



Do Imaginings have a Goal?

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Abstract

The paper investigates whether imaginative states about propositions can be assessed in terms of fittingness (also known as correctness, appropriateness, aptness). After characterizing propositional imaginings and explaining the idea of fittingness, I present some considerations in favour of the *no conditions* view: imagining seems to be the sort of action that cannot be done unfittingly, and imaginings have no external cognitive nor conative goals in light of which they could be unfitting. I then examine the *local conditions* view, that there can be fittingness conditions on imaginings, but that these are inherited from the mental projects in which imaginings can play a role. Given that there are virtues of the imagination such as creativity and spontaneity, and given that imaginings are subject to purposive mechanisms, and given that there are cases in which it is unfitting to fail to imagine, I endorse the *general conditions* view, on which imaginings have a goal, and therefore fittingness conditions, even outside the context of mental projects. I then examine 4 versions of the general conditions view and argue that imaginings aim to make contents available to mental projects.

Keywords Fittingness · Functionalism · Imagination · Philosophy of mind · Propositional attitudes

1 Introduction

This paper investigates whether imaginative states about propositions can be assessed in terms of fittingness (also known as correctness, appropriateness, aptness (McHugh and Way 2016)). I begin by presenting some considerations in favour of the *no conditions* view, that we make a category error if we try to evaluate imaginings in terms of fittingness. I then present some arguments for the *local conditions* view, that there can be fittingness conditions on propositional imaginings, but locally; that these conditions are grounded in the role of a propositional imagining in

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a larger mental project. I ultimately argue for the *general conditions* view, on which imaginings do have a goal, and therefore fittingness conditions, even outside the context of larger mental projects. I then examine four versions of the general conditions view, concluding that the goal of imaginings is to make contents available to mental projects. Before presenting the arguments for these views, I characterize propositional imaginings and explain the idea of fittingness.

So far as I am aware, the question of this paper is not addressed in the contemporary literature on the imagination. I do not engage with historical conceptions of the imagination, or other closely related concepts, which might suggest fittingness conditions on imaginings. For example, Aristotle's *phantasia* is a faculty that reproduces (Aristotle 2016, 427b 17) the immaterial forms of the things that we encounter in sense experience; it is "a motion [of the soul] effected by actual perception," "in virtue of which we say that a particular image [phantasma] comes about for us" (Aristotle 2016, 429a 1, 428a 1). As Aquinas puts it, the *phantasia* is "a storehouse of forms received through the senses" (Aquinas 1947, ST I Q74, A4, co.). Since *phantasma* are "of those things of which perception is" (Aristotle 2016, 428b 12), we might say that a *phantasma* is fitting when it accurately reproduces the forms encountered in experience—for example, that when my *phantasia* undertakes to reproduce the form of a cuttlefish it doesn't instead reproduce the form of a nautilus, or of some cuttlefish-like creature that lacks eyes. However, it is doubtful that this and other historical conceptions correspond well-enough to what we mean by the imagination (White 1985, p. 484), so I set them aside for the present purpose.

2 Characterizing Propositional Imaginings

Let's put aside various loose uses of the term "imagining," e.g., a low-confidence belief, "I imagine I'll be home before 6," or believing falsely, "I used to imagine that he cared," or disabusing someone of their false belief "Don't imagine that I care!".

Some imaginings are experiential (sensuous, imagistic). Such imaginings are phenomenologically rich, they have a strong "what it is like." If I ask you to imagine stroking a tiger (the feel of its fur, the heat of its breath) I am asking you to have a certain inner experience akin to a sensory experience, not for you to frame a proposition in your mind. My discussion does not concern experiential imaginings.

My discussion concerns propositional (factual, semantic) imagining, *imagining that*, imagining as a sort of propositional attitude (henceforth simply "imagining"). Imagining can be conceptually decomposed into the proposition represented and the attitude that represents it, the manner in which my mind relates to the proposition (Dorsch 2012, pp. 33–35). I might relate to the proposition "Agatha is eating lunch" in the imaginative way, the belief way, the hope way, the doubt way, etc. Most imaginative states are on a spectrum from the phenomenologically florid ("imagine that a rat is nibbling your eye") to the phenomenologically muted ("imagine that interest rates will remain stable"). Propositional imaginings can have an associated experience, but this is not essential to them. For example, in imagining the latter, I frame an image of a stock-market arrow in my mind, but I could imagine this same proposition along with a different image.

