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The Curious Case of Collective Experience: Edith Stein's Phenomenology of Communal Experience and a Spanish Fire-Walking Ritual

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Abstract:

In everyday language, we readily attribute experiences to groups. For example, one might say, "Spain celebrated winning the European Cup" or "The uncovering of corruption caused the union to think long and hard about its internal structure." In each case, the attribution makes sense. However, it is quite difficult to give a non-reductive account of precisely what these statements mean because in each case a mental state is ascribed to a group, and it is not obvious that groups can have mental states. In this article, I do not offer an explicit theory of collective experience. Instead, I draw on phenomenological analyses and empirical data in order to provide general conditions that a more specific theory of collective experience must meet in order to be coherent.

Keywords: Phenomenology; Edith Stein; Collective Experience; Collective Intentionality; Communal Agency; Philosophy of Psychology

Introduction:

It is commonplace in our everyday language to attribute experiences to groups themselves. For example, one might say, "Spain celebrated winning the European Cup;" "The market was shocked at the failure of the tech giant's IPO;" or "The uncovering of corruption caused the union to think long and hard about its internal structure." In each case, the attribution makes sense. Almost no one is confused as to what they mean. However, when one attempts to explain *precisely* what one of these statements means, it is not unusual to feel like Augustine who, trying to explain the nature of time, said, "I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled" (1961, p. 264). After all, celebrating requires certain kinds of mental states; Spain is a nation, and it is not at all obvious that nations have mental states. What, then, is meant by such strange statements?

Recent years have seen a surge in phenomenological research in the areas of social cognition and social ontology (Chant, Hindriks, & Preyer, 2014; Chelstrom, 2013, Gallagher, 2008; Stueber, 2006; & Zahavi, 2011). Themes in this research include such topics as the nature and structure of interpersonal understanding, or empathy, the possibility of group agency, collective intentionality, and shared emotions, to name a few. At the same time, there is no shortage of scientific interest in the physiological mechanisms that drive, or underlie, feelings of empathy, communality, and solidarity (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; deVignemont & Singer, 2006; Gallese & Goldman, 1998, Hove & Risen, 2009; Jackson, Rainville, & Decety, 2006; Singer & Lamm, 2009; & Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2011;). Furthermore, there is a long tradition of interdisciplinary dialogue between phenomenology, psychology, and the cognitive sciences, especially since Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the Schneider case in *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002, especially pp. 112-170). In keeping with this tradition, the goal of this article is to combine the phenomenological insights of Edith Stein's analyses of communal experience, with the findings of a recent study of a Spanish fire-walking ritual in an effort to clarify the curious case of collective experience.

While much is written in contemporary analytic philosophy on the questions of what it means for two or more people to act together (Gilbert, 1989, 2014; Bratman, 1993, 2014; Searle, 1995, 2010 ; List & Pettit, 2011), and some such research is attuned to the phenomenological tradition (especially Schmid, 2009), there is no consensus on what it means to say that a group acts together. However, acting together is, I take it, only one kind of experience we attribute to groups. As I noted above, we also say groups celebrated and were shocked, to name just a few. In addition, there is little to no consensus on which, if any, of the aforementioned theories are reconcilable. To achieve such a consensus, and to fully determine the compatibility of the

aforementioned theories, is beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, I will not attempt it. Instead, the goal of this article is to survey the terrain from the point of view of a phenomenological analysis of communal experience and use this as a tool to interpret the findings of an empirical study of a collective ritual. This article will succeed if it is able to identify general conditions, both phenomenologically and empirically grounded, which any theory of collective experience must meet in order to be coherent. If our theories are to vindicate the common sense convictions that our everyday language expresses, we must be able to adjudicate theories of collective experience. Not just any explanation or theory will do. This article seeks to lay the groundwork necessary for such research going forward.

What makes a communal experience communal?

I begin somewhat at the end, by trying to answer the question, “What makes a communal experience *communal*?” I have identified the following six proposals that might answer this question.

- (i) Each member of the group has the experience as an individual.
- (ii) Some subset of the group has the experience.
- (iii) The experience is given in consciousness with a specifically communal sense (*Sinn*).
- (iv) The experience is given in consciousness as belonging to a stream of consciousness which is the “communal stream.”
- (v) There is some ontologically independent entity, a super-individual subject, whose experiences are those of the community.

- (vi) Some logically consistent combination of (i) through (v) as sufficient, necessary, or jointly sufficient and necessary conditions.

