

Algebra identified with geometry

Appendix II. On the Imaginary in Geometry

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APPENDIX II.

On the Imaginary in Geometry.

This is a revision of a note added to the private reprint of the Abstract of my second Memoir on Plane Stigmatics, and contains extracts from the works of eminent mathematicians, showing the condition of the problem of the geometrical signification of imaginaries prior to the presentation of that Memoir to the Royal Society:—

PLÜCKER, Dr. Julius, Professor at Bonn, Foreign Member of the Royal Society. *Analytisch-geometrische Entwicklungen*, 2 vols. 4to, Essen, 1828—1831 (Analytico-geometrical Developments), vol. i. p. 61: “. . . so bedeutet die Gleichung durchaus nichts, oder wenn wir lieber wollen, einen imaginären Kreis,” . . . “wenn vorhin von imaginären Kreisen die Rede war, so ist diess nur eine Sprache, die den analytischen Formen angepasst ist.” (. . . in this case the equation means nothing at all, or if we prefer it, an imaginary circle, . . . when we spoke of imaginary circles, it was only a language accommodated to the analytical forms.) Vol. ii. p. 64: “Setzen wir $\tan \phi = \sqrt{-1}$, so kommt $\tan(\phi + \psi) = \sqrt{-1}$,” . . . “Um das Paradoxe dieser Behauptung von der analytischen Seite fortzuräumen (von geometrischer Bedeutung kann gar keine Rede sein) . . .” (If we put $\tan \phi = \sqrt{-1}$, we have $\tan(\phi + \psi) = \sqrt{-1}$ To clear up the paradoxical character of this assertion from the analytical side, there can be no question at all of a geometrical meaning. . . .) [The geometrical meaning is directly derived from art. 34. v., in conjunction with art. 39. iv. above.]

J. V. PONCELET. *Traité des Propriétés Projectives des Figures*, 4to, Paris, 1822, p. 28: “En général on pourrait désigner par l’adjectif *imaginaire* tout objet qui d’absolu et réel qu’il était dans une certaine figure, serait devenu entièrement impossible ou inconstructible dans la figure corrélative. . . . Car, de même qu’on a déjà en Géométrie des noms pour exprimer les divers modes d’existence qu’on veut comparer . . . il faut aussi en avoir pour exprimer ceux de la non-existence.”

IDEM. *Applications d’Analyse et de Géométrie*, 2 vols. 8vo, Paris, 1862—1864, vol. ii. p. 321, Sur le principe de continuité (originally written in 1819): “La nécessité de son admission [de la règle des signes] dérive ainsi de la volonté d’établir la continuité entre les diverses régions de

la courbe. . . . J’en dirai tout autant de l’admission des *imaginaires*; c’est parce que dans ces figures, la chose représentée perd son existence précisément dans les mêmes limites où l’expression algébrique correspondante devient imaginaire, qu’il est possible et permis d’adopter, dans tous les cas, cette expression pour la définition rigoureuse et représentation exacte de cette chose; et ainsi s’établit une continuité indéfinie, tantôt absolue et tantôt *fictive* entre tous les états d’un même système géométrique.” [The *clinant* expression remaining perfectly continuous, there is no longer any need for such a metaphysical basis for “imaginaries.”]

M. CHASLES. *Traité de Géométrie Supérieure*, 8vo, Paris, 1852. Preface, p. xi.: “*Les imaginaires, en Géométrie pure, présentent de graves difficultés*: souvent l’on ne sait comment les définir ni les introduire dans le raisonnement; et, d’autre part, les éléments d’une démonstration peuvent disparaître quand quelques parties d’une figure deviennent imaginaires. Ces difficultés n’existent pas en analyse, où les imaginaires se manifestent et se caractérisent par les racines d’une équation du second degré, dont les coefficients seuls, et non les racines elles-mêmes, entrent dans les relations que l’on considère.” [When the coefficients are themselves imaginary, this is of no assistance. If we start from geometrical lines considered in the Cartesian manner, we obtain equations with scalar coefficients; the imaginaries occur in *pairs* only, and their product is scalar. But if we start with stigmatics, we obtain equations with *clinant* coefficients, which may be of the form $Sa + jWa$, and their imaginaries do not necessarily occur in pairs, and their product is not generally scalar.] “Nos théories donnent lieu aussi à certaines équations du second degré, qui permettent d’introduire, naturellement et dans un sens parfaitement déterminé, les imaginaires dans les spéculations géométriques, parce que ces objets imaginaires, points, lignes ou quantités, n’entrent pas eux-mêmes explicitement dans le raisonnement,” [the next citation will show that this statement admits of exception, even in Chasles’s own method; in point of fact, the “imaginaries” are a substantial and explicit part of the complete theory.] “mais s’y trouvent représentés par des *éléments tou-*