A few more necessary pieces of terminology to facilitate my discussion. *Simple-imaginings* are imaginings in which I imagine a single proposition and have no apparent goal for doing so. *Mind-wandering* (Dorsch 2015) is when, in a temporally discrete episode, I imagine a series of propositions that are associatively or thematically related, again with no apparent goal. A further case is when imaginings are undertaken with an apparent goal, *mental projects*. To decide whether he should adopt a dog, Tom carefully imagines the various possible consequences of the decision. Other examples of mental projects include “mentally calculating a sum; drawing an inference; making up our minds about what to think or do” (Dorsch 2015, p. 793). In the course of his mental project, Tom will imagine various things and also assemble various memories, beliefs, affective states, and desires, using them in conjunction with one another to achieve the mental project’s goal. For example, Tom imagines that the dog bites his child and gauges his emotional reaction to this possibility. I use *imaginative project* to signify the imaginative aspects of a mental project, including a purely imaginative mental project.

2.1 Two Core Characteristics

I do not offer necessary and sufficient conditions for imaginings, and I assume the mainstream view that imaginings are *sui generis*, rather than reducible to some other type of mental state (cf. Langland-Hassan 2012). I offer two core characteristics of imaginings that will help inform the subsequent discussion.

First, imaginings are not truth-evaluable (Dorsch 2012, p. 62; McGinn 2004, p. 132; Schellenberg 2013, p. 500). This is because imaginings (unlike memories or beliefs) are not cognitive. That is, imaginings do not have a mind-to-world direction of fit, they are not attempts to conform the mind to the external world. Although imaginings represent propositions to our mind, they do not represent them as true, and so it is an error to evaluate them as either true or false. For instance, if I imagine “that flicking the switch will cause the light to turn on” and I then discover that flicking the switch causes the fan to turn on, then my imagining is not “false,” even though it represents something that is not true, because it did not represent it as true; it did not purport to represent reality. Again, if I discover that flicking the switch does in fact cause the light to turn on, my imagining was not true, because it made no claims about reality. In this respect, imaginings are akin to utterances rather than assertions—they express, rather than assert as true, a proposition. Not being truth-evaluable distinguishes imaginings from propositional attitudes that are cognitive in a more tentative way than belief (opinion, hypothesis, assumption, hunch, alief (Gendler 2008)), and from propositional attitudes like disbelief or doubt. This characteristic also distinguishes imaginings from propositional attitudes in which we evaluate a proposition as true or false (or are unsure of its truth value), yet treat it *as if* (Vaihinger 1935) it were true for some practical purpose (acceptance, supposition, reliance). Although imaginings can be used for various practical purposes, they are not a way of treating a proposition as if it were true.

Second, imaginings are subject to the will, to volition (Dorsch 2012, p. 2; Gendler 2008, p. 651; Kind 2001, p. 89; McGinn 2004, p. 12; Scruton 1973, p. 117). By acts

of will, we can begin, continue, stop, and refrain from imagining. This distinguishes imaginings from beliefs, perceptions, and most other mental states. Clearly, imaginings are not only or perfectly subject to the will: in ordinary consciousness there is “a kind of background hum of imagistic activity” (McGinn 2004, p. 14). Imaginings can appear unbidden. It can be very difficult to imagine things that are highly complex or novel. It can be difficult to stop imagining something. Nevertheless, imaginings are subject to the will, the sorts of things that makes sense to try to subject to the will (unlike beliefs), and we have a reasonably high degree of volitional control over our imaginings.