Before I proceed, I wish to clarify what I take each of these proposals to claim. One way to endorse the first proposal is just to define the group in terms of the experience. For example, every person present in a seminar would constitute a group simply by their being present in the lecture theater at the time of the seminar. Anyone not present is, *eo ipso*, not a member of the group. One might also endorse (i) by refusing to admit any experience as communal until every member of the group has undergone it. In this way, rites of initiation would be an example of a communal experience since, by definition, group membership is contingent upon having experienced the ritual. The second proposal claims that a particular subset of the group must have an experience in order for it to count as a communal experience. That subset might be identifiable by role played within the group, or be a critical mass in terms of a percentage of the overall group population. Whose having the experience is necessary, or the requisite size of the subset, may vary depending on the nature of the group in question. The third proposal suggests that there may be some qualitative property of the experience itself that identifies it as being shared or belonging to the community. The fourth proposal requires there to be a stream of experience, not the individual's, but to which the individual has access, and properly speaking, this stream belongs to the community. Endorsing the fifth proposal commits one to saying that groups are the kinds of ontological entities about which one may speak in terms of subjectivity proper. By this, I mean that if (v) is true, then we should be able to say something about the group qua subjectivity, minimally that it has a first-person perspective on experiences that it calls its own, and that perspective is unified in immanent time within a singular subject. Finally, the

sixth proposal simply asserts that more than one of these proposals might be true at once so long as there is no contradiction involved.¹

The remainder of this article aims to determine whether the combined force of phenomenology and quantitative social psychology can shed light on the prospects of the aforementioned proposals. I begin with an explication of Edith Stein's phenomenology of communal experience and then turn to a field study of Spanish fire-walking ritual. It is my claim that these two resources can help us confirm some of the above proposals and eliminate others in an effort to get closer to clarifying what it actually means to attribute an experience to a community.

Edith Stein's Phenomenology of Community

Edith Stein completed her dissertation on the topic of empathy under Edmund Husserl in 1916 at the University of Freiburg (Stein, 1989). She went on to serve as his research assistant from 1917-1918. During that time, she edited his lectures on time consciousness and worked to prepare volumes two and three of *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* for publication.² Though she is probably most well known for her work on empathy, in 1922, she published two essays in the fifth volume of Husserl's *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*. They were entitled "Sentient Causality" and

¹ The only potential contradiction immediately obvious to me is that (i) and (ii) might be inconsistent. However, it may be possible, if one defines the subset properly, for (i) and (ii) to be co-instantiated. For example, I can imagine a group consisting of two people, one of whom is the president of the group and the other the vice president. I can further imagine one claiming that the necessary subset of the group who must have the experience in order for it to count as communal consists of the president and vice president of said group. In this instance, both (i) and (ii) would be true at the same time.

² The second and third volumes of *Ideas* were never published during Husserl's lifetime. The lectures on time consciousness were published. However, when they did, Martin Heidegger took full credit as their editor, thanking Stein for her help in transcribing the manuscript. It is now clear to scholars that he published her version without making any substantial changes. For more information, see Calcagno, 2014, pp. 5-6.

“Individual and Community.”³ These twin treatises bore the subtitle, “Contribution to the Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities.” These works, when considered alongside her dissertation and 1925 publication, *An Investigation Concerning the State* (Stein, 2007), comprise a comprehensive social and political philosophy that is beginning to draw a great deal more attention in the last decade. “Individual and Community” is of the most interest to this article because within it she develops detailed phenomenological theories of collective intentionality, social acts, and the nature of social groups.

In order to grasp Stein’s phenomenological analysis of communal experience, we must understand her starting point. She begins her analysis of community “from within.” By this, I mean that she assumes we are all members of some community or another and that we have experiences *as members* of those communities. She then brings the tools of phenomenology to bear on those experiences in order to reveal their common essence. This is to be contrasted with the typical starting point of her admittedly more prominent teacher, Edmund Husserl, who begins with the intentional structures of individuals and then proceeds to investigate how those structures can become interwoven with others so that a community emerges (See Husserl, 1973, pp. 218ff.; Husserl, 1988, p. 22; & Husserl, 2001, pp. 543ff). I see nothing wrong, in principle, with either approach, but I do believe that Stein’s has the advantage of being more accessible to her readers.

Her investigation into the “question of how it’s possible to have a community as a higher-level subject of life and a community life” begins with the comparison of individual and communal experience (Stein, 2000, p. 132). As for the individual, her conscious life is isolated,

³ These two works are collected into one volume in her collected works. See Stein, E. (2000). *Philosophy of psychology and the humanities*. Washington D.C.: ICS Publications.

in terms of direct access, from the conscious life of every other individual.⁴ She writes, “What flows out of *one* ego belongs to *one* current of consciousness, which is isolated unto itself and walled off from every other, just like the ego is” (2000, p. 133). However, despite this “inalienable aloneness,” the individual ego is capable of entering into a “community of life” with other egos, and in so doing, “the individual subject becomes a member of a super-individual subject” (Stein, 2000, p. 133).