jours réels, qui peuvent servir à les déterminer." [This is at most only correct for the very limited class of imaginaries which M. Chasles considers.] Page 64: "La plupart des relations entre deux couples de points en rapport harmonique, que nous avons démontrées dans l'hypothèse de quatre points réels, ne sont plus applicables dans le cas où deux de ces points sont imaginaires, comme il peut arriver; c'est-à-dire que ces relations peuvent ne plus avoir de sens explicite; les segments qui y entrent sont en quelque sort désagrégés, et ne représentent que des quantités imaginaires, lesquelles ne sont rien par elles-mêmes, considérées isolément. . . . Mais si l'on admet que l'on puisse faire sur les quantités imaginaires les mêmes opérations d'addition, multiplication, etc., que sur les quantités réelles," [a renunciation of pure geometry,] "principe pratiqué en algèbre, alors on déduira de chacune de ces équations une relation où les deux points . . . n'entreront que par leurs deux éléments. . . . Alors les segments qui entrent dans ces relations . . . doivent être considérés comme des symboles," [a second renunciation of pure geometry,] "au moyen desquels on fait allusion au cas où les points seraient réels, et qui, combinés entre eux . . . conduisent à des relations où n'entrent que les éléments des deux points. De sorte que la relation symbolique primitive n'est, au fond, qu'une expression de cette relation entre des éléments toujours réels. Il sera donc permis d'employer ces relations symboliques, ou, en d'autres termes, de raisonner sur des points imaginaires, comme on le ferait dans le cas analogue où ces points seraient réels. On peut déterminer la position de deux droites issues d'un point donné, par celles des deux points où ces droites rencontrent une droite fixe. Et quand ces deux points seront imaginaires, on dira que les deux droites sont elles-mêmes imaginaires." Page 546: "Nous ferons en Géométrie pure ce que l'on fait en Géométrie analytique: nous admettrons que, soit dans des formules, soit dans des constructions" [concerning circles] "qui n'impliquent que le carré du rayon d'un cercle, ce carré devienne négatif; et nous dirons que le cercle est imaginaire. Il n'y a point, bien entendu, de cercle imaginaire; et ce mot n'est qu'une fiction qui sert à rattacher les résultats obtenus à un autre cas de la question générale, dans lequel la présence d'un cercle procure une image visible et une notion parfaitement claire des propriétés de la figure." Chasles's imaginary circle is the vec-cyclal, described *suprà*, art. 49. v. (2).

G. SALMON, D.D., F.R.S. A Treatise on Conic Sections, 4th edit., 8vo, London, 1863, p. 79: "When the distance of the line from the centre [of the circle] is greater than the radius, the line, *geometrically considered*, does not meet the circle; yet we have seen that analysis furnishes definite *imaginary* values for the co-ordinates of intersection. Instead, then, of saying that the line meets the circle in *no points*, we shall say that it meets it in two *imaginary points*, just as we do not say that the corresponding quadratic has no roots, but that it has two imaginary roots. *By an imaginary point we mean nothing more than a point, one or both of whose co-ordinates are imaginary.*" [The meaning of an *imaginary co-ordinate* is not explained.] "*It is a purely analytical conception, which we do not attempt to represent geometrically*—just as when we find imaginary values for the roots of an equation, we do not try to attach an arithmetical meaning to our result." [The imaginary points (or stigmata of stigmals, for which the abscissa is not on *OI*, and ordinate not parallel to *OJ*, that is, for which the co-ordinates are imaginary) in this case are given geometrically in art. 49. v. That the piece of "imagination" which supplied these "airy nothings" with a "name," although it could not give them a "local habitation," involved a pure impossibility, is shewn in art. 34. x.

