitioned into mind and body. As I see it, it stands on three main ideas, which I shall try to briefly present, along with the supporting concepts that emerge directly from them. In further course, I shall apply interactivist terms to explain the concepts of imagination as Immanuel Kant and William Blake understand it, and that is the main aim of this paper. Bickhard claims that interactivism is a scaffolding of a model, to be explored further. As imagination is not explained explicitly by it just yet, here is an endeavor to do that.

The foundation of the approach is the metaphysics of process – it opposes the metaphysics of substance. Bickhard claims that through more than two thousand years of history of philosophy and science, the substance dominated in the understanding of the world. Since ancient times, the philosophers had been looking for the ultimate building material of the world, which would explain its existence and the way it works, like Empedoklean eternal four elements, or atomism.

In the course of development, process explanations gradually replaced earlier substance ones. For instance, the caloric-base model of heat – which

explained the heat being the special fluid caloric substance – to a kinetic model of heat (Bickhard 2024, 4). Likewise, fire is no longer modeled as a release of substance called phlogiston, but as a process of combustion (Bickhard 2024, 15). Another example might be the quantum field theory, which demonstrates that the particles are not material – they are processes instead. The core of a quant is essentially empty – a quantum field is its essence, the process that runs in relation to other processes. In fact, a separated atom in a vacuum does not seem to have any properties – the properties emerge only in relation to other atoms.

That leads me to explanation of the next core idea, that is emergence. In presocratic times there was a strong presupposition that nothing could come from nothing, therefore substances that were sought after were meant to be eternal, existing prior to the beginning of time. The most important thing to understand in interactivist model is that the properties are not emerging "from" – as there is no special place "of" their origin, but rather they emerge "in", in organizations of processes. This also connects metaphysically the two worlds that were split apart: the world constituted of things and facts about these things on one hand and the world of intentionality and norms on the other. In interactivism there are no things and facts, but processes with properties that are emergent in their organization according to intentions and norms that also emerge from them.

The third crucial idea is normativity. It could be explained on the example of simple organisms that are far-from-dynamic-equilibrium, that is: living beings. Far-from-dynamic-equilibrium process must be maintained far-from-dynamic-equilibrium, otherwise they are simply dead. Some processes contribute to their self-maintenance, it is a property emerging <u>in</u> the organization of the organism.

Metaphysics of process, emergence and normativity working together result in hierarchical organization of processes within an organism. Higher levels of development are built and are building upon lower levels, for example, "first-level properties are manifest in first-level interactions with the environment, but are strictly implicit in relation to the representational capacities of a first-level system. That is, (..) they cannot be interactively represented *by* the first-level system itself" (Bickhard 2024, 221). They would need a second-level knowing for that.

Bickhard's canonical example is that a bacterium has options, that is: it has emergent properties of being self-maintained. A bacterium can swim. If it swims up the sugar gradient, that contributes to its self-maintenance; it tumbles when it is directed down the sugar gradient. The swimming is a self-maintenance process for a bacterium; it can detect the direction and switch if necessary. Its normative condition is that self-maintenance is good, but it is not an ultimate good, but rather: good in relation to persistence of the bacterium, relative to sugar gradient. It is functional normativity. And, of course, it can be relative – what constitutes functional normativity for a parasite, is at the same time dysfunctional normativity for its host.

Another example of a more complex agent could be frog, which has more options regarding what to do at any given time, and therefore it requires more complex mechanism of indication of what to do *right now*. It would not be good

for a frog to flick its tongue in the direction where there are no flies, therefore it must have some indications as to which direction to flick for eating. Similarly, the very act of using a vending machine is of no use *per se* if there is no vending machine around. Agent requires indications of possible actions. Maybe if a frog flicked a tongue in a slightly different direction it would get more flies. Or maybe if there is a shadow indicating potential danger – let's say a hawk – a frog would be better off jumping to the water instead. The range of possibilities could be complicated; it could branch and iterate, and form a web. Human beings create extremely complicated webs, forming interconnected realms of potential ways of interacting with the world. This structure of organization of potentiality in current situation is called situation image – it is representational and has truth value. If some evil human being tosses a pebble in the direction of a frog and the frog would flick it – this indication would be false for the frog: the representation indicates that there is something to eat; but there clearly isn't.

An agent also needs a mechanism of selection from among these indicated options, that is: motivation. Motivation here is essentially not a drive, but a decision of what to do next, as the far-from-equilibrium systems cannot do nothing. There is no "trigger", no "prompt" needed, internal and external processes compete to take over "the control of the general course of thinking and action" (2024, 187).

Apperception is understood as the updating of the situation image with the consequences of ongoing interactions (2024, 154). Perception is a process of "differentiation and specialization of interaction in general (…) for the purpose of apperception (2024, 155). It is not computational, "not an input interface from the world to the mind", but rather a constant flow of interactions. The differentiation of the environment, to have proper situation image, is running parallelly to evaluation of processes and setting their truth-conditions. The processes of apperception and perception are intertwined, with no spatial nor temporal borders.