Although imaginings are subject to the will, it seems that they are not conative. That is, they do not have a world-to-mind direction of fit, they are not attempts to conform the external world to the mind. Conative states (want, wish, preference, desire) involve dispositions to action, to choice, to change things, and they achieve their goal and are satisfied when that change occurs (Schroeder 2015). By contrast, although we can stimulate conative states by imagining things, imaginings themselves do not involve dispositions to action, nor is there a sense in which an imagining finds achievement or satisfaction in some change in the world. Whereas “I desired it and it happened. Hooray!” makes sense, “I imagined it and it happened. Hooray!” is a *non sequitur*—clearly, we do not want many of the propositions that we imagine to be true, nor is a token imagining a bad one because no actions follow from it. So, whilst it seems that imaginative states result from a mental action, or are themselves mental actions (Dorsch 2012, pp. 381–430), they do not themselves incite further action or try to achieve something beyond themselves. To use an Aristotelian term, imaginings are purely immanent, rather than transient, actions: they actualize only the agent, they achieve nothing outside the agent, they are not ordered toward external change, they have “no product apart from the actuality, the actuality is in the agent” (Aristotle 1991, 1050 30a). When we are imagining, rather than, say, building a house, we may say that “its End, being the actual exercise of the art, is contained within the art itself, and is not something extraneous to it” (Cicero 2014, Bk. 3, Sec. 23) This is not to deny that imaginings can be put to use in mental projects that aim at change, only that imaginings *qua* imaginings do not aim at some change external to the agent.

3 Evaluating Propositional Imaginings

Although not truth-evaluable, imaginings can be evaluated in many other ways. Imaginings can be evaluated in moral terms: spending my days imagining that I am Aristotle would be vain, vicious (Cooke 2014). Imaginings can be evaluated in prudential terms, as beneficial or harmful: imagining things that spark your anxiety is bad for you. Imaginings can be evaluated in aesthetic terms: imagining a peaceful world might be beautiful or twee. Imaginings can be evaluated in epistemic terms: imagining can provide insight into modalities and probabilities (and, often mislead us about them). Again, an imaginative project can suffer from epistemic vices such as folly, obtuseness, superficiality; Tom neglects to imagine the possible medical expenses of adopting a dog. Again, we might evaluate imaginings as healthy or

unhealthy, or as normal or abnormal for creatures like us; persistently imagining that the security forces are following you is unhealthy and abnormal, whereas a teenage boy who persistently imagines various lascivious scenes is at least healthy and normal.

Putting these other types of evaluation aside, fittingness is an evaluation about intentional attitudes and their relationship to the intentional objects that they are about. Fittingness conditions are endogenous to an attitude, generated by the nature of the attitude itself. A wide range of intentional attitudes can be assessed as fitting or unfitting, from cognitions (it is fitting to believe the truth, to doubt the doubtful), to conations (it is fitting to wish for the best, to hunger for food), to states that are a mix of these, like emotions (it is fitting to feel sad about the saddening, to feel embarrassed about the embarrassing). The true is that which it is fitting to believe, the saddening is that which it is fitting to be sad about, and so forth. In these cases, there is a fitting relation between the intentional attitude and the corresponding intentional object. By contrast, if I feel joy at being mauled by a vicious dog (something that is not joyful) or if I doubt that $2 + 2 = 4$ (something that is not doubtful) then my attitudes are unfitting. The intentional objects (the joyful, the doubtful) that such attitudes ought to be about are not present in these situations. If I fail to feel grateful at that which is worthy of gratitude, or fail to feel shame at that which is shameful, then an attitude is absent where it is due, which is also unfitting. Note that, depending on the intentional attitude in question, evaluations of fittingness can be identical with one of the evaluations noted above; for example the fittingness and the truthfulness of a belief are the same evaluation, supposing that belief aims at truth (Velleman 2000).

Whilst some hold that fittingness is a *sui generis* evaluation (McHugh & Way 2016), I will assume that fittingness just is the proper functioning of mental states. If the reader objects to this identification, they may nevertheless profitably read this article as being about the proper-functioning conditions of imaginings. Consider the heart. A heart just is that which is oriented toward the goal of pumping blood, its proper function is to pump blood. To the degree that a heart fails to pump blood, where this is not due to some external frustration (e.g., a clogged artery somewhere else in the body), it is malfunctioning, and if something ceases to be able to pump blood at all, it ceases to be a heart. The heart serves its proper function via various physical mechanisms—the contraction of muscle tissues, the opening and closing of vents, and many other conceivable mechanisms besides. Likewise, a mental state is characterized by its orientation toward a certain goal, and it is fitting to the extent that it is poised to achieve its goal, absent external frustrations. For example, suppose that the goal of belief is truth, that belief just is the mental state that aims to represent the true. Given this goal, a belief is “subject to mechanisms designed to make it true” (Velleman 2000, p. 254). When these (psychological) mechanisms work as they should then, absent some external frustration, the belief will exhibit proper functioning by tending toward being true. By contrast, when a belief of ours is not subject to these mechanisms—e.g., it becomes insensitive to new evidence—the consequence is that it becomes unfitting, malfunctioning, and after some margin, not a belief at all but some other mental state, such as a delusion (Bortolotti 2022, p. 4.2).