Thus, Stein clearly believes that there are super-individual subjects of some kind, and we may now turn to her analysis of these subjects by considering her example. She asks us to compare being a member of a military unit that is grieving over the loss of its commander to grieving over the death of a personal friend (Stein, 2000, p. 134). Her analysis of this example will shed light on precisely what she takes communal experience to be. She writes, “we see that the two cases differ in several respects: (1) the subject of the experiencing is different; (2) there’s another composition to the *experience*; (3) there’s a different kind of experiential current that the experience fits into” (Stein, 2000, p. 134). In what follows, I will use Stein’s analysis of these three differences, in turn, as a guide for getting to the heart of communal experience.

First, let us examine the subject of communal experience. As a member of the military unit whose leader has been killed, the grief that I feel over this loss is not mine alone as it would be if I were to grieve over the loss of a personal friend. In such an example of communal grief, we have “a subject in our case that encompasses a plurality of individual egos. Certainly I the individual ego am filled up with grief. But I feel myself to be not alone with it. Rather I feel it as *our* grief” (Stein, 2000, p. 134). On the face of it, this appears to soften her stance vis-à-vis the

⁴ I say it is isolated in terms of direct access because Stein does argue that we have a kind of indirect access to the mental lives of others. This is her theory of empathy (*Einfühlung*). I will return to empathy below. However, a full consideration of Stein’s treatment of empathy would take us well beyond the scope of this paper. See Stein, 1989.

“inalienable aloneness” of individual egos that we saw above. How can a communal subject encompass a plurality of individual egos if they are isolated from one another? In order to understand Stein’s claim about the communal subject, we must compare it with her understanding of the individual. When she speaks of the individual subject, she distinguishes “the pure ego, that is, the quality-less point of radiation of the experiences, from the *personality*, the constituted unity of personal properties” (2000, p. 135). This distinction is useful in understanding what Stein means by a communal subject. She insists that there is no communal pure ego; however, there “very well could be a *collective personality* as that whose experiences the communal experiences are to be regarded as” (2000, p. 135).

Stein’s insistence that there is no communal ego reveals a two-fold commitment, first to the ontological separateness of individual egos, and second to the non-independence of the communal subject. We saw above, but it bears repeating, that individual egos are distinct from one another in terms of the inviolable separateness of their conscious lives. Experience is given originally only to the very subject to whom it belongs, and there is no path by which I may trace my experiences to your ego or to a super-individual ego in which you and I share original experiences. This speaks to the second point. She clearly insists that there is no ontologically separate communal ego. When we have communal experience, “we feel in the name of the community, and it’s the community’s experiencing that is carried out in us and through us” (Stein, 2000, p. 139). Only individuals *have* experiences. An individual has a group experiences *in the name* of the group.

What, then, is the communal subject? To answer this question requires us to examine the noetic and noematic correlates of communal experience. Let us consider again the example of the grieving military unit. The subject of the experience, Stein tells us, is different. How so?

There is a sense in which experiences, vis-à-vis their mode of givenness, refer back to their subjects. Those experiences which are given *to me* in the first person perspective *are mine*. The individual subject is the noetic correlate of this sense implicit in the first-person givenness of experience. Upon closer examination, it turns out that some experiences that are given to me in the first-person form also imply other subjects. They are given in the first-person *plural*. Some of my experiences carry an implicit reference to a multiplicity of subjects. This is what Stein means when, speaking of the grief experienced as a member of the unit, she writes, “I feel it as *our* grief. The experience is essentially colored by the fact that others are taking part in it, or even more, by the fact that I take part in it only as a member of a community” (2000, p. 134). Communal experiences possess an essential noetic sense implying ownership by several subjects. As the individual subject is the subjective correlate of first-person singular experiences, the communal subject is the subjective correlate of first-personal plural experiences.

The second difference between individual and communal experience that Stein notes is that “the composition of the experience is different” (2000, p. 134). We have already seen, on the noetic side, how this is the case. However, there is a different noematic composition of communal experiences as well. The *experiencing* of every experience is private – thus, the ego’s inalienable aloneness – but communal experience possesses a distinctive noematic feature. Stein writes, “It has a *sense*, and by virtue of that sense it claims to count for something lying beyond the private experiencing, something subsisting objectively, through which it is rationally substantiated” (2000, p. 135-136). The object of communal experience possesses a noematic sense that qualifies it as a *shared* content. Of course, the individual experiencing differs from person to person. Stein speaks of a “private veneer” that surrounds the shared core of communal experience (2000, p. 136). For example, I may grieve the loss of our commander more acutely

than you do. Still, “the sense-content of each of the individual experiences applying to this correlate is *idealiter* the same, notwithstanding the private veneer that encloses it at any given time” (Stein, 2000, p. 136). There is a single noematic sense to the experience that is shared between us.