The model claims to describe the whole person, therefore it should be suitable for explaining or describing – in its terms – every human activity. In fact, the book mainly focuses on perception, and to begin with I, too, want to stay in perceiving activity. As the approach is highly pragmatic, I decided to choose a part of perception that seems to be supposedly less pragmatic, namely – imagination.

Imagination could be understood in many ways, and while not all philosophers include it in their schemas – Immanuel Kant definitely does. The understanding of how important the imagination is in Kantian philosophy differs between interpretations, but its place in the schema stays rather unchanged. I will predominately apply the Martin Heidegger's interpretation of Kant.

One may say that the metaphysical assumptions of Kant and Bickhard differ drastically, the former being the metaphysics of substance, and the latter – of process. Bickhard praises Kant for only one thing: for framing "issues between naturalism and normativity" (Bickhard 2024, 157), even though he approaches them differently. By no means am I first one to notice similarities or to endeavor in integrating Kant's cognitive architecture within Bickhard's interactivism –

Kenneth Westphal already published an article on that. According to him, both philosophers try to answer similar questions of how do we know about things outside of us (Westphal 2025, 2). Kant focused on the connection between an object and our representation of an object, while Bickhard deliberated on the physiological possibilities of representations.

Imagination in Kantian philosophy is a synthesis unifying manifold of intuition in accordance with the rules of understanding. According to Heidegger, not only does it constitute a mediator between sensory intuition and intellectual reflection, but it is also the very being-in-the-world of the human being (Heidegger 1990). He sees it as a center of Kant's Critique, because without the synthesizing role of imagination there would be neither coherent sense of experience, nor the application of categories would be possible.

I do believe the place of imagination in interactive model is crucial (if not quite apparent) – it would be responsible for differentiation, which happens between internal and external representations. Representations in interactivist model are processes running in constant flow; the activities in which we engage, we do not *have* them (Lundh 2025, 109). In other words, they are not static entities, but ongoing processes. Bickhard distinguishes between external and internal representations, highlighting that they are closely related to each other and also run in parallel. External representations are those aspects of the person-environment interaction that require apperceptive interpretation: they involve current situation image, that is the structured organization of potential interactions along with their truth conditions relative to the environment. Internal representations are higher-level processes in which the external interactions are being interpreted, evaluated and integrated within the person's broader organization. In short, external representation requires apperceptive interpretation, while internal one is the process where external phenomena are interpreted (Bickhard 2024, 156).

Differentiation is a part of preliminary interpretation that internal representation presents that makes possible the refinement of the external representation; to give an example – it informs that what we see is a chair. Going further, on the basis of that, the representation "knows" that it is an object that we could sit on in order to lower our energy spending, or – in a special situation, we could use it as a ladder for climbing, or as a weapon to be thrown – all the options at the same time are being evaluated in internal representation, plus it takes into consideration the entire situational image. While standing in the aula and giving a talk, maybe it would not be appropriate for me to throw a chair or even to stand on it. Maybe everyone is better off if I stay focused and do not use the chair at all, but still – I do detect it and recognize it as a chair, and I do possess this implicit knowledge of what can be done with it. And for that detection and differentiation Kantian imagination would be responsible. It could also initiate the learning processes, if the encountered object or situation does not fit the known schemas. Maybe if I encountered a chair with very unorthodox shape, I would not distinguish it from a sculpture, and these two objects would have different options of interactive possibilities.

This understanding of imagination complements (or is complemented by) the process described within interactivist framework as imaginative trajectories – anticipatory schemas of possible interactions extending beyond the actual into the horizon of potential engagements with the environment. Such imaginative "memories" would anticipate future or counterfactual episodes (Bickhard 2024, 217), therefore, similarly, this understanding of imagination would be responsible for expanding interactive options, though – at different cognitive level.

Adding to that, I propose placing higher level of imagination in interactivism – the one presented by William Blake. I claim that Blake, a poet and artist, can be positioned among philosophers due to his unique concept of imaginative powers. Blake was a contemporary of John Locke, and he condemned Locke's empiricism "for providing a reductive account of subjective experience" and claimed it "represses the imaginative component of perception" (Quinney 2009, 29). Empiricism in fact reduces the perceived object to a somewhat generalized image that can be seen and described by an average person. "Every Eye sees differently" (Blake 1984, 645), but a reduction to a simplest possible image reveals less about the object or situation than a conscious perception involving active imaginative powers.

Blake claims that "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Sences" (Blake 1984, 34). Northrop Frye explains, that by the "body" Blakes means a person as a perceived form or image, and the "soul", or – as he more commonly uses – the "mind", is for him an active perceiver (imaginer) (Frye 1974, 18-19); imagination (also: "fancy") therefore would be understood here as an act of perception.