I now turn to arguing for three possible views about the fittingness of imaginative states. Though I think each has some plausibility, I endorse the third view on which there are general fittingness conditions on imaginings.

4 The No Conditions View

A first reason for the theory that there are no fittingness conditions on our imaginings is based on the absence of intuitive judgments of unfittingness. Regarding simple imaginings and mind-wandering, imagining that one engages in with no apparent goal, it is hard to think of cases in which they are unfitting. For no apparent reason, I imagine that there is a cheese toasty, I imagine that it is a green cheese toasty twice as big as the earth, that the cheese toasty is conscious, etc. Whatever I imagine, the judgment never arises that I have done something unfitting, imagined incorrectly, even when the propositions I imagine are metaphysically impossible or very bizarre, or if the series of propositions imagined have no thematic relation. By contrast, it's very easy to cite examples of unfitting beliefs, unfitting memories, unfitting desires, etc.

A second reason for the theory that imaginings cannot be unfitting is drawn from the two characteristics noted previously. We saw that imaginings are not cognitive. This eliminates one crucial way in which attitudes (like belief) can be fitting and unfitting. Again, we saw that imaginings are not conative (like desire). This eliminates another crucial way in which attitudes can be evaluated as fitting. Given the inapplicability of these two rather capacious categories, categories that provide the fittingness conditions for so many other mental states, it's plausible that imaginings have no fittingness conditions. It is hard to think of the goal in light of which imaginings could be evaluated in terms of fittingness, a goal of the mind that is neither cognitive nor conative, so perhaps there are none. Again, if imaginings are immanent actions, the goal of which is achieved just by their occurrence, it seems that one cannot imagine unfittingly.

Given the apparent absence of both the "data" and the "theory" of how imaginings could be unfitting, it seems plausible to infer that in fact imaginings cannot be unfitting.

5 The Local Conditions View

Here is an argument for the claim that there can be fittingness conditions on imaginings, at least under certain conditions. On this view, fittingness is a judgement that attaches to imaginings *qua* parts of a mental project, rather than *qua* specific type of mental state – nevertheless, on this view some imaginings are evaluated as fitting or unfitting.

- (1) Some imaginings play roles in mental projects.
- (2) If an imagining plays a role in a mental project, then it has a goal.
- (3) Some imaginings have goals (from 1 and 2)

- (4) If some imaginings have goals, then some imaginings can be evaluated as fitting or unfitting
- (5) Some imaginings can be evaluated as fitting or unfitting (from 3 and 4).

(4) will be assumed given my identification of fittingness with proper-functioning; the fitting imaginings will be those that tend to achieve their goal within the mental project. I argue for (1) and (2).

5.1 Premise 1

Regarding (1), imaginings are constitutive parts of certain types of mental projects, in which they perform a function. McGinn suggests that the imagination, by helping us consider counterfactuals and by presenting possibilities, plays a role in many cases of belief-formation (McGinn 2004, pp. 138–142). Similarly, Dorsch argues that the imagination can be used in certain mental projects to ascertain even non-modal knowledge (Dorsch 2016, p. 6). Nanay suggests that the imagination is, in addition to belief and desire, crucial for decision-making because of how it helps us discover and consider alternatives (Nanay 2016, p. 134). Gendler suggests that self-deception is a form of pretense involving the imagination (Gendler 2007). Likewise, activities of pretense and make-believe are widely described as involving the imagination (Dorsch 2012, p. 43; Gendler 2010; Schellenberg 2013, p. 508; Velleman 2000, pp. 255–274; Walton 1990). Liao and Gendler outline how the imagination can be used in attempts at affective, moral, and aesthetic cultivation (Liao & Gendler 2011). Walton suggests that imaginings are a constitutive aspect of our engagement with fictional works (Walton 1990). Without probing the details of these proposals, I take it that collectively they make more plausible the already very plausible claim that (1) some imaginings play roles in mental projects: belief-formation, decision-making, pretending, self-cultivation, engagement with fiction.