The shared sense content that constitutes the communal grief aims toward the fully motivated experience of the community. Let me explain. What counts for the complete intentional content of a communal experience is a difficult question, one that Stein’s analysis raises but does not fully answer. It will be helpful to make a distinction here. There are two questions one may ask *vis-à-vis* communal experience: 1) What must individual experiences be like if they are to be considered shared, or communal?; and 2) How is the object of communal experience constituted? In response to the first question, Stein identifies plural noetic and noematic senses of experience that are ideally the same between subjects. Individual experiences with these senses count as shared. To put it slightly differently, if Tom and Gina each have an individual experience of event *E*, and their consciousness of *E* contains a plural noetic correlate implicating both Tom and Gina as subjects, and if a shared noematic sense marks the composition of the object of *E*, then Tom and Gina may be said to share an experience.

The second question is more difficult to answer. The full content of the communal grief is a constituted unity. “We feel the grief as something belonging to the unit, and in the fact that we’re doing that, through this grief we’re calling for the grief of the unit to be realized” (Stein, 2000, p. 137). And, the constitution of this communal grief is an intersubjective affair; “a whole series of current of consciousness contributes to its coalescence” (Stein, 2000, p. 136). Furthermore, the constitution of the communal content takes time. “It isn’t something instantaneous. It develops in a continuity of experiencing during an interval and shows all sorts

of qualitative fluctuations within its unity” (Stein, 2000, p. 136). The noematic intentional correlate of the communal experience is constituted out of individual experiences of the group’s members, those implied in the subjective/noetic correlate, and the content of the communal noema undergoes changes as it receives more and more input. Just as the intentional object of visual perception changes as the experience is deepened, when, for example, I walk around the object and examine it more closely, so too the intentional content of communal experience fluctuates as more and more members contribute to its coalescence. As with any object of consciousness, its full constitution may be an open-ended project since there are always infinitely more perspectives to be gained.

So far, Stein has portrayed communal experience as having characteristic noetic and noematic senses. Its noetic sense refers it, in terms of ownership, back to a plurality of experiencing subjects. The noematic sense of the communal experience is marked with a special shared sense (*Sinn*), and the full communal content is a constituted unity. This shared sense, Stein insists, must be accessible in principle to any member of the community (2000, p. 136). Given these qualifications, one can conclude that all that is required for a “community” to have an experience is for *at least one* member of the community to realize the fully motivated sense content in her experience. This strikes an odd tone, and so, Stein’s elaboration on this point is worth quoting in full.

If none of the members feels the appropriate grief, then you've got to say that the loss isn't correctly appreciated by the unit. If even *one* member has realized within himself the rationally required sense-content, then that no longer holds: there the one is feeling “in the name of the unit,” and in him the unit has satisfied the claim placed upon it. The experiences of the others aren't eliminated by this. They all share in the assembling of the

communal experience; but that which was *intended* in all of them came *to fulfillment* in the experience of this one alone (2000, pp. 136-137).

Just so long as one member of the community realizes, within her own stream of consciousness, the properly motivated communal senses (noetic and noematic), the community may be said to have the experience. On the other hand, if none of the members of the military unit were to have the appropriate grief – if, for example, each grieved only over what the loss meant to her personally – then the community would fail to have the experience.

I would now like to turn to the third and final difference between communal and individual experiences Stein indicates. The experiences fit into a different kind of experiential current. Stein writes, “we can justifiably talk about one *experiential current of the community*” (2000, p. 140). This may come as a shock given what we saw above. For example, she is clear that “A community-subject, as analog of the pure ego, does not exist” (Stein, 2000, p. 135). She adds later that, “this ‘communal consciousness’ of ours doesn't constitute any super-individual communal consciousness, as private experiencing and its content constitute a super-individual experiencing and a super-individual content” (Stein, 2000, p. 139). She attempts to walk the line that asserts the reality of the community’s stream of *experiences* while denying the existence of a communal stream of *consciousness*.

In her descriptions of the individual ego, both in *On The Problem of Empathy* and up to this point in “Individual and Community,” she did not need to distinguish between the current of experience and the current of consciousness. It was unnecessary, she claims, because here “the term consciousness in the usual manner of speaking extended from the moment of the experience” (2000, p. 140). In the individual, the current of consciousness is identical with the current of experiences. The use of the aqueous metaphor to describe the stream of consciousness

is traceable to its principle of unity. A stream of consciousness is *a stream* because the experiences it comprises are connected in a continual flowing such that the experiencing subject may trace them back to her experiencing ego. In other words, all the experiences in the stream of consciousness are her experiences, and the pure ego is the principle of unity of that stream. The same cannot be said for the communal current of experience and its unity. Stein writes, “But with communal experience we have to distinguish strictly: here there’s no current of consciousness as an originally constitutive flow” (2000, p. 140). Like the communal content discussed above, the communal current of experiences is a constituted unity. It is closer to a personality than it is to a unified stream of consciousness.

This fits with what Stein says about the experiencing of the communal subject. The community has experiences but is not self-conscious. “The community becomes conscious of itself only in us” (Stein, 2000, p. 139). She writes, “[T]here can’t be any self-supporting communal consciousness, any more than there’s a communal life that constitutes” (Stein, 2000, p. 140). She goes on to add, “Accordingly, we won’t be allowed to talk about any ‘consciousness’ of the community in the strict sense” (Stein, 2000, p. 140). Only individuals are self-conscious subjects. The difference between an individual and a communal current of experiences is a constitutional one. The communal differs from the individual “through the fact that, as to its constitution, it refers back to the original conscious life of a plurality of subjects” (Stein, 2000, p. 140). We saw this above with the identification of the communal subject as the subjective correlate of experiences given in the first-person plural. Communal experiences are constituted on their noetic and noematic sides with respect to their being experienced and to their content, and the result of these constitutive functions is a unified current of experiences that, properly speaking, belongs to the community.

The communal current of experience does not permeate the individual current. If it did, there would be no distinguishing between the two. Rather, “what the individual experiences as a member of the community forms the material out of which the communal experiences coalesce,” and the same extends to the coalescence of the communal current in the individual current (Stein, 2000, p. 141). The communal current of experience is a constituted current of experience that has its place *within* individual streams of consciousness. There is a stream of consciousness that is the individual’s conscious life, and there are many experiential currents in that stream. Each of our streams of consciousness contains both individual currents and group currents. The group currents of experience are constituted out of those individual experiences with group significance. Those experiences are marked on both the noetic and noematic sides with an essential communal sense. On the noetic side, this sense implies the givenness of the experience to a plurality of subjects. The subjective correlate of this noetic sense is the communal subject. On the noematic side, there is an essential sense of the intentional object’s belonging to the community. The experiences of the community are connected by the sharing of these senses. The communal subject constitutes those experiences with these essential traits into a whole and the ideal correlate of this constituted unity is the communal current of experience.

One important question is this: what enables the cohesion of the communal current of experience? Though Stein does not give a direct answer to this question, I will attempt one on her behalf. First, the repeated noetic and noematic senses themselves function as a kind of cohesion amongst disparate communal experiences. The identity of the plural noetic and noematic references unifies these experiences across time. In a manner similar to the way in which the first-person givenness of my experiences unify my current of experience, the first-person plural givenness of communal experiences unifies them. As I have put it elsewhere, if

experiences *E1* and *E2* are had at time *t1* and *t2* respectively, provided that *E1* and *E2* possess the same first-person plural correlate, they are united in some sense (Burns, 2015, p. 543). Or, there is a we-mode of experiencing, as Raimo Tuomela and others have expressed this point, that unifies communal experience (Cf. Tuomela, 2007, pp. 13-45).⁵ Those experiences with the same we-reference, are unified in some important sense. Of course, we must admit that some communal currents of experience will be more cohesive than others. Some will be strongly unified, others will likely be weak and fragmentary. Though Stein does not state this, I believe she would be committed to the notion that the more solidarity there is amongst members of the community, the deeper their intersubjective bonds, and the more openly and naively they live together while allowing the concerns of the others to become their own, the more cohesive the communal current of experience will be.

Before proceeding to consider the fire-walking ritual, I would be remiss if I were to ignore Stein's account of empathy and its relation to communal experience. Although the term empathy (*Einfühlung*) appears only twice in the body of *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, as an intentional structure of experience, it makes a fundamental contribution to communal experience.