R. TOWNSEND, M.A., F.R.S. Chapters on the Modern Geometry of the Point, Line, and Circle, 2 vols. 8vo, Dublin, 1863-65, vol. i., p. 16: "In the language of modern geometry every two points, lines, or other similar elements of, or connected with, any compound figure, which with change of relative position among the constituents of the figure pass or are liable to pass, as above described, from *separation*, through *coincidence*, to *simultaneous disappearance*, or conversely, are termed *contingent*, as distinguished from *permanent* elements of the figure, and are said to be *real* or *imaginary*, according as they *happen to be* apparent or *non-apparent* to sense or conception. *Geometers of course have not, nor do they profess to have, any conception of the nature of contingent elements in their imaginary state, but they find it preferable, on the grounds both of convenience and accuracy, to regard and speak of them as imaginary rather than as non-existent* in that state: in the transition from the real to the imaginary state, and conversely, contingent elements pass invariably through coincidence, through which, as above described, they always change state together."

Sir WILLIAM ROWAN HAMILTON. Elements of Quaternions, 8vo, London, 1866 (written 1865), p. 90, note: "It is to be observed that no interpretation is here proposed for imaginary intersections of this kind, such as those of a sphere with a right line, which is wholly external thereto." [These are perfectly similar to the cases in art. 34. x.] "The language of modern geometry requires that such imaginary intersections should be spoken of, and even that they should be enumerated—exactly as the language of algebra requires that we should count what are called the imaginary roots of an equation. But it would be an error to confound geometrical imaginaries, of this sort, with those square roots of negatives for which it will soon be seen that the calculus of quaternions supplies, from the outset, a definite and real interpretation." Page 218: ". . . . where $\sqrt{-1}$ is the old and ordinary imaginary symbol of algebra, and is not invested here with any sort of geometrical interpretation. We merely express thus the fact of calculation, that . . . the formula . . . when treated by the rules of quaternions, conducts to the quadratic equation . . . which has no real root,—the reason being that the right line . . . is, in the present case, wholly external to the sphere, and therefore does not really intersect it at all, although, for the sake of generalization of language, we may agree to say, as usual, that the line intersects the sphere in two imaginary points." Page 277: "The equation . . . in complanar quaternions" [=clinants] "of the n th degree, with real" [clinant] "coefficients, while it admits of only n real quaternion" [clinant] "roots, is symbolically satisfied also by $n(n-1)$ imaginary quaternion roots." Page 278: "Imaginary roots of this sort are sometimes useful, or rather necessary, in calculations respecting ideal intersections, and ideal contacts, in geometry." [These imaginaries of Sir W. R. H., belonging to solid geometry, are not considered in these Tracts; but by supposing the unknown in the clinant equation of n dimensions to be y , then putting $y=x+z$, and developing, we obtain an equation which, since x is arbitrary, may be split into two in various ways, each pair of equations generally furnishing n^2 values of x, z , and hence determining n^2 stinnals of the various pairs of stigmatics; but in every case these n^2 stinnals only furnish n values of $x+z$, that is, of y , and these coincide with the direct solutions of the equation. If we take the two equations to be such as would occur if x were scalar and

z vector, then the two stigmatics will be Cartesian, and have n Cartesian points of intersection, which will furnish the n values of y ; and will also have $n(n-1)$ non-scalar points of intersection, whence are derived Sir W. R. H.'s imaginaries; but if we combine their abscissæ and ordinates, they will only yield the same n values of y as were given by the scalar points. In this, as in all other cases, the imaginary points arise from passing unconsciously from a merely geometrical curve, to a stigmatic in which each point of that curve is referred to a point in another curve according to a definite law. The unconsciousness arises from the second curve being always the wholly auxiliary axis OI , and the mode of reference being the drawing of ordinates perpendicular to it, so that the second curve is overlooked.

If to these we add the investigations in Peacock's *Algebra*, first (1830) and second (1842-45) editions, and in De Morgan's *Trigonometry and Double Algebra* (1849), introducing a conception equivalent to a clinant, and the papers of Möbius (Berichte über die Verhandlungen der k. Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, 16 Oct. 1852, 5 Feb. 1853, 14 Nov. 1853, and 21 Feb. 1857), in which he has succeeded in applying the last-named geometrical explanation of imaginary expressions to the involution and homography of points on a plane, but has not approached the subject of imaginary intersections, lines, angles, &c., we shall obtain a fair view of the state of the problem prior to the conception of Stigmatics, which was first introduced by name in the writer's paper on "Clinant Geometry," 'Proceedings of the Royal Society,' 26 Feb. 1863, vol. xii. p. 442.