5.2 Premise 2

I suggest that (2) is grounded by the principle that imaginings inherit goals from the mental projects of which they are a part, that they gain goals in light of how they contribute to the mental project. This principle does not claim that the imaginative state that is part of a mental project must have the very same goal as the mental project as a whole. Rather, it allows that each part of a mental project has a different goal that contributes to and is explained by the goal of the whole mental project. This principle is an instance for the classic Aristotelian idea that goals are architectonic; an ultimate goal generates the subordinate goals that contribute to its achievement: if my goal is health, then I have the goal of exercising, and I might adopt the goal of buying training shoes in light of how it contributes to my ultimate goal (Aristotle 2011, 1094a 10).

I offer two reasons for accepting this principle. First, it explains intuitive judgments about the fittingness of imaginings in the context of mental projects. Second, it explains the parthood of the imaginings that are parts of mental projects.

5.2.1 Reason 1—Intuitive Judgments of Rightness and Wrongness

It seems that our imaginings can go wrong when we are engaged in certain mental projects. When I am reading a Greek tragedy there is a sense in which I ought to be imagining the scenes depicted and imagining things about the characters; this fiction prescribes, with a wide degree of latitude, what I should be imagining. Again, when I and my comedian friends do some improv on the theme “vacations in Spain” I should not be imagining that I am eating focaccia, carbonara, and gelato. When I ask you to imagine that “a rat is nibbling your eyeball”, you shouldn’t instead imagine that “a cat is tipping on a highball.” The unfittingness here is not that in these examples I have allowed my mind to wander, but rather that I am attaching the wrong imaginings to the mental project. The mental project of engaging with fiction prescribes certain imaginings and not others—given that focaccia, carbonara and gelato are not Spanish foods I am not supposed to imagine them.

Again, when I am engaged in a mental project of belief-formation or deciding on a course of action, I ought to imagine various things—certain imaginings are prescribed by these mental projects just as certain imaginings are prescribed by engagement with fiction. For instance, in deciding how to formulate the claims laid out in this paragraph, I should try to imagine possible lines of criticism, or ways in which they might be misinterpreted, and if I do not then (beyond some margin) there is something wrong with my imaginings. This is because imagining possible lines of criticism, or possible misinterpretations, is a subordinate goal of the goal of the mental project of formulating this paragraph. By contrast, imagining that the reader is a connoisseur of foie gras is not something prescribed by the mental project of writing a paper because it does not contribute to its goal. The principle that imaginings inherit goals from the mental projects of which they are parts explains these intuitions.

Note that in these cases we are making judgments that attach to each imagining as a part, rather than making judgments about the goal of the mental project as a whole and illicitly applying a property of the whole to the part (making the fallacy of division). This becomes more obvious in cases where the mental project as a whole is unfitting but where the part is fitting. If I think I’m supposed to be improving on “vacations in Spain” and so I imagine that I am eating tapas, but it turns out that I’m supposed to be improving on “vacations in Switzerland,” then although my mental project is unfitting in relation to the goal of my improv group, my imagining is nevertheless fitting in relation to my mental project.

The principle that imaginings inherit goals from the mental projects of which they are a part also explains the “self-licensing” nature of mental projects such as make-believe. Suppose you are playing with your young child, make-believing that you are in ancient Greece. At some point your child says that they are going to get a ride-sharing car to the agora. You explain that the ancient Greeks did not have ride-sharing cars—your child has imagined unfittingly according to the mental project “make-believing that you are in ancient Greece.” Your child then explains that they are a time-traveller to ancient Greece, that they have brought ride-sharing cars back from the future. Possibly you might object to this new make-believe, or suggest a ride-sharing waggon instead, but suppose you go along with it. Your child has

changed the goals of this imaginative project, or created a new one, and therefore the set of imaginings that count as fitting has changed. By authorial exercises that alter the goal of the imaginative project, the imaginative states of make-believe cannot fail to be fitting, whereas attitudes such as belief have goals that are beyond one's authorial control and so make less malleable prescriptions for the imaginings that relate to them.

The principle that imaginings inherit goals from the mental projects of which they are a part also explains the absence of fittingness conditions on simple-imaginings and day dreaming, noted previously.

5.2.2 Reason 2—Parthood of Mental Projects Argument

The principle that imaginings inherit goals from the mental projects of which they are a part gives a plausible account of what makes a mental state a part of a mental project.