By empathy, Stein means "acts in which foreign experience (*fremdes Erleben*) is comprehended" (1989, p. 6). In an act of empathy, one subject undergoes another subject's experiences, *as other*. For example, a friend tells me of the loss of his brother in war. I become aware of the pain of his loss in "the pained countenance" (Stein, 1989, p. 6). Stein insists that this experience of the other's pain is not based on imitation, association, or inference from analogy – each of which were popular genetic theories of empathy in her day (Cf. 1989, pp. 22-27). Rather,

⁵ I would like to borrow this way of speaking from Tuomela without committing myself to any of the particularities of his social ontology. However, there is a fruitful dialogue to be had here as well. Antonio Calcagno has begun just such a discussion (See Calcagno, 2014, pp. 127-30).

it is a *sui generis* form of perception (Stein, 1989, p. 11). There is a very real sense in which the conscious lives of other subjects are perceivable.

Phenomenologically speaking, empathy belongs to the class of acts which are called apperceptions (*Vergegenwärtigungen*). Apperception is the name given to something that is perceived with or alongside another perception; it thus encompasses the concept of an empty intention and of a horizon (See Husserl, 2006, p. 83, n. 12). As such, all empathy is, for Stein, founded on the perception of the other's body as a living body (1989, pp. 56-59). In other words, there are times when, as I perceive your body, I also directly perceive your conscious experience, albeit as yours. For example, when I see your face redden and your fist clench, I see your anger *in* these things.

Rather than go into the full details of Stein's original theory of empathy, I would like to restrict my considerations to how empathy makes communal experience both possible and meaningful. The first of these is, perhaps, the most obvious. Were it impossible to overcome the inalienable aloneness of my solitary experiencing, communal life would also be impossible. Empathy identifies the class of acts that make it possible for individuals to have a social life in the first place. Through empathy, I can allow your concerns to affect me and become important for me. Without it, there could be no *we*, only competing I's. The possibility of pooling our collective power and putting it to work for *us*, the possibility of my accomplishing something beyond that of which I am individually capable, emerges from empathy. Without it, it is impossible for us to come together and constitute a community as a higher-order personality.

Empathy also makes communal experience meaningful. Recall that communal experience involves noetic and noematic senses that refer to both the subject and content of the experience as being plural. Furthermore, the fullest sense of communal experience involves the constitution

of the full communal sense content of the experience. The question of communal experience is not a question of numbers but of rationally motivated sense content. Empathy is the well-spring of this communal content. The communal experience is deepened as more and more subjects contribute to its coalescence, but it is deepened in each of our individual streams of consciousness, each of which are actively constituting the communal stream of experience. To return to the example of the grieving of the military unit, as you and I grieve in the name of the unit, I empathize with your grief and you empathize with mine. The content received in acts of empathy contributes to the overall meaning of the group's grief and the constitution of the community's grief as such. Empathy is the primary experience whereby we share rationally motivated sense content, thus making communal experiences meaningful.⁶ With these thoughts in mind, I now turn to the analysis of the Spanish fire-walking ritual.

A Spanish Fire-Walking Ritual

Collective rituals, which are present in almost all known societies, may offer a potential opportunity to study collective experience. Before I return to evaluate the six suggestions of how to account for a communal experience, I would like to turn to an empirical study of a ritual that may help bolster the foregoing phenomenological analyses. In 2011, Konvalinka et al. published a study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* in which they assessed synchronous physiological arousal during a fire-walking ritual, observed in San Pedro Manrique, Spain.

As a part of this ritual, a fire is stoked in a specially built arena. The fire consumes two tons of oak and is allowed to burn for four hours before it is reduced to a bed of hot coals, which

⁶ Thanks to the anonymous reviewer of this article for this particular turn of phrase.

are burning at approximately 677 degrees Celsius when the walkers cross them. The ritual begins with a procession from the center of town. Those who will participate in the ceremony, musicians, and a large group of spectators proceed through town and into the arena, which holds approximately 3000 people. Aside from the fire walkers, those present at the event include locals, friends, family, and visitors. Once inside the arena, the spectators take their seats, the walkers dance around the coals for a few minutes before determining the order in which they will cross. They then take their seats to wait their turn. The fire walkers cross the coals one at a time, and many of them do so while carrying a loved one on their backs. Once across, their friends and families rush to congratulate them (Konvalinka et al., 2011, pp. 8514-8515).

The study included thirty-eight participants, twelve fire walkers, nine spectators who were friends or relatives of at least one fire walker, and seventeen spectators not related to any of the locals. Synchronous arousal between spectators and participants was compared using recurrence quantification analysis (RQA) and cross-recurrence quantification analysis (CRQA) on pairs. RQA and CRQA are non-linear mathematical methods that quantify how similarly two observed data series unfold over time, measuring the similarities of the trajectories of dynamical systems being compared. According to Fusaroli, Konvalinka, and Wallot, RQA “reconstructs the dynamical system underlying a time-series, maps its possible states and quantifies the trajectory of the system through these states,” and CRQA “quantifies how often the two systems display similar patterns of change or movement, and how complex the structure of the entrainment between their trajectories is” (2014, p. 139). RQA and CRQA thus show deeper similarities between data sets than mere correlations.