The impossibility of any satisfactory representation of imaginaries in Cartesian Geometry was looked upon by Auguste Comte as so indisputably settled, that he regarded it as a philosophic principle, and thus referred to it in his latest volume, which gives a connected view of mathematics. It is necessary to remember that he was a professional mathematician, who thus describes himself in a philosophical work on geometry, from which I have derived much assistance:—"Traité Élémentaire de Géométrie à deux et à trois dimensions, contenant toutes les théories générales de géométrie accessibles à l'analyse ordinaire. Par M. Auguste Comte, ancien élève de l'École polytechnique, répétiteur d'analyse et de mécanique rationnelle à cette École, et examinateur des candidats qui s'y destinent, auteur du *Système de Philosophie Positive*. Paris, Mars, 1843."

AUGUSTE COMTE, *Synthèse Subjective ou Système Universel des Conceptions propres à l'état Normal de l'Humanité*, tome premier, contenant le *Système de Logique Positive, ou Traité de Philosophie Mathématique*. Paris, Novembre 1856, pp. 345-7. Speaking of Cartesian geometry, he says:—" *Il faut finalement regarder l'omission géométrique des solutions imaginaires comme plus utile que nuisible à la constitution de la philosophie mathématique*. A cet égard, on doit d'abord reconnaître les conséquences générales de cette lacune spontanée, d'après laquelle la peinture des équations reste plus ou moins incomplète en un cas quelconque, et peut souvent devenir insuffisante," [it always is so if only scalar values of x and y are admitted]. "Nous devons ainsi concevoir des équations, à deux ou trois variables, où la représentation, sans produire aucune ligne ou surface, se trouvera bornée à quelques points isolés, qui ne pourront jamais caractériser leur source algébrique. Convenablement formées, les équations peuvent même devenir entièrement dépourvues d'interprétation concrète, si toutes les solutions y soit imaginaires, du moins envers l'une des variables." [In stigmatic geometry such cases can only occur by limiting the symbols, as in using Sx or Vx only for x .] "Une telle lacune peut, réciproquement, altérer l'institution algébrique des figures, en suscitant des modifications abstraites qui n'auront pas d'équivalent géométrique. Mieux appréciée, cette influence consiste à surcharger ou priver les équations de facteurs incapable de peinture, en tant que dépourvus de solutions réelles. A ces accidents il faut toutefois attribuer une action plus salutaire que nuisible, parce qu'ils peuvent quelquefois expliquer la diversité des équations rectilignes d'une même figure diversement formulée. Nous devons généralement regarder l'omission géométrique de solutions imaginaires comme plus propre à perfectionner qu'à troubler la subordination de l'abstrait au concret. Il importe davantage de pouvoir ainsi noter algébriquement la discontinuité partielle des lignes et des surfaces que de représenter géométriquement des équations ou solutions essentiellement inutiles." [Now first, till they are known, how can the solutions be declared "essentially useless"? And, secondly, whatever advantage is gained by not representing them remains in stigmatic geometry by simply limiting the value of the symbols, just as in Cartesian geometry we might still further mutilate the representation of equations by excluding all

negative values of the symbols, which would exclude all parts not contained within the angular wedge IOJ . Indeed, the introduction of the *negative* case was as great an innovation in Cartesian, as the further introduction of the imaginary case is in Stigmatic Geometry.] "L'appréciation philosophique des meilleurs modes propres à combler cette lacune peut directement confirmer un tel jugement, en faisant spécialement sentir que la plénitude d'interprétation tendrait à porter la confusion dans les tableaux correspondants. Instituée aussi simplement que possible, la représentation géométrique des solutions imaginaires consisterait à les construire en écartant le facteur constant qui les rend ordinairement telles, sauf à marquer distinctement les points ainsi produits. Nous pourrions alors combiner, envers les mêmes dimensions, l'hyperbole et l'ellipse, de manière à rendre chacune de ces lignes propre à représenter les solutions imaginaires de l'autre équation." [This refers to Poncelet's "supplementary" figures, already mentioned.] "Étendue à la cissoïde, et successivement à tous les cas suffisamment favorables, cette peinture instituerait des accouplements plus contraires que conformes à l'ensemble des comparaisons géométriques. Assimilée algébriquement à l'ellipse, l'hyperbole s'en éloigne géométriquement par ses propriétés principales, qui doivent la faire finalement classer parmi les courbes susceptibles d'équation binôme envers deux asymptotes." [In the stigmatic case, the two figures are indistinguishable, and are treated as one under the name of Central.] "Même dans les cas les plus favorables, la peinture des solutions imaginaires" [after Poncelet's fashion, the only one with which Comte was acquainted] "pourrait donc troubler la géométrie générale, en y suscitant des rapprochements vicieux. On doit d'ailleurs reconnaître que cette représentation resterait ainsi bornée à certains modes de l'équation propre à chaque figure, et deviendrait confuse envers ses types les plus étendus. Si, par exemple, on considère la conjugaison ci-dessus indiquée entre l'ellipse et l'hyperbole, on reconnaît qu'elle ne convient qu'à leurs plus simples équations, de manière à ne pouvoir nettement s'adapter à leur situation quelconque." [This objection does not apply to my theory.] "A plus forte raison, un tel mode serait habituellement inapplicable au delà du second degré, sauf envers des cas de plus en plus exceptionnels." [This is the reverse of correct as respects stigmatics.] "Relativement aux procédés plus