We should admit that mental projects exist, since they are a good way of explaining why we enjoy certain patterns of mental contents: I have this imagining, then I call to mind this memory, then I attend to a certain feeling, I make such and such an inference, and so forth, because I am engaged in a given mental project. There is “something that it is like” to be engaged in a mental project rather than having a series of mental states that are not connected in the mental project-way—e.g., a pattern of remembering and anticipating beyond the presently entertained mental state, or a feeling of frustration if you “lose your train of thought.”

So, we need a mereological account of what sort of relations between mental contents make them parts of a whole, parts of the same mental project. One candidate might be causal relations. However, an agglomeration of mental states don't qualify as parts of a mental project just in virtue of there being certain causal relations between them. Through some advanced Pavlovian training, imagining cheese toasties might cause an episode of hatred towards Copernicus, but it seems wrong to describe even a reliable connection between thinking the former and thinking the latter as a mental project. Another candidate might be associative or thematic relations. However, there are chains of thoughts that are associatively or thematically linked but that are not mental projects, such a mind-wandering: dog—prairie dog—the Wild West—cowboys—Dallas—freeways—the Second Death. So, mere associative relations do not make things part of a mental project.

Instead, I suggest a goal-based account of what makes an imagining, or other mental state, a part of a mental project. If an imagining is part of a mental project, this is because it contributes to that mental project, achieves some sub-goal within that project. It is the goal for which a mental state is recruited that explains why it is recruited to a given mental project, and explains the thematic and causal patterns that we observe. When I am trying to form an opinion as to whether Tom likes Tam, I should call to mind memories about my observations of them, rather than my preference about whether Tom should like Tam, since only the memory would serve the goal. Whether some mental states share a goal accurately delineates whether they are parts of a given mental project or not. If I recall the memory of what Tom said behind Tam's back this is a part of my mental project, whereas if I recall that

diplodocuses suffer from neck-aches this is not part of my mental project but mind-wandering, an interruption from the “background hum” of mental contents, because this memory does not contribute to my mental project.

In the case of imaginings, it seems plausible to conjecture that imaginings are recruited into mental projects because (like emotions, memories, etc.) they have some non-localized aim, some prior goal in virtue of which they are useful for the mental projects. Alternatively, one might want to say that it is only by being part of a mental project that an imagining has a goal, just as a goalless being like a rock takes on a goal by becoming a part of an artefact like an axe. A defender of this latter option could plausibly appeal to the noted apparent absence of cases, outside the context of mental projects, in which we judge imaginings to be unfitting. I will not further investigate the merits of these *local-only* and the *local-plus* views.

6 The General Condition View

From an evolutionary point of view, we presumably want to begin with the assumption that imaginings serve a function and have a goal, rather than allowing that such a pervasive part of our mental life is mental junk, aimless spandrel. Again, that every other intentional attitude seems to have a goal and fittingness conditions establishes a strong presumption for thinking that imaginings do. I offer three reasons for thinking that there must be general, not merely localized, fittingness conditions on imaginings, before going on to review four suggestions as to what those conditions are, that is, what the goal of imaginings is.

6.1 Three Reasons Supporting the General Condition View

First, there seem to be excellences (perfections, virtues, goods, evaluative properties) that are endogenous to the imagination, excellences of the imagination itself. Most obviously, our imagination can be creative and spontaneous. These are aesthetic excellences, ones not just to do with mental projects of which our imaginings can be a part, but imaginings themselves. One can imagine creatively and spontaneously even outside the context of a given mental project (for example; aesthetically, would you rather be privy to Tarantino’s imaginings or Al Gore’s?) Across contexts, it seems to be a virtue of our imaginings that they are creative and spontaneous, whether we are decision-making, engaging with fiction, or whatever else. This universal scope indicates that these excellences are endogenous to the imagination. Further, it is meeting these evaluative standards that is very often what helps generate certain mental projects. We describe someone as not very imaginative not only when, given a mental project, they fail to imagine certain things, but when they are the sort of person who fails to undertake certain mental projects due to an absence of imaginings—e.g., they fail to imagine that their life could be different in various ways, that they could leave town, and so doesn’t set about various mental projects.

If imaginings have endogenous characteristic excellences, if imaginings can be better or worse even aside from their use in mental projects, then they have goals

that these excellences help advance, since every excellence or virtue of a faculty helps it achieve its goal (Aristotle 2011, 1106b 5–30). So, plausibly, imaginings have goals and fittingness conditions.