A brief word on why I find this study so compelling are in order before discussing its results. The first reason is that the participants and spectators have radically different bodily

behavior during the rite. In rituals where there is similar bodily behavior between participants and spectators, it would be more likely to observe similar physiological arousal due to said behavior. The second reason that I find this study so compelling is that it studies differences in synchronous arousal between related and non-related spectators. Therefore, if there is some significant difference in arousal patterns between these groups of spectators, it suggests that the reason for the difference must go beyond simple empathy based on neurological mirroring.

I now turn to the results of the study. Per Konvalinka et al.:

Cross-recurrence plots were computed for three different pairs of participants: (i) related fire-walkers and spectators, (ii) tangentially related fire-walkers and spectators, whereby the spectators were related to one of the other walkers, and (iii) unrelated fire-walkers and spectators, whereby the spectators had no relation to anyone in the ritual. This allowed us to investigate how the ritual affected the group level and whether shared arousal was modulated by the level of relation (2011, p. 8516)

Both RQA and CRQA showed similarities in the physiological arousal of the performers and the related spectators. However, neither showed patterns of similarity between performers and non-related spectators. The CRQA analysis demonstrated fine grained “coupling of arousal patterns between fire-walkers and related spectators” (Konvalinka et al., 2011, p. 8518). What was found was *not* a simple correlated increase in heart rate between a fire walker and her spouse, as one might suspect. Rather, the data show that “there are shared patterns of arousal that span the fire-walking ritual across all of the individual fire-walks, between performers and spectators that are related or tangentially related” (Konvalinka et al., 2011, p. 8517). In other words, participants and related spectators shared deeply similar patterns of physiological arousal during the ceremony. However, unrelated spectators did not share these arousal patterns.

RQA analysis was used to measure similarity between participants and observers using four metrics: predictability, stability, complexity, and smoothness. The study revealed significant differences across all four metrics between related spectators and non-related spectators. However, the same tests failed to differentiate between participants and related spectators on three out of the four metrics (Konvalinka et al., 2011, p. 8516). It should be noted that the related spectators and the unrelated spectators had superficially similar experiences in that neither performed in the ritual and both were seated throughout.

We can conclude from the study that there is an observable difference in one's experience of the ritual based on group membership. As the study concluded, it is "not enough to merely observe the ritual to show collective emotions experienced by the performers and their supporters. The observers must share membership in the group and have a relationship with at least one of the participants to share this tightly coupled group experience reflected in the heart rate dynamics" (Konvalinka et al., 2011, p. 8518). Membership in the group modulates one's experience of the ritual itself. I want to suggest that this empirical data strengthens the phenomenological evidence of a we-mode of experience – even if it is at a pre-reflective and sentient level.

Furthermore, simple neurological mirroring cannot account for these findings. Just seeing the ritual or being present is insufficient to bring about the levels of synchronous arousal that the study found. The ritual is very arousing for everyone involved, and "[s]haring of emotions merely through mirroring is of course possible and expected in the other spectators as well" (Konvalinka et al., 2011, p. 8518). However, if the synchronous arousal were only the result of neurological mirroring, one would expect to find it in both groups of spectators. This is precisely

not the case. There is something happening to the participants and the related spectators that is not happening to non-related spectators.⁷

Concluding on Conditions for Collective Experience

Keeping the preceding phenomenological analyses and empirical data in mind, I now wish to return to the six proposals that began this article. My hope is to eliminate some and confirm others so that we may have a clear conception of what it means to call an experience “communal.”

The first proposal was that each member of the group must have the experience in order for the experience to count as communal. In light of the preceding, it seems we should reject this. Whether or not a group has an experience is not, as we noted above, a question of numbers. What we ought to understand to be at stake instead is the fulfillment of rationally motivated sense content. Just so long as at least one member of the group has the properly motivated experience, it seems we can say that the group has the experience.

There may be other good reasons to reject (i). First, it seems too narrow a way to define a group. In (i), it is just the fact of one’s being present for an event that constitutes one as part of the group. Imagine the socialist party has a meeting, and in this meeting, actions are taken that have an effect on the whole party. Say, for example, the party splits into three. I would like to say that the group upon whom this has an effect, and who share in the experience of the schism going forward, can include members of the party who were not present at the meeting. Second, I am inclined to believe that an experience can be a communal experience without affecting *all* members of a group. For example, if a political party wins its first seat in government. There can be a communal experience of joy even if one member is away and does not learn of the event

⁷ Fischer, R. et. al. (2014) studies a Hindu fire-walking ritual and finds similar results, viz., that the level of one’s involvement in the ritual shapes one’s affective response to it.

until many weeks later. If (i) is the case, then there cannot, properly speaking, be a communal experience until every member of the group has the experience, and I find that counterintuitive.

