UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN

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Szanto, Thomas

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Collective Imagination: A Normative Account

Thomas Szanto

1. From social imaginary to collective imagination and back

Imagination is a startling mental capacity, and Sartre was certainly not the first who has viewed it as a "magical act" (Sartre 1940, 125). This is not only true of the ordinary, individual sort of imagining but especially so of social and collective forms of 'imagining together'. Indeed, it seems mysterious how collectives could have proper imaginary representations, their own mental imaginary, or even their own faculty of imagination. Or worse, collective imagining may be something that is metaphysically outright impossible. And yet, isn't imagining together a rather ordinary phenomenon? As Walton rightly observes, imagining is not always a "solitary affair": we "do not always engage in imaginings alone"; rather, "fantasizing is sometimes a social event. There are collaborative daydreams as well as private reveries" (Walton 1990, 18). Whether or not it is true that people "together may be able to think of more exciting things to imagine than they could come up with separately, or more interesting or satisfying ones" (Walton 1990, 18), collective imagination (CI), rightly construed, is a real phenomenon, or so I shall argue.

In the face of a veritable industry of philosophical, psychological and social-scientific investigations concerning imagination, on the one hand, and an equally large literature on collaborative and collective memory (Barnier et al. 2008; Olick et al. 2011), collective intentionality, agency, mentality (see below) and emotions (von Scheve and Salmela 2014), on the other, it is, however, rather surprising that hardly anybody has yet systematically addressed the question of whether individuals could collectively, or as a group, perform acts of

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imagination.[1] I think one reason for this striking desideratum is that the focus in the social sciences has typically been the *symbolic* or *aesthetic content* or the *public display* of collective imagination rather than the intentional structure of the *act* or *performance* of episodes of collective imaginings. Furthermore, psychologists and philosophers have been reluctant to account for CI because of the presupposition that it would entail some super-individual mental imaginary, or groups with their own sensory dimension or phenomenal consciousness. As I shall show in the following, however, there is an alternative, normative, construal that is not committed to such assumptions, which are indeed implausible, and yet can accommodate the typical sensory phenomenology involved in imagination.

To be sure, various social facets of imagination have been explored extensively in a number of disciplines. Some historical forerunners include sociological, psychological, and psychoanalytic discussions of collective imaginative representations as conceived, however differently, by Levy-Bruhl, Durkheim, Freud, Jung, Vygotsky, or Piaget (cf. Moscovici 1998; Friedland 2005). More recently, in the social cognition debate, there has been much work on imaginative simulation of others' mental states, often investigated in tandem with pretense (Leslie 1994; Currie 1995; Nichols and Stich 2003; Currie and Ravenscroft 2002; Nichols 2006; Goldman 2006; Ingerslev 2014). Meanwhile, a roster of sociologists and social philosophers has dwelled upon the concept of the social imaginary, a rather vague denominator for a set of beliefs, rules, or pre-reflective practices pertaining to sociality, or techniques of living together (Taylor 2004; Adams et al. 2012). Perhaps we find the most influential treatments of social imaginary in Castoriadis' (1975) neo-Marxist conception in his *Imaginary Institution of Society*, Said's (1978) postcolonial criticism of "imaginary geographies" and Anderson's (1983) famous study on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*. Furthermore, social imaginaries have been specified by sociologists under such headings as "interpersonal" and "corporate" emotional imagination (Illouz 2007), or in terms of aesthetic and symbolic representation (Bourdieu 1979), and by social philosophers and phenomenologists (Ricoeur 1986; Adams 2012; Steinbock 2014;). There is also a growing research area in the political sciences on various aspects of the so-called "politics of imagination" (Bottici and Challand 2011) or "imaginal politics" (Bottici 2014), and political philosophers have recently started to elaborate on the structure of "institutional imagination" (Gledhill 2014).

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[1] The only exceptions to my knowledge include the accounts I discuss below, namely Walton's (1990) cursory exposition and the similarly brief and virtually unknown early phenomenological accounts of Stein (1922) and Walther (1923), as well as some recent papers by the anthropologist Keith Murphy (2004, 2005), who focuses, however, rather narrowly on the creative collaborative activity of architectural imagination.

Yet, none of these accounts systematically addresses the issue of how we can collectively instantiate acts of imagination, or sufficiently clarify the very intentional structure of such acts, however intriguing they are on their own terms. Moreover, I contend that we will not make much progress in specifying the concept of social imaginary unless we have an account of how collective imagination not only relates to, but also differs from, individual imagination. Thus, Bottici rightly observes that

> if one starts with 'imagination', conceived as an individual faculty, then the problem is how to account for the at times overwhelming influence of the social context. If we begin with the concept of the 'social imaginary', then the problem is how to reconcile it with the free imagination of individuals. The problem seems unsolvable, and […] there is no easy way out. (Bottici 2014, 5)

In the following, I aim to offer some steps towards solving this problem. I will do so by outlining what the most plausible and phenomenologically adequate theory of imagination requires (sec. 2) and eventually showing how, though CI differs markedly from individual imaginings, it can be understood in a way whereby it still accommodates all requirements for what counts as imagination proper (sec. 3). I conclude by pointing to some desiderata and future research for thinking about the social imaginary, namely investigating what exactly happens to our imaginings when we, collectively, imagine not just any objects but precisely communities or collectives (sec. 4).