Second, I venture that imaginings are subject to mechanisms designed to make them a certain way. I give two important examples. Imaginings are subject to mechanisms designed to make them *intrusive*: the imagination incessantly presents the mind with all sorts of varied contents, sometimes relevant to the mental projects we are presently engaged in, but often not. Imaginings are subject to mechanisms that make them *contagious*—they not only intrude upon our consciousness, but they invite other imaginings and mental contents into our consciousness: at first we find ourselves imagining that we are eating a cheese toasty, but then we quickly find ourselves engaged in some gastronomic mental project relating to this imagining: deciding whether to have a cheese toasty, trying to evaluate which kind of cheese might make for the ultimate cheese toasty, and so entertaining a wide variety of mental states. Imaginings have a tendency to communicate themselves, and to glue various other mental states together. Spontaneity and creativity relate to these mechanisms; spontaneity is a virtue of the intrusiveness of our imaginings, creativity is a virtue of the contagiousness of our imaginings.

Imaginings are subject to mechanisms designed to make them a certain way. If imaginings are subject to mechanisms designed to make them a certain way, then imaginings have a goal. Therefore, plausibly, imaginings have a goal.

Third, we can give some examples of imaginings that are unfitting outside the context of mental projects. The reason that the *local conditions* view missed these examples is that they are cases in which imaginings are absent rather than present: cases in which we fail to imagine something, rather than cases in which the presence of an imagining is unfitting. Here are some cases:

Fate: Years ago, Jane chewed an entire pack of gum and mashed it into Samantha's hair, ruining Samantha's 12th birthday. Jess is Jane's daughter. On Jess's 12th birthday, Jess comes home from school having had an entire pack of gum mashed into her hair by a schoolmate (who is of no relation to Samantha, who has no knowledge of what transpired years ago). Jane does not imagine that the two events are linked in some way by a mysterious non-natural mechanism; fate or destiny.

Bus: Tibor sees a child get hit by a bus. That evening, lying in bed, Tibor does not imagine that his child own gets hit by a bus.

Lottery: Jeff's best friend wins the lottery. Jeff does not imagine that he himself wins the lottery.

Moon: In 1969, Tess watches the moon landing on television. That evening, lying in bed, Tess does not imagine that she goes to the moon, or that someone goes to Mars, or anything relating to space exploration

In *Fate*, even though Jane should probably not believe that Jess' misfortune was fated, it would be unfitting if Jane didn't even imagine such a thing, if her mind didn't "go there." The circumstance is such a strange one that it should prompt us to imagine something like fate. As illustrated by the other cases, certain imaginings are

not just prescribed by mental projects but by life events; an imagination that is functioning properly ought to react to life events like these, these events should prompt imaginings. Note that cases of the wrongness of not-imagining do not seem reducible to other standards of evaluation: plausibly, Jane's absence of imaginings in *Fate* is not less prudent, less moral, (etc.) than the case in which she does imagine fate; Jeff is not epistemically or aesthetically or ethically worse off for failing to imagine himself winning the lottery (he is probably better off).

By contrast, so far as I can see, the *local conditions* view is right that, outside the context of mental projects, we cannot find cases in which the presence of an imagining is unfitting. Tibor imagines that his child is better off getting hit by a bus than living with his ex-wife. Jeff imagines that he wages a campaign of abuse against his lottery-winning friend. Tess imagines that the Moon landing is a hoax. We might describe these imaginings as abnormal, unhealthy, immoral, or whatever, but none seem to be irreducibly unfitting. Plausibly this absence is because spontaneity and creativity are excellences of the imagination: just as one's will cannot be too agapic, one's imagination cannot be too intrusive or too contagious.

6.2 Four Versions of the General Condition View

I now note four accounts of what the goal of imaginings might be that would generate general fittingness conditions on them. I treat the *endogenous excellences*, *mechanisms*, the *unfitting-by-absence* and the *lack of unfitting-by-presence* as desiderata for an account to explain. I also treat as desiderata how well an account is able to explain the points that made the *no conditions* and the *local conditions* views plausible. I will endorse the fourth account that I offer, which says that *imaginings aim to make themselves available to mental projects*. Due to limits of space I cannot reconstruct many possible views, so I have selected those that seem most plausible, or those hinted at in the literature.