One who is deeply committed to (i) might try to salvage it with the following suggestion. It could be the case that (i) is a sufficient but not necessary condition for a communal experience. In other words, if each member of the community has the experience *E*, then the group has the experience. However, it is not the case that, if it is a single member fails to have *E*, then the community does not experience *E*. Here, I must admit that I have been somewhat sloppy in my use of language. What does it mean to say that each member of the group “has the experience?” If this means that the individual has, within her stream of conscious life, an experience of the fully motivated communal content, then it seems to me that (i) is a sufficient but not necessary condition for communal experience. However, we must recall that Stein insists that if *any member’s* stream of consciousness contains the properly motivated content, then this is sufficient for the community to have the experience. This makes (i)’s being true trivial in the following sense. If it is true that one member’s having the experience is sufficient for a communal experience, then surely it is true that every member’s having the experience is sufficient as well. It seems pedantic, then, to insist on the truth of (i) even as a sufficient condition.

This brings us to (ii), that a subset of the group must have the experience in order for it to count as communal. I take it that this is obviously a necessary condition. If no members of the group have the experience, there is nothing to count as communal. Furthermore, I would claim that this is also a sufficient condition, assuming that “has the experience” is qualified as above. There is, I believe, a danger in trying to specify (ii) any further. We should not try to identify how large the subset of the group must be. As has been argued above, a group’s having an experience is not a question of reaching a critical mass of members who have the experience.

Furthermore, because many groups lacking formalized structures can both exist and be the bearers of experiences, I can see no good reason to identify the necessary group subset with any particular organizational or administrative roles. Group membership itself suffices.

Let us now consider (iii). I argue that Stein's phenomenology of communal experience and the empirical data garnered from the fire-walking ritual offer reason to accept the third proposal, which suggests that a communal experience is given in such a way that it is specifically qualified as "communal." Stein's analysis identifies plural noetic and noematic senses that are constitutive of communal experiences.

Her analyses, in some sense, predict the results of the fire-walking study, which shows that there are distinctive patterns of arousal during the ceremony that are shared by members of the community – and members only. One way in which this might be further tested is by modifying the study performed at the fire-walking ritual. The same techniques could be used to measure the heart rate patterns of participants and spectators while withholding group membership information from the scientists analyzing the data until their computations are complete. Theoretically, the scientists should be able to predict group membership based on patterns of arousal.

I also believe that we should affirm (iv), albeit with some qualifications. This proposal claims that the experience is given in consciousness as belonging to a stream of experiences that is specifically the communal stream. The communal experience's sense of belonging to a communal stream must not be construed as the individual "tapping into" a super-individual stream of consciousness of which she is a part. Rather, those experiences which we have "in the name of the group," to use Stein's expression, belong to a group current of experience *within* the

individual stream of consciousness, and within that stream of consciousness, there is an identifiable current of experiences that belong to the group.

Finally, there is good reason to reject (v). Only individuals, as far as we can tell, are centers of conscious experience. To affirm (v) is to commit the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. Allow me explain what I mean. Imagine you come to visit me at Loyola Marymount University. I tell you that I am going to show you the university. I walk you through campus, show you the classrooms, the dorms, the library, the chapel, and the administrative offices. If, at the end of the tour, you reply, “That’s wonderful, but where’s the university? You showed me a bunch of buildings and people, but I never saw a university,” then you are committing this fallacy. Just as a university is a collection of buildings and people, communities are collections of individuals. There is no super-individual ego whose experiences are those of the group. There is no good evidence, empirical or phenomenological, for the existence of super-individual egos.

In conclusion, I have argued that in order for an experience to count as a communal experience it must meet the following three criteria. First, a subset of the group must have the experience. Secondly, the experience is one that is given in consciousness with plural noetic and noematic senses. The plural noetic sense is the sense of the experience that refers it back as belonging to a plurality of experiences rather than to a lone individual. The plural noematic sense identifies the content of the experience as shared. Also, the ideal correlate of this plural noematic content must be that which the experience rationally motivates. Third, the experiences can be said to belong to a communal current of experience so long as one does not commit the error of granting the bearer of these experiences ontological independence. It seems that any theory that tries to solve the curious case of collective experience must meet these three conditions.

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