2. What is imagination? A primer

Philosophical theories of imagination are as old as philosophical imagination itself. From Aristotle onwards, almost all classical authors have tried to account for humans' peculiar capacity to form quasi-perceptual or sensory but also cognitively poised and often propositionally structured mental states, which either represent something that does not figure as the proper sensory content of one's own perceptual states or beliefs or present something that one takes not to be real (cf. Bottici 2014: 15-31; Kind 2016). In the last decades, in the philosophy of mind and cognition, imagination has been increasingly dealt with in relation to what is sometimes called 'mental imaginary' or the role that (sensory) mental images play in the content in acts of imagining (Gendler 2011; Thomas 2014; Kind 2015; Gregory 2016). I will not enter this discussion here but only outline the backbone assumptions of a theory of imagination that most contemporary authors can agree upon and that seem to be particularly relevant to making the case for CI. I will then sketch what I take to be the gist of the phenomenological account of the intentional structure of imagination, a feature that will also prove decisive in accommodating the collective cases.

A natural way to bring into relief what is distinctive of imagination is to contrast it with other mental states that have sensory and intentional content. And indeed virtually all authors agree upon what imagination is not: imagination is identical with neither conative states that have propositional content, such as desires or wishes, nor with propositional attitudes, such as hopes, beliefs, or mere suppositions. In contrast to desires and wishes, imagination may, but certainly does not necessarily, involve the wish that the imagined object, property, event or state of affair be or become real or obtain. Furthermore, desires are typically action-eliciting states and, in tandem with certain beliefs about available means and outcomes, they constitute reasons for action. Thus, barring certain forms of practical irrationality, they also guide our intentional actions. If I desire to go to the cinema, this will typically, together with the relevant beliefs about a showing tonight, money, etc., *make* me go to the cinema. Nothing of the like holds for imagining how it would be if I went to the cinema. To be sure, this is not to say that imaginings might not shape our desires and eventually elicit actions, but there seems to be no essential connection between them. Similarly, this is also not to deny the possibility of imagined desires or so-called 'desire-like imaginings' (Currie 1990; Velleman 2000; Doggett and Egan 2007; see also Husserl 1980, 448-455; 539-540), for example when I wish that my imagined hero doesn't die. Such states may have similar action-eliciting and guiding functions – just within an imaginative or fictional framework – as those ordinary imaginings that may add further (phenomenological) force to desires by filling out sensory details that merely proposition-like desires or wishes lack.[2]

Secondly, imagination must be contrasted with beliefs. There are two related features in particular that mark the difference: first, imagination's spontaneity, voluntariness or intentionality and, secondly, its doxastic neutrality. According to the standard picture, a distinctive feature of beliefs is that one cannot voluntarily or spontaneously form beliefs or decide to believe at will. This has to do with the epistemological feature that relates beliefs to truth and evidence. Beliefs only occur if the believer has some evidence that warrants her belief. Another common way to put this is to say that beliefs aim at truth (Williams 1973; Cohen 1989; cf. Velleman 2000). If one believes that p, one typically takes p to be true. This is quite unlike imagination. As we will see in more detail, imaginings are characterized by specific doxastic modifications. If one imagines p, one either takes p as fictional, possible, non-existent, absent, or make-believe, or pretends that p, while knowing that p actually might not obtain. Moreover, imaginings are characterized by a peculiar spontaneity – they often arise 'out of the blue' (cf. Casey 2000, 63-72). Again, this is not to say that there are no belief-like imaginings just as there are desire-like ones.

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[2] Closely related cases are discussed by Gendler (2006a) in terms of "imaginative contagion", the phenomenon whereby "merely imagining or pretending that P has effects that we would expect only perceiving or believing that P to have" (Gendler 2006a, 184), for example, "when imagining a vacation may make us more eager to take one."

Yet, whereas one takes beliefs in belief-like imagination to be true only in the imagined, possible, or fictional world of imagination, barring unusual cases or on pain of irrationality, one takes ordinary beliefs to be true not only in some possible but in the actual world (cf. Gendler 2011).

This brings us to the third contrast-state: imagining p must be distinguished from merely supposing that p or entertaining some other propositional attitude towards the mere possibility or conceivability of p, or counterfactual reasoning. This has to do not so much with the epistemology but rather with the sensory or representational phenomenology of episodes of imagination. Imaginings have, along with their more or less rich imagistic and cognitive content (cf. Lagland-Hassan 2015), a specific sort of sensory or intuitive content, which brings them closer to perception than to any other mental act. Indeed, however difficult it is to bring out the difference in the sensory phenomenology of imagination (cf. Casey 2000), there is a clear sense in which to imagine something has an intuitively richer and more 'striking' content. Imagining p concerns or impacts and often emotionally affects us more forcefully than merely supposing p or pondering its conceivability or normative implications. As Moran nicely puts it:

> imagining […] involves something more like genuine rehearsal, 'trying on' the point of view, trying to determine what it is like to inhabit it. It is something I may not be able to do if my heart is not in it. (Compare this with ordinary counterfactual reasoning, which is considerably less topic-specific or dependent on moods.) If we understood better why imagining […] requires your heart to be in it, we would understand better what is being resisted when we resist. (Moran 1994, 105)

Thus, the idea that the phenomenology of imagination involves personal concerns or an affective dimension in a way in which mere suppositions do not leads to an intriguing puzzle, first pointed out by Hume (1757; cf. Gendler 2006b) and recently much debated under the heading of 'imaginative resistance' (Walton 1994, 2006; Gendler 2000, 2006b; Weatherson 2004; Stueber 2011).[3] The idea is this: assuming that our imaginings carry some affective weight or affect us personally, imagination seems to be bound by what we are emotionally capable of or willing to picture. This becomes particularly salient when considering fictional or aesthetic contexts. We seem to have an intuitive resistance to even 'just' imagining scenarios involving some blatantly morally wrong outcomes. Sometimes this is the case even if what is at stake is only to imaginatively dwell upon scenarios that directly violate deeply ingrained conventions. For example, it seems difficult to engage with fiction or art that clearly violates our moral sense regarding violence against children or racism. Or think of pornography, even if it is within the bounds of legality. Surely, what is and what is