"Mans perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception. He percieves more than sense (tho' ever so acute) can discover" (Blake 1984, 2). Blake points out that the way we perceive – how we involve our active intellectual power into the action of perception – is adding a whole new range of qualities to the perceived objects, creating an individual reality from them. A sculptor and a climber, looking at the same rock, will see the same object, but the reality of the rock is made of "the imaginative pattern" (Frye 1974, 20) of the sculptor's mind, or of the climber's mind. To get a reality of a rock by isolating common factors – reducing artistic qualities in sculptor's perception and technical qualities form the climber's one – is not worth doing, even if it would be possible. "Add more people, and this least common denominator of perception steadily decreases. Add an idiot, and it vanishes" (Frye 1974, 20).

While the standard of the reality for Locke is mediocrity, for Blake is genius. Mediocre perceivers "see all that they want to see in all that they can see", whereas the genius "sees all that he can see of all that he wants to see" (Frye 1974, 21). Lockean average perception would not require additional conscious effort, conformist minds perceive based on person's previous experiences and learned patterns. Blakean genius, on the other hand, does involve conscious imaginative powers to see more *of* a perceived object than in a manner already habituated.

Now, what would make a person endeavor to follow less certain interaction with the world, when there are more secure and predictable possibilities at hand?

The interactive model assumes living organisms are endogenously active, unable to be inert, therefore motivation is not understood here as a drive or initiation, but a selection, a guidance of what to do next. As the interactive system is constantly ongoing, it is not just reacting to the environment but also reacting to its own internal processes. The process of adaptation allows to treat "the organism's own uncertainty to be part of the *object* of interaction, not just a condition accompanying interaction" (Bickhard 2024, 164). Uncertain conditions are interruptions in the system, while the uncertain component is, so to speak, an X in our assessment of interaction.

Resolving uncertainty evokes searching for a known process within the situation image and/or seeking new interactive possibilities, starting learning processes. Curiosity drives the motivation to be involved in these seeking and learning actions, if it anticipates resolution. It could be "overridden by sufficiently powerful influences from danger, pain, hunger, and so on" (Bickhard 2024, 172), but otherwise the organism would lean on interaction and learning.

The manner in which motivation can develop is through seek situations of rich and complex forms of interaction, to generate similarly rich and complex resolutions and engagements. There could be perceptual, cognitive, physical or social interactions. Such perceptual and cognitive ones are called esthetic motivations, it could for instance involve interactions in music or mathematics. It is not a simple property of an object or situation, but rather a relation between object/situation and "what the organism can bring to them" (Bickhard 2024, 172). A child could be fascinated by picking and tossing grass, but the sense of novelty and the new options of the situation would run out soon. The same child, should it grow up and become a botanist, may find the grass fascinating again via new perspectives she or he gained.

I believe this is the imagination William Blake was writing about – to never stop seeking new perspectives. As in, not fitting the first more or less matching schema into every encountered situation, but constantly re-learning. The question is how curiosity and learning wins within an organism? We are extremely complex creatures organized in highly sophisticated ways, with the entire realms of processes that are implicit and never reach our consciousness. However, there is a way in which we could do some conscious amendments to the system – for instance by introducing changes into value system.

Values in interactivism are treated as meta-goals, the goals about other goals (Campbell, Christopher and Bickhard 2002). We talked earlier about emerging normativity and how the first inherent norm of any organism is self-maintenance. The more complex organisms possess a possibility to create even more complex systems of goals.

Interactions start at Level 1: being-in-the-world, where values are implicit in procedural patterns, e.g. toddler's goal to please its parent – presupposes social norms and self-worth with no awareness of these. Level 2 occurs when the children reflect on the values from Level 1 and they become explicit. They can create conscious strategies to manage interactions, e.g. "avoid making dad

unhappy". Level 3 introduces meta-values, that is: values about values, enabling formation of identity and judgments like "I should be more creative". Moral philosophizing occurs at Level 4, where the whole system is being evaluated.

What I do believe is this imagination could appear at Level 3, where the explicit values are being formulated, and at higher levels from hereon. Toddlers are always curious, as everything is new to them, but the imagination I am looking for is this more complex one, that helps making a choice between a known possibility and seeking new possibilities. William Blake was trying to incline us to re-wire our normative system to prompt constant development and to bring our interactions with the world to the highest possible levels and this he treated as a value in itself.

Conjoining these two understandings of imagination – Kantian and Blakean one – results in coining the term that could be successfully incorporated within the interactivist model. While Kant's imagination helps to set it up at the basic perceptive level, Blake's approach enables to explain the mechanism in more complex organisms on the higher cognitive level. The processes run in parallel and complement each other, as the higher levels are always built upon the lower ones – that is, the higher levels emerge from the levels below, as explained earlier. I believe that interactivist framework can prove to be very useful for explaining a person's motivations and their place in the world.

I couldn't stress that enough that all those metaphysical/epistemological deliberations should lead to a prescription for flourishing life, creating a key to make our interactions with the world, with the environment around us – beautiful; the key that would be beneficial both to us and that environment.

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