généraux qui furent directement destinés à peindre les solutions imaginaires, ils sont trop indirect et trop compliqués pour devenir jamais admissibles." [But stigmatic geometry is more direct and less complicated.] "Tel est le jugement final qui convient à des spéculations dépourvues de direction philosophique, où l'on oublie le but, essentiellement géométrique de l'institution cartésienne. Elles manifestent une tendance absolue à développer isolément la peinture des

équations quelconque au lieu de la subordonner à sa destination principale, comme élément nécessaire de la constitution propre à la géométrie générale." [But the chief ground on which I base the claims of stigmatic geometry to attention is that it is a simple geometrical idea carried out by a calculus based on the simplest geometrical relations—those of similar triangles. Hence Comte's "final judgment" is altogether premature and inapplicable.]

APPENDIX III.

On the History of Stigmatic Geometry.

THE indulgence of the reader is requested for the following personal record of the various steps by which I have arrived at the general conceptions sketched above.

About fifty years ago my father taught me Euclid after Playfair, and Algebra from the "Elements of Algebra, by Leonard Euler, translated from the French; with the notes of M. Bernouilli, &c., and the additions of M. de la Grange, 3rd ed., by the Rev. John Hewlett, B.D., F.A.S., &c., to which is prefixed a Memoir of the Life and Character of Euler, by the late Francis Horner, Esq., M.P.," London, 1822, pp. xxx. 593. Although I fear I did not profit properly by such a book, it was something to have begun Algebra under the guidance of a mathematician like Euler. At present, his exposition of infinity, surds, negatives, imaginaries; geometrical ratio, &c., appears very defective. "Since all numbers which it is positive to conceive, are either greater or less than 0, or are 0 itself, it is evident that we cannot rank the square root of a negative number among possible numbers, and we must therefore say it is an impossible quantity. In this manner we are led to the idea of numbers which from their very nature are impossible; and therefore they are usually called *imaginary quantities*, because they exist merely in the imagination. . . . Of such numbers we may truly assert that they are neither nothing, nor greater than nothing, nor less than nothing, which necessarily constitutes them imaginary or impossible."—*Ibid.* p. 43. (From this confusion to the clinant conception the reach was long.) About forty years ago I studied

as a freshman Dean Peacock's *Algebra* 1830 (ed.), which first shewed me that the "imaginary" and "impossible" of other writers might become geometrically visible and possible. But I owe most at this period to discussions with my late friend Duncan Farquharson Gregory (fifth wrangler in 1837) from whom I derived the germ of the conception of *operation*, and not *quantity*, as the real meaning of algebraical expressions. About this time also I became acquainted with the works of Martin Ohm of Berlin, (*Versuch eines vollkommen consequenten Systems der Mathematik*, "An Attempt at a perfectly consistent System of Mathematics," in nine volumes, vol 1 and 2, second edition 1833, third edition 1853; vol. 9, 1852; *Der Geist der mathematischen Analysis, und ihr Verhältniss zur Schule*, "The Spirit of Mathematical Analysis, and its relation to a logical system," pp. 159, Berlin, 1842, translated and published by me in 1843; *Der Geist der Differential- und Integral-Rechnung, nebst einer neuen und gründlicheren Theorie der bestimmten Integrale*," "The Spirit of the Differential and Integral Calculus, with a new and more Fundamental Theory of Definite Integrals," Erlangen, 1846, which, together with many others of his nearly thirty volumes, I also translated, though I did not publish them),—and these occupied my thoughts for many years after I had taken my degree. Of course I mention no books of regular routine, to which belong Lagrange, and Lacroix, and Newton, &c., &c. But as yet I had hit upon no scheme for solving those difficulties of incommensur-