

## Collective, Joint, and Shared Imagination?

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“Adaptive imagination”—or, as Stephen Asma also dubs his theoretical object, “mythopoetic cognition”—draws attention to one of the most salient features of human life. Yet it has been overlooked in the flourishing cognitive sciences. As Asma points out, this may have to do with personal and institutional factors in research environments rather than the importance of the subject matter: “Academia in general and cognitive science in particular have either ignored poetic cognition or dismissed it as nonepistemic.” A similar attitude would make the study of, say, religion a vacuous affair. It may be nonsense to some, but the study of it is not nonsense.

I fully concur with Asma’s ambition of paying closer attention to the importance and functions of poetic truth as a sense-making version of social reality as well as his insistence that mythopoetic cognition has (had) adaptive value. In fact, imagination is a globally advantageous adaptation. Where would the human species have been without it, we may ask—imagination makes us human. However, “imagination” has a bad press in the cognitive sciences and related fields (e.g., philosophy and psychology). Online searches on serious webpages (e.g., the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*) provide rather meagre results. Overviews of relevant disciplinary fields in otherwise commendable works yield little as well (e.g., Robbins and Aydede 2009; Doris 2012). Explicit, detailed, and valuable attention is offered only in works such as Paul Harris’s 2000 book *The Work of the Imagination*, which is part of the series “Understanding Children’s Worlds”—somewhat tellingly, suggesting something about the place given to imagination in the scientific community. Lately, however, a more

robust interest has arisen to solidify the field (Abraham 2020). So, consider Asma’s proposal and our rejoinders as hopeful additions to this development.

My own perspective and take on this subject stem from decades of work in the study of religion, myth, and religious narrative in general (e.g., Jensen 2019). As a result of this work, I find it essential to stress an amplification of Asma’s points; that is, to extend his points and stress the collective aspects of the conceptualization of mythopoetic cognition. The majority of works in Asma’s references appear as exponents of individualist methodology; in a philosophy of science perspective this is a general trend in Anglo-American thinking and especially so in the cognitive sciences. That methodology has undeniably contributed greatly to present knowledge, but it may inhibit the ability to admit the adaptive benefits as they would emerge from collectivist perspectives. These will be pursued in what follows here—in a thoroughly Durkheimian manner. It seems obvious that full-blown mythopoetic cognition and adaptive imagination are primarily collective: humans must agree (more than less) for both to have adaptive value. Collective narratives express and support collectives. Religious traditions express this more clearly than many other human feats.

### Imagination: The Sine Qua Non of Religion

Some colleagues were really offended when I once, at a scholarly symposium, ventured the view that imagination is the most crucial feature of religious worldviews. It was interpreted as if imagination was the only feature of religious thought and, consequently, that it had no truth

value at all, being merely wishful thinking and illusion. However, the point is that, for humans to be religious in the first place, they must be able to imagine Heaven and Hell, God(s), to meta-cognitively wonder “What would Jesus have done?” or: “Is this kosher?,” “halal,” “dharma,” or perhaps “the way of the ancestors.” My question, then, is this: How could anybody be religious without imagination, and perhaps more particularly, without explicit metacognition (Schjødt and Jensen 2018)? Religion, as habitually conceived in the academy, is many “things.” For one, religion is a cognitive organizer, one that enables humans to imagine collectively (as do the arts in post-traditional societies). It enables humans to engage the world in a mode of interactive cognition. Peter Berger pointedly addressed this in his now-famous *The Sacred Canopy*: “put differently, religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant” (1967, 28). So, in the religious perspective, the meaning of life is a collective imagination based on interaction, attribution, projection, and intentionality. The world is human-like and may therefore be addressed as “one of us.”

### Imagination in Normativity

To appease the skepticism of descriptivist philosophers, it should be pointed out that imagination also is the sine qua non for normativity—that is, how things ought (or ought not) to be. Any kind of normative perspective, such as moral or ethical, would be unthinkable without “the work of the imagination.” How could humans be moral animals without imagination? This, conversely, could be seen as one more facet of the human imaginative “drive”: imagination makes it possible to desire valuable things, good food, and sex, and as such it is the basis of classification systems—once a favorite subject in anthropology. Consider the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss as being fundamentally about imagination. And so, further down the line, imagination provides the *Leitvorstellung*—the governing

principles—of scholarly and scientific practice. No less. Honestly, imagination reigns. And collective, joint, and shared modes of imagination even more so.

Ontogenetically, it is obvious that imagination of intention is the basis for children’s pretend and role play (Reddy 2009, 164ff), but the imaginative acts of being or feeling like “someone else” seem never to leave adult humans. Luckily, some things are never lost; they may, however, become restrained, subdued, and forbidden—depending on cultural contexts. The total sum of the arts witnesses the human imaginative play with intentions. This is perhaps where humans truly differ from all other animals: in the ability to imagine and, even more importantly, to imagine collectively. These abilities are closely tied to other features of human cognition, especially joint intentionality, cognitive fluidity, and the remarkable ability for cognitive decoupling. For instance, humans not only can hunt together, packs of other predators can do that; however, humans can organize the hunt in advance and stage it afterwards (e.g., in ritual or by painting it for others to imagine) by acts of imagination (Donald 2001). Karl Marx once said that “what distinguishes the worst architect from best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality.” Thus, although there is no doubt that imagination is fiction, it is also the case that in light of these ruminations, imagination and fiction are the most important of human adaptive achievements (Herman 2013). Then, at least two questions remain: First, is imagination a cognitive gadget? That is, not innate, but something acquired during ontogeny through social and cultural interaction (Heyes 2018). Most likely. And second, is imagination language-dependent? Again, most likely, and certainly when it comes to sharing imaginations—which is foundational, for example, in religious worldviews. The resulting picture would be (while awaiting further investigation) that adaptive imagination is a collective cultural gadget. If so, and slightly rewriting the ideas of John Searle,

adaptive imagination and mythopoetic cognition are among the fundamental building blocks of human civilization (Searle 2010). Searle's "social institutions with deontic powers" truly are works of the imagination. Imagination was needed all the way from organizing a Paleolithic hunting party to the current prognostic deliberations of the World Bank International Monetary Fund. Human thinking has a history (Tomasello 2014).

As some philosophers see it, it may well be that mythopoetic narrative thinking is nonveridical. This is for the very simple reason that the veridical, or indicative, modes of intentionality concern what has been or is the case, whereas inverted modes of intentionality in imagination (such as desiring, forbidding, wishing, etc.) are future-oriented and concern what may be the case (English lacks a distinct future tense here). This goes for scientific practice as well. In any science, imagination leads the investigative agents and their predictive coding mental activities. Scientists imagine together, using all kinds

of props for their shared imaginations. In such procedures, my imaginations may become props that extend to your brain (e.g., Menary 2010). Very often, what we take to be immediate perception is actually made up, imagined, by our own brains (Frith 2007).

All things social are products of the imagination and social constructionism is the imagination of imaginations. But, behold, all these things are real—they have deontic powers (Plotkin 2003; Searle 2010). And, should you wish to imagine yourself, you will inevitably do so in the webs of the imaginations of others. The workings of the social world obviously depend on perception, but ever so much they depend on prediction and imaginative cognition. Thanks to Stephen Asma for calling attention to this rather neglected, but absolutely fundamental mythopoetic dimension of human cognition. Then again, it seems that it gains even more importance when prefixed with "collective," "joint," or "shared."

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