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[3] Interestingly, there is an early formulation of this phenomenon also in Husserl where he discusses the impossibility of imagining oneself commit a murder; see Husserl (1952, 264-265, 331).

not permissible in the domain of imagination is socio-culturally and historically relative. But the very fact that there is a need to publicly negotiate and gauge norms limiting not just our publicly available artistic representations but also our mental imaginary 'for private use' shows over and over again that such intuitions regarding what is better not to imagine are a real fact of human (moral) psychology.

But where is the puzzle or paradox here? In order to see the point, consider again the possible lack of wishes and desires in and the doxastic neutrality of imagination. Given that, in imagining *p*, one not only invests no belief in *p* but doesn't even necessarily wish that *p*, it is indeed puzzling why one would still feel any resistance to imagining *p*. We often say, 'It's just fiction', and commonly accept that one may imagine whatever one likes as long as one doesn't act upon it. Yet, we cannot accept such conciliatory reassurances if our sensory imaginary, our affective investment in it and our moral sense clash. And it is precisely this paradox that illuminates the difference between imagination and mere suppositions, possibilities and counterfactual reasoning. After all, there seems nothing wrong in merely supposing, for the sake of an argument for a better society for example, what it would mean to euthanize handicapped individuals unfit to work. Yet, the same cannot be said if we imagine what such a society would be like, or how it would be to live in such a society. In this latter case, we seem to immediately feel some resistance in performing the imagining. Now, crucially, this normative dimension of imagination, indicated by the phenomenon of imaginative resistance, is not restricted to fictional scenarios. Rather, as I shall argue in the next section, it is a distinctive feature of collective imagination, where normative pressures on (individuals') mental imaginary are considerably more forceful than in individual cases.

Before moving to the collective cases, however, we need a firmer grasp of the *intentionality* of imagination. This is best provided by the phenomenological theory of imagination as proposed by authors such as Husserl (esp. 1980), Fink (1930), Sartre (1936, 1940), or more recently Casey (2000). However much they differ on a number of specific claims regarding, for example, the ontology of objects of imagination, their being posited as nothingness (Sartre 1936, 1940), or their perspectival (Husserl 1980) or non-perspectival givenness (Sartre 1940),[4] when it comes to the intentional structure of episodes of imagination, by and large all phenomenologists agree upon four claims:

(1) First, phenomenologists accept the already familiar claim that engaging in acts of imagination is an intentional conscious mental act that is under (relative) deliberate control of the subject of imagination (e.g., Husserl 1980, 2-4; Sartre 1940).

(2) More importantly, acts of imagination are, precisely as conscious mental acts, intentional in a more pregnant phenomenological sense: they are characterized, just like any other conscious acts – be they perceptions, beliefs, hopes, doubts, memories, expectations or volitions – by their intentional directedness to given objects, persons, events, or states of affairs. This is worth emphasizing, for it may

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[4] I cannot dwell on these differences in any detail here; see Casey (2000) and Stawarska (2005).

seem that the peculiar nature of imagination would make its objects somehow different from ordinary objects of, for example, perception. However, it is a key contention of every phenomenological account that, wherever we may locate the difference, it certainly is not regarding the objectivity of objects of imagination: imagination has its intentional objects just like any other mental act.

(3) Similarly, the distinctive feature of imagination, in particular compared to perception, is not that the perception has and imagination lacks genuinely sensory – or in phenomenological jargon, so-called hyletic – content. To be sure, there are indeed some important differences between the two 'sensory' acts; these especially concern: (a) the activity of perceptual and imaginary projects (perception, for example, is linked to bodily or kinesthetic activities in a way imagination is not); (b) spontaneity and control (similar to judgments, perceptions are co-dependent on what the world contributes, whereas imaginings are obviously not determined in the same way); and (c) objectual determinacy (the imagistic presentation of imagined objects or events may be almost infinitely fine-grained, whereas perceptual objects will always have some yet undetermined horizons, which are not given in perception; at the same time objects of imagination will typically lack the sensory 'presence' of directly perceived objects).[5]

These differences from perception notwithstanding, imagination is usually taken to exhibit a 'quasi-perceptual' content and phenomenal quality.[6] Indeed, one of the crucial contentions of the phenomenological account of imagination is that we must safeguard the 'imagistic', sensory or quasi-perceptual dimension of imagination (Husserl 1980, 219, 227, 349-351; cf. Elliott 2005; Jansen 2005, 2016).[7] Speaking with Kind (2001), phenomenologists 'put the image back into imagination', but they also lay stress on the fact that acts of imagining exhibit (quasi-perceptual) sensory and phenomenal contents. In order to avoid misunderstandings, for Husserl, as for other phenomenologists, imagination is not derived from perception or from what Husserl calls "image consciousness" [*Bildbewusstsein*], the awareness of an image *qua* image representing something (cf. Aldea 2013). Rather, it is a distinct intentional act, an irreducible capacity of our mental lives. And just as perception puts the perceiver in direct touch with the perceived objects, without any further mediation of mental representations or other peculiar mental 'items' (see Szanto 2012), imagination does the same with the imagined objects. Though imagination has some imagistic and sensory dimension, Husserl clearly rejects the view that there are some mediating

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[5] Notice that none of this is meant to imply that either is phenomenally richer than the other, but rather simply to point to some differences in their phenomenal givenness.

[6] However, as Gendler (2011) notes, some distinguish between *perception-like* and *belief-like* imaginings, the first involving mental images and sensory qualities, the latter being propositional and amounting to cognitively entertaining a possibility (e.g., Currie and Ravenscroft 2002).

[7] However, phenomenologists clearly distinguish between material 'physical images' and psychic images or 'phantasy presentation'; see e.g. Husserl (1980, 17-30, 47-65; cf. Aldea 2013) and Sartre (1940).

mental images in imagination (*phantasma* or the like). On the contrary, "imagining is a direct sensory awareness of objects" (Jansen 2016, 71).

(4) Now, the central difference between imagination and different but cogent mental states lies not in the differences between their contents or objects, but rather concerns a distinctive intentional mode, or in phenomenological terms, the 'thetic' or 'positional quality' of acts of imagination. Thus, it concerns what we have already encountered in terms of doxastic neutrality and which Husserl discusses in terms of "qualitative" or "imaginative modification" (e.g., Husserl 1980, 335-343, 355-361): "phantasy is precisely through and through modification" (Husserl 1980, 326).

But Husserl is far more differentiated than contemporary accounts trading on the doxastic modification involved in imagination. Phenomenologically viewed, the modification in imagination is twofold: it concerns, on the one hand, the mode of representation of the intentional act and, on the other hand, its doxastic or thetic character. The imaginative modification concerns, first, a modification, noematically speaking, in the way objects appear, namely as an as-if object, and, viewed noetically, in the way objects are presented or given, namely presentified. But this modification in the representational character of the act and object of imagination is correlated to another dimension of intentional modification, which has not so much to do with the representational but rather the epistemological or doxastic features of imaginings.[8] Whereas perception "presents" the object "in person [*leibhaftig*], as it were, as present itself […], in phantasy […], the object itself appears […], but it does not appear as present [*gegenwärtig*]. It is only presentified [*vergegenwärtigt*]. It appears as if it were there but only as if" (Husserl 1980, 16; transl. modified). Accordingly, in imagination "I construct the as-if-object in the manner of an original quasi-perceptual as-if-giving of the object itself [*quasi wahrnehmungsmäßige Selbstgebung-als-ob*]" (Husserl 1980, 696).

More precisely, objects of imagination can be presentified in four different ways, according to four distinct ways they are posited: (i) as non-existent, as in fiction; (ii) as absent or non-actual [*in-aktuell*], or existing elsewhere in time and/or space, for example when you imagine what a non-fictional person does when she is absent or did when she was still alive; (iii) as irreal, or existentially neutral, i.e. given doxastic modification of the object which posits it as neither existent nor non-existent but rather neutralizes any existential claim regarding it; (iv) finally, there is an indeed pervasive thetic modification of objects as pure possibilities. As Casey (1971) argues against Husserl and Sartre, pure possibility is beyond neutrality, reality and unreality, and cannot be explained in terms of any of these modifications.[9]

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[8] This is certainly not to imply that there were two *distinct* modifications in acts of imagination. Rather, they are but two correlative aspects of one and the same phenomenon.

[9] Indeed, Casey argues that this is the single crucial thetic modification that characterizes "all prototypical imagining" and lends imagined objects an "existential status of [their] own" (Casey 1971, 478). However, I do not think that every proper imagining necessarily and exclusively involves this modification. For, why shouldn't it be a proper imagination if one posits the imagined object as inexistent, non-actual or absent and thus here and now *not* possible?

It is crucial to distinguish these modes, all the more so as these distinctions often get confused in lay-accounts of imagination and are rarely properly distinguished in standard philosophical accounts. Moreover, distinguishing non-existence from non-actuality, irreality, and pure possibility makes it clear that imagination stands in no exclusive relation to inexistent or fictional objects. In other words, "imagining does not involve a relation to objects of a special ontological category, e.g., nonexistent or fictional objects, but rather involves a particular mode of relating to objects" (Jansen 2016, 71).

3. The possibility and structure of collective imagination

Now that we have an initial understanding of what imagination is, it will surely seem that such mental episodes can only be instantiated by individuals and hence CI is impossible. After all, how could such episodes be shared, given that imagination was characterized as a spontaneous mental act under deliberative control and involving a sensory phenomenology? It might seem that we would need a bullet way too large to bite in order to accommodate shared imaginative episodes. Specifically, it might seem that we would need to assume not just collective mentality or a group mind with its own deliberative mechanisms and capability for mental representation or imaginary; for, even if one were to grant this possibility (Huebner 2014; Szanto 2014) – a possibility that many surely will resist – it might seem that we would need further assumptions. We would need to assume that collectives engaging in joint imaginative episodes would have their *own* sensory phenomenology.[10] As I shall argue in this section, however, we need no such extreme and indeed implausible assumptions to defend CI.

But before defending my own account, let's have a look at one of the first, still rather sketchy but no less interesting philosophical proposals put forth by Walton in his book *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. It is worth quoting the relevant passage at length:

> The social activity I call collective imagining involves more than mere correspondence in what is imagined. Not only do the various participants imagine many of the same things; each of them realizes that the others are imagining what he is, and each realizes that the others realize this. Moreover, steps are taken to see that the correspondence obtains. And each participant has reasonable expectations and can make justified predictions about what others will imagine, given certain turns of events. Making explicit agreements about what to imagine […] is one method of coordinating imaginings. But it has a serious drawback. Insofar as the participants decide, collectively, on what to

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[10] Notice that this is not the same as assuming the possibility of affective or emotional sharing—which is a still contentious, to be sure, but increasingly accepted assumption; see, e.g., von Scheve & Salmela 2014. I have argued for emotional sharing elsewhere: Szanto (2015), Szanto (forthcoming), and León et al. (forthcoming).

imagine, their imaginings are bound to be deliberate; each must decide, individually, to imagine whatever it is that is agreed upon. The price of coordination by agreement is the 'vivacity' of imagining spontaneously. But […] coordination can be effected by other means without paying this price – by enlisting the aid of such things as doll, hobbyhorses, snow forts, toy trucks, mud pies, and representational works of art. (Walton 1990, 18-19)

Walton is perfectly right in distinguishing "mere correspondence in what is imagined" and genuine sharing of imaginative episodes; and he is also on the right track in pointing to the following criteria constitutive of this difference (notably criteria that are usually viewed as constitutive of other forms of intentional and affective sharing; cf. Szanto 2015, 2016, forthcoming): (i) sameness of the intentional object; (ii) some form of mutual awareness (or 'realization') of others partaking in the joint imaginative activity, and (iii) some form of deliberate coordination or agreement on how to proceed.

Walton is also right in emphasizing the role of those aids that he later discusses as 'prompters'. Prompters can be any natural or cultural artefacts (e.g., the above-mentioned dolls, hobbyhorses, snow forts, etc., but also hallucinogenic drugs) that help 'broaden' our imaginative capabilities, for example by spontaneously imagining things we might not readily imagine without them. Importantly for present purposes, prompters are often artificially produced not just to induce private imaginative musings but precisely to facilitate spontaneous engagement in collective imaginative projects. They do so not least by smoothly "direct[ing] the imaginings of others in predetermined ways" (Walton 1990, 22). Finally, prompters may become conventionalized, habitualized, or internalized. This is particularly familiar from artistic traditions or rituals, but Walton gives a simpler example: "With practice [participants] may 'internalize' this convention sufficiently so that when they see a stump, even a not very bear-like one, it provokes them automatically and unreflectively to imagine a bear" (Walton 1990, 24). Prompters are particularly interesting with regard to CI because they help coordinate imaginings or make agreements on how to proceed more spontaneously than do discursive frameworks. Prompters facilitate, coordinate and guide our joint imaginative projects without complicated and often "disruptive discussions", explicit stipulations or lengthy collective deliberations (Walton 1990, 23).

So far, so good. But are the above-mentioned criteria, plus the facilitating role of prompters, really sufficient for "shar[ing] our imaginative thoughts with others" (Walton 1990, 22)? I contend that more is needed. What then makes it the case that some instances of imagination are not simply instances of a subject S1 imagining *I* and a subject S2 (and S3…Sn) also imagining *I* but, rather, S1 and S2 imagining *I* together or collectively imagining *I* – i.e., properly speaking, *sharing* imaginings? Upon closer scrutiny, there are two interrelated questions involved here. First, what distinguishes individual or solitary imaginings from a simple aggregation of separate individual ones and furthermore from a genuinely collective one: is it differences

between the objects, the representational qualities or contents, the spontaneity or vividness of imagining, or something else? Secondly, what constitutes the sharedness or collectivity of CI: is it the object, the sensory contents, the subject or something else?

In order to address these questions it is useful to take a look at the burgeoning literature on collective intentionality. Within this debate, it has become customary to distinguish three types of accounts of what constitutes the sharedness or collectivity of collective intentionality. They are distinguished according to which of the three core aspects of intentional acts – their *content* or *object*, their *mode,* or their *subject* – one assigns the collectivity-constituting function. As Schweikard and Schmid aptly summarize:

> Content-accounts claim that for A and B's intention to visit the Taj Mahal tomorrow to be collective, each A and B have to intend to visit the Taj Mahal together. Mode-accounts insist that the element of collectivity has to extend to the intending; in their view, A and B have to intend collectively to visit the Taj Mahal (together). Subject-accounts claim that the element of togetherness is really in the subject; in their view, A and B have to form a plural subject or a unified group that is the subject of – and has – the intention to visit the Taj Mahal. (Schweikard and Schmid 2013)[11]

Given these standard distinctions, there are the following options of where to 'tie in' the sharedness of imaginings in CI:

(i) Sharedness, as we have already seen with Walton, might be constituted by the fact that participants are directed to the *same imagined intentional object* (or event, person, state of affairs, etc.). This will also involve sameness of the presentified *contents* and possibly that of the *vehicles* presenting them (e.g., same symbolic or imagistic media or prompters).

(ii) Secondly, it might be due to the specific mode in which each of us intends the given object, or in Searlean terms (1995; 2010) a 'we-intention'. Instead of you and me imagining something in the 'I-mode', you and I will 'we-imagine'. Notice that we do not necessarily need a plural subject here (as in (iii) below) who instantiates we-imaginings. It would suffice if individual intentions of the form 'I *we*-intend', 'you *we*-intend', etc. were sufficiently integrated. The collectivity would be built into the very way we imaginatively *refer* to or *intend* the given object, an object that according to (i) might already be shared.

The notion of mode here should not be confused with the modification of the positional quality of acts of imagination mentioned above. Still, regarding the doxastic mode, one might hold that it must also be identical across subjects in CI. According to this line of thought, it will not be enough that one subject imagines an

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[11] A prototypical representative of the content-account is Bratman (2014), while Searle (1995, 2010) and Tuomela (2007) defend different versions of the mode-account and Gilbert (1989), Rovane (1998) or Tollefsen (2015) offer variants of the subject-account.

object as absent, while another imagines it as fictional or inexistent and a third remains neutral towards its existence. Rather, the specific modification of the positional thesis must also be identical.

(iii) According to probably the most robust, but certainly also the most demanding, account, subjects would need to constitute their own group mind or plural subject, which would eventually be the bearer of acts of collective imagination. On the face of it, this sounds mysterious and metaphysically unnecessarily inflated. Following the most plausible plural subject accounts of collective intentionality (Gilbert 1989), however, what the individuals would need to do here is not really mysterious. They need to *jointly commit* themselves to imagining something *as one mind.* This entails, roughly, that none of the parties could individually and without further ado (e.g., without discussing it with the others) withdraw at will from the joint imaginative project. The joint commitment to the shared project could only be obliterated jointly.

So which of these requirements is constitutive of CI? I want to argue that we can only properly account for CI if we endorse a multi-dimensional picture. According to this, the sharedness of imaginative episodes across subjects is – above and beyond Walton's mutual realization criterion – constituted by the first two of the above requirements for sharedness (i.e., sameness of object of imagination and representational contents, possibly but not necessarily sameness of vehicles of imaginative representation and sameness of intentional mode and thetic quality), but also retains some elements of the third. In particular, I contend that we can retain its normative spirit, which is captured by the emphasis on joint commitments. However, we ought to skip any reference to plural subjects or unified group minds, which, for some, might be too heavy a metaphysical burden.

(iv) What I suggest then is a further, and indeed crucial, constitutive element for sharedness of imaginings – one that is typically left out of the 'collectivity equation' in general – namely a normative one. Drawing on Edith Stein's ingenious early phenomenological proposal, I want to argue that both a decisive difference between individual and collective imaginings and a key to understanding the constitution of CI lies in the degree of normativity that is built into, guides and ultimately integrates individuals' imaginative projects. The proposal is that it is the high degree of normativity involved in CI that unifies individuals' imaginings and makes them eventually exhibit group-relative 'imagistic typologies'.

To be sure, norms guide what to and what not to imagine in any act of imagination, be it solitary or not. And this is precisely what explains the emergence of the phenomenon of imaginative resistance discussed above. But there are important differences between the norms regulating solitary and joint imaginative projects. The differences concern the normative powers and, as we shall see in a moment, also the very way in which norms regulate imaginations. Concerning normative power, the constitution and the success of CI will to a much larger degree depend upon the way in which the participants' presentational capacities comply with

what their group takes to be essential features of the imagined object. If my imaginative intentional fulfillment falls all too short of what my 'fellow imaginers' require, I will no longer participate in the joint imagination, even if others or I myself fail to realize that.[12] The reason for this is that the imagined object or world is supposed to be precisely not *my own* imaginative representation but *our common* one and must consequently respond to shared norms, values or commitments. And this is also the reason why each of us is entitled to (re-)claim our imaginative typologies if they are violated by our fellow imaginers – even if we know full well that in imagination there are no objective facts of the matter as to the representational properties of a given object.

Notice that the normativity in question works similar to Walton's conventionalized and internalized prompters. And indeed, norms of CI will typically be created and maintained by means of symbolic or artistic prompters, such as mythologies, fairy-tale figures, literature, paintings, or architecture. However, again, the normative force of such collective prompters on individuals' imaginings is typically much wider in scope and diachronically more robust than those of individual prompters, such as private sketches, toys for individual use, etc. The former may often exert their influence on very large collectives and over generations (ethnic or religious communities, etc.). Here is how Stein puts it:

> we all also know a fantasy world that we consider to be a common property [*Gemeingut*]: Sleeping Beauty and Little Red Riding Hood are figures of the German fairy-tale world, which belongs to the collective environment of our nation. It wouldn't occur to anyone among us to maintain that everyone has his or her own Sleeping Beauty. Sleeping Beauty has her own securely defined traits […]. We would lodge a very forceful protest if somebody wanted to attribute traits to her that don't belong to her. Now, our fairy-tale world has a certain typology, a distinctiveness that distinguishes it from those of other nations, for example the Chinese. (Stein 1922, 147-148; transl. modified)

Interestingly, Stein's claim has recently gained empirical credit from developmental psychologists. Rakoczy and colleagues demonstrated in a series of studies that 3-year-olds have a context-sensitive understanding and enforcement of normative rules in joint pretense plays ('Let's say that the soap is a loaf of bread in this game'). Children forcefully protest if other participants (another child or adult) or even fictional characters (e.g., a teddy-bear) who join the game treat target objects according to their real function (e.g., as soap) or mix up pretended identities between different games. Thus, the studies clearly indicate that children's learning of the distinction between pretense or fictional scenarios and reality is normative through and through (Rakoczy 2008; Wyman et al. 2009). Moreover, it has been suggested that, from an

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[12] I have argued for a similar, essentially normative component in the constitution of collective emotions in Szanto (2015). There, I have also discussed in detail various types of misidentification regarding one's group-membership.

ontogenetic perspective, this understanding lies at the basis of eventually engaging in collective intentionality and complex institutional frameworks (Tomasello 2014). Those are construed in Searlean terms as the collective assignment of specific (normative) status function ('X counts as Y in context C') and its collective acceptance ('This piece of paper is a dollar in the US'; cf. Searle 1995, 2010).

Now, critics may object that, though there may be differences in the *degree* of the normative powers, given that normativity is involved in solitary as well as collective imagination, normativity cannot constitute the decisive difference. Rather, as the objection might proceed, *collective acceptance* of what counts as what in the imagined world would suffice. However, an account of CI based on collective acceptance will ultimately fail. First and foremost, collective acceptance depends upon linguistic or some form of discursive negotiation, but we often engage in joint imaginative projects without such negotiation. As we have seen, collective acceptance – or in Walton's terms, CI by agreement – fails to explain how we can engage in CI spontaneously, without complex discursive coordination, thus forfeiting the potential vivacity of imaginings. In contrast, norms can be internalized and habitualized such that they can 'kick in' spontaneously whenever individuals engage in CI. Also, norms can be 'sedimented' in collective prompters in a much more robust way than can explicit agreements, which often require constant and explicit reaffirmation to be upheld. Thus, sedimented norms more "securely define" the properties of imagined objects than the mere collective acceptance of, say, what representational contents the concept of a Sleeping Beauty entails. There are two further problems with a collective acceptance account of CI: first, acceptance is an all-or-nothing affair. But CI, as we shall see in a moment, admits of fine-grained differences in the sensory phenomenology across the participants. I can fill or leave out certain representational properties of a Sleeping Beauty, while still imaginatively referring to the same (shared) object as others. Habitualized norms can regulate this without complicated agreements concerning the exact properties of Sleeping Beauties. Secondly, acceptance is much more clearly context bound than norms, which typically admit a wider scope and higher flexibility in application. While we collectively accept that X counts as Y in a *specific* context C, norms can apply across a range of different contexts and thus much more flexibly regulate what is still, say, 'pretty much like our Sleeping Beauty'.

But does this mean that norms of imagination even regulate the *fine-grained sensory phenomenology* of CI? Recall that it is precisely this aspect of imagination that prima facie makes collective imagination impossible. For, it might seem that, for CI to work, given the phenomenology of imagination, we would need to assume not just a group mind with its own mental imaginary, but also a group mind with its own sensory phenomenology. But we do not need to assume this. To see why, notice again that CI admits of differences in the sensory phenomenology across participants, who may refer to the same intentional object with different intuitive contents. Accordingly and following once more the lead of early phenomenologists,

we have to distinguish two aspects in the structure of CI: its *intuitive* or *phenomenal* and its *intentional* components. As Stein suggests:

> Thus, apparently we are faced with an antinomy. On the one hand, fantasy and fantasy world give themselves as simply private and relative to the single subject; on the other hand, as super-individual. Perhaps we can arrive at a solution of the antinomy if we distinguish between fantasy-*intention* [*Phantasie*-Intention] and fantasy-*intuition* [*Phantasie*-Anschauung]. We all *intend* [*meinen*] the same object when we speak of Sleeping Beauty's castle. But if each of us intuitively represents it [*veranschaulichen*], then we have just as many intuitive objects [*anschauliche Objekte*] as intuiting subjects. Fantasy intuition doesn't bring the meant object itself before our eyes like perception, but merely represents it; and everybody represents it in his or her own way. (Stein 1922, 147-148)

Given this distinction, some may wonder, however, whether it entails a duplication of intentional objects. Every instance of CI would then entail both a shared intentional object and a collection of private intuitive objects. But this cannot be right. First, this would not only be ontologically unparsimonious but, moreover, it would blatantly violate the phenomenological insight that, in intentional acts, we are not directed at some intermediary objects or contents but, rather, directly at the respective intentional object. Furthermore, since intentional acts are individuated (in part) by their intentional objects, every instance of CI would then have two intentional acts, a private (intuitive) and a shared (non-intuitive?) one. Finally, how to construe the relation between the two objects would be mysterious (as constitutive, foundational, or something else?), and we would still be left with the puzzle of how an aggregation of private intuitive objects could ever be integrated such that we would (also?) have a shared intentional one.

Yet, luckily there is a more charitable reading of Stein. According to this, we do not have two literally separate intentional objects but, rather, only two aspects of the collective intentionality involved in CI. These aspects may but need not in fact coincide and can, in any case, be conceptually distinguished. We can find a somewhat clearer expression of such a double-aspect theory of CI in Gerda Walther's congenial account of experiential sharing (see Szanto forthcoming) in a passage where she discusses the possibility of communities directed at imaginary objects. In a remarkably similar vein to Stein, Walther distinguishes between the shared intentional object of a collective imagination and those (noematic) contents that need not be shared or even be similar across the participants, notably the intuitive and emotional ones:

> Let's suppose that a number of children feign [*fingieren sich*] a benevolent fairy in a play and build her a temple such that they pay homage to her in their well-organised play. They constitute a community 'in the service' [*"im Dienste"*] of this fairy. Here, the intentional object of this communal life (i.e. the life in the service of this fairy) certainly is no real object, nor is it intended as such, for the children know in fact very well that their fairy does not exist in reality, rather they just

pretend thus. What is real is only the behavior of the children in the service of the fairy […] Moreover, the noema […], through which the *same* intended object is intended, that is, the same 'content' of the psychic life [*Seelenleben*] of the members, needs not be the same, let alone identical. […] Rather […] the emotional accentuation [*Gefühlsbetonung*] and the intuition in the imagination [*Anschaulichkeit in der Vorstellung*] of the fairy might be wholly different for the different children. (Walther 1923, 25-26)

However, while I agree with Stein and Walther that we need to carefully distinguish the intentional from the phenomenal, sensory or intuitive aspects of acts of CI, I believe that differences in the latter will not be as significant as they suggest but, rather, much more fine-grained. At the same time, differences will also be less subject-relative than Stein and Walther think. This is due to the robust normativity involved in CI. To be sure, norms of imagining do not determine the fine-grained sensory phenomenology of imaginings. If the phenomenon of imaginative resistance is real, even our solitary imaginings are shaped by norms, and we often resist filling out mere suppositions with imaginary and sensory detail. But given the bigger risk of exclusion from our fellow imaginers, this is to a considerably larger extent so in the social arena – unless, of course, we are artists, trying to collectively push the boundaries of what and how to imagine. Thus, our very phenomenology of CI, the 'how' we (ought to) imagine something, is deeply penetrated and modulated by social norms, and especially so since these norms often become internalized and habitualized and hence even work without our deliberate or conscious endorsement.

4. Concluding remarks: From collective imagination to imagining collectives

Let me draw these lines together and conclude by pointing to a desideratum and possible avenues for future research. The guiding question I have investigated in this paper is whether and how it is possible that two or more individuals properly speaking share episodes of imagination, a phenomenon I have called, in contradistinction to social imagination and social imaginary, collective imagination.

The question of whether CI is *possible* in the first place has presented itself especially with regard to a particular feature of (individual) imagination, namely its specific sensory phenomenology. After all, how can a group of individuals share intentional acts, not only with their own mode, content and object but also with their own sensory contents or phenomenal qualities, to wit, without presupposing some arguably mysterious phenomenal group consciousness? I have tried to show that we can circumvent this problem by referring to a double-aspect theory of collective imagination and distinguishing shared intentional aspects from the phenomenal, sensory or intuitive aspects of CI.

In addressing the question of *how* to account for instances of CI, I have focused on the correlative questions of what is distinctive of CI in comparison to individual imaginings and what constitutes the collectivity in CI. I have argued that

the standard picture of CI, exemplified by Walton's account, needs some corrections and amendments, and suggested a multi-dimensional and normative account. Beyond or instead of Walton's requirements – viz. shared objects, mutual awareness, coordination or agreement and the role of so-called promoters in the latter – I have proposed that CI constitutively involves the following: (i) sharedness of objects and contents and typically that of the vehicles and prompters, (ii) sharedness of the intentional mode and the specific thetic quality of the acts (i.e., taking the imagined object as fictional, non-existent, possible, etc.) and, crucially, (iii) specific and specifically strong normative constraints on what and how to imagine together. Furthermore, reflecting on the intriguing phenomenon of imaginative resistance, I have emphasized that norms of imagination, often internalized and habitualized, modulate CI even more robustly than individual imaginings.

Now, it is also these criteria that mark the difference between individual and collective imaginings, and neither differences between certain types of imaginary objects (say 'ordinary' phantasma versus socio-cultural constructs of a social imaginary) – as some work in the social sciences might suggest – nor differences in the vehicles of solitary and collective imaginings (say more or less symbolic or imagistic versus discursive) and respective differences in their representational qualities, vividness or spontaneity.

But what about the mutual awareness or, as Walton puts it, 'realization' requirement? Is it really necessary for all types of CI, and does it have to be some direct, face-to-face or perceptual form of mutual awareness? And if so, would it not be an all too strong requirement for *all* varieties of CI, excluding some genuinely collective imaginings for the wrong reasons (such as the example of the shared fairy tale world across generations)?[13] Indeed, I believe that in a fully comprehensive account of CI – one that goes far beyond the present proposal – we must distinguish different types of the genera of CI. These then would in part be distinguished precisely by whether they necessarily involve direct mutual awareness or rather some technologically, discursively, or symbolically mediated, non-direct and possibly non-synchronous ways of knowing each other as participants in a collaborative imaginative project. I am thinking here for example of distinguishing types of CI according to their different objects (e.g., artistic artefacts, fairy tale worlds, rituals, political imaginaries) and the different collectives and creative processes involved: for example architectural teams in collaborative creative practices, or brainstorming (cf. Murphy 2004, 2005); socio-cultural collectives with robust shared practices and values, engaging in the imaginary creation of fictional traditions, fairy tale worlds, rituals, etc.; or forms of social imaginary proper, which could be instantiated by single individuals, with a 'group in mind', and involve the imaginary creations of a shared past (collective memory), utopian thinking, etc.

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[13] See my discussion of this requirement regarding collective emotions and my respective proposal to distinguish different types of emotional sharing in Szanto (2015 and forthcoming).

But there will be another crucial difference between these types – and this constitutes another important desideratum for a comprehensive account of CI. It seems that in some varieties, and especially so in social imaginaries, we can observe a certain blurring of the conative and the representational-imaginative aspects. Thus, the boundary that usually marks off imaginings from mere desires and wishes typically becomes porous in these latter forms of heavily mediated, symbolically and discursively laden social imaginaries. But it is not at all clear why, when we collectively imagine, we often (co-)imagine collectives to which we either wish to belong or have belonged, or regarding which we wish that certain facts obtain. Future research should consequently investigate the specific socio-psychological mechanism leading to such blurring of wishes and imaginings. I conjecture that familiar social-identification mechanisms or in-group favoritism will play a key role. I suppose also that the intriguing phenomenon of collective iteration of imagined scenarios, or the so-called 'collapsed imagination' (i.e. simulating or imagining others' imaginations; Currie 1995; Nichols 2003), might be at play here. But whatever the reasons, it seems that the step from collective imagination to imagining collectives that we wish to belong to and to be a certain way is often a small and often dangerous one.

Acknowledgments

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