6.2.1 Account 1: Imaginings Aim at the Fictional

One account is Walton's dictum that "imagining aims at the fictional as belief aims at the true" (Walton 1990, p. 41).

However we construe "fiction," this account seems inadequate. On the one hand, if we stipulate that "the fictional" means whatever it is that imaginings aim at, then this account isn't informative. It's unclear that "the fictional," stipulated as such, picks out any independent normative domain or property. The imaginings prescribed by literature, those prescribed by decision-making mental projects, and the imaginings that pop-up outside the context of mental projects, such as life events or experiences of nature, do not seem to all be oriented at what we understand by "the fictional;" it is hard to see that they have anything in common.

On the other hand—and I suspect more in line with Walton's intent—we might say that the fictional is a domain that depends upon a certain "social, or at least human, setting. The stump in the thicket makes it fictional that a bear is there only because there is a certain convention, understanding or agreement in the game of

make-believe” (Walton 1990, p. 38). On this view, wherever there is a prescription to imagine there is a human convention of sorts: an Englishman ought to imagine the Wars of the Roses when he sees a rose with mixed red and white petals because of a cultural convention linking the two. People of many cultures ought to imagine faces or animals when they see “cloud formations and constellations of stars” because their cultural conventions “understand them [the clouds and stars] to prescribe the imaginings they prompt” (Walton 1990, p. 51).

This view is extensionally inadequate. For one thing, within the context of many mental projects there are things that one ought to imagine regardless of human convention or agreement. For example, even an author in the dystopia of *Idiocracy* (2006) ought to imagine various lines of criticism to the claims of the paragraph; this makes them a more excellent author, even though no one expects this of them. Here, human convention or agreement recommends imagining certain things because it seems independently fitting to imagine them. For another, it seems that certain events or natural phenomena prescribe imaginings regardless of human convention. For instance, we want some explanation of why it is that so many cultures converge on prescribing imaginings about the stars. Again, it seems that when Tibor sees the child get hit by a bus, it is not just a matter of convention that this should lead him to imagine things about his own child.

Here is an idea of how natural objects or events can serve as “props” in the Waltonian sense, prescribing imaginings for creatures like us, aside from human convention. Stars have certain evaluative properties, such as being majestic. Events like children getting hit by buses have evaluative properties such as being horrific. We reliably form such evaluative judgments. Though these are relative properties, response-dependent properties, which exist only given the sensibilities and interests of human beings, along with the physical world, they are not merely social or conventional properties. Plausibly, these evaluative properties prescribe imaginings for us—faced with the majestic, one ought not only to have certain emotional states, such as awe, but also certain imaginings. For instance, taking the majesty of the stars as a prop, we might creatively and spontaneously imagine that the stars are gods, or ermined lords, or diamonds cast across black satin. It seems that many cases in which the absence of an imagining is unfitting are failures to respond to an evaluative property.

6.2.2 Account 2: Imaginings Aim at the True and the Good Indirectly

Scruton remarks that the imagination “governed as it is by a reality principle, seeks condensation, suggestion, dramatic completeness. These are features which make fiction into the accurate representation of an independent world” (Scruton, 1983, p. 42), that “the aim of imagination is to grasp, in the circuitous ways exemplified by art, the nature of reality” (Scruton, 1983, pp. 35–36).

Scruton does not work these remarks into more complete account. Here is the one way such an account might go. Let’s say that imaginings are “indirect aimers.” Indirect aimers are any mental states that do not aim directly at extra-mental properties such as the true and the good. Rather, indirect aimers aim at the true and the good via some relation to other mental states that themselves aim at extra-mental

properties; direct aimers (e.g., belief, desire). Perhaps indirect aimers aim at the true and the good by causing direct aimers, or by participating in mental projects with them—e.g., providing propositions for the mental project “is it disgusting to X?” to evaluate and have affective reactions to.

Such a view seems to fit nicely with the points supporting the *local conditions* view, *endogenous excellences*, *mechanisms*, and *unfitting-by-absence*. However, since this view says that imaginings aim at truth or goodness indirectly, this view must say that imaginings do not aim to cause or enter constitutive relations with mental contents *simpliciter*, but only insofar as doing so results in mental contents that are fitting, i.e. that imaginings aim to prