For the old psychology, which viewed all forms of man's mental activity as associative combinations of accumulated impressions, the problem of imagination was an irresolvable puzzle. This psychology was forced to reduce imagination to other functions. The essential feature that distinguishes imagination from other forms of mental activity is that it does not repeat combinations of accumulated impressions but builds a new series of impressions from them. The very foundation of the activity that we refer to as imagination is the introduction of something new into the flow of our impressions, the transformation of these impressions such that something new, an image that did not previously exist, emerges. The problem of imagination was therefore inherently irresolvable for associative psychology since it represented all activity as a combination of elements and images that are already present in consciousness.

Thus, the reduction of imagination to other mental functions provided the foundation for the old psychological theory of imagination. This theory was expressed clearly in Ribot's work, where he distinguished between two forms of imagination, specifically, reproductive imagination and creative or reconstructive imagination.

Reproductive imagination is the same as memory. Psychologists used the phrase "reproductive imagination" to refer to a mental activity where we reproduce a series of images in consciousness that we have experienced, though there is no immediate reason for the restoration of these images. In this activity of memory, images that have previously been experienced arise in consciousness unconnected with any actual proximal cause for their reproduction. It is this form of memory that the old psychologists called reproductive imagination.

Psychologists distinguished this form of imagination from true memory in the following way: If, while viewing some landscape, I recall a similar one that I have seen elsewhere, this is the activity of memory. Here, the existing image or landscape elicits the image that had been experienced earlier. This is the normal movement of associations that provides the foundation for the function of memory. In contrast, I may be immersed in meditation or dream, seeing no landscape, and nonetheless reproduce in memory a landscape that I have seen at some previous time. This activity differs from that of memory in that its immediate impetus is not an eliciting impression. Thus, despite other limitations in their perspective, these psychologists did recognize that the
activity of imagination, even where it operates on existing images, has a different nature than the activity of memory.

However, there is no essential difference between remembering a landscape that I have seen before when looking a different landscape or when a word flashes through my head (e.g., the name of the locale). Within this framework, the difference between memory and imagination lies not in the processes themselves but in their eliciting causes. The mental activity itself is very similar in the two situations. Once we have assumed the perspective of an atomistic psychology, a psychology that constructs complex forms of activity from elements, any explanation of imagination must begin with the proposition that every image is elicited by the images associated with it. With this approach, the problem of reproductive imagination is inevitably fused with the problem of memory. Reproductive imagination becomes one of many functions of memory.

The issues become more complex when we consider the activity that psychologists refer to as creative imagination. Earlier, I mentioned the most prominent distinction between creative and reproductive imagination. Fundamental to creative imagination is the production of new images, images that have never existed in consciousness or in past experience.

Psychologists working within the framework of associative psychology have explained the emergence of new images in terms of an accidental combination of elements. New combinations of elements appear in creative imagination. The elements themselves, however, are not new. This was the basic law of imagination for the old psychology, a law stated by both Wundt and Ribot. In their view, imagination is capable of creating infinite combinations of previous elements. It cannot, however, create new elements.

The work completed by these psychologists was very significant. They demonstrated the sensual nature of imagination. As has been stated before, these psychologists demonstrated that our dreams do not soar according to whim or caprice. Our dreams are linked to the experience of the individual that is dreaming. The most fantastic representations can ultimately be reduced to combinations of elements that have been encountered in an individual's previous experience. Even in dreaming, we see nothing that we have not experienced in some form when awake. In terms of the elements that compose them, the most fantastic representations are not fantasy. These psychologists clearly demonstrated the real foundation of imagination, the connection between imagination and the impressions accumulated in previous experience.

On the other hand, they failed to resolve the other half of the problem, to show how imagination represents these accumulated impressions in an entirely new form, in new combinations. Rather than resolving this problem they avoided it. Their response to this question was simple. They argued that these new combinations arise purely by accident. The new combination in imagination arises from new constellations, from new relationships between the separate elements. In his theory of dreaming, Wundt attempted to show that every element of the dream is an impression experienced by consciousness in the waking state. The fantastic combination of elements in the dream reflects a unique constellation or combination of elements that emerge because our "sleep" (dream) consciousness operates under very special conditions. This form of consciousness is deaf and blind to impressions from the outside world. The sleeping individual does not see or hear. He does not perceive external stimuli through the sense organs. These stimuli reach consciousness only in a distorted form. What the "sleep" consciousness does perceive are internal organic stimuli. Finally, the "revival" of various images through association occurs in an accidental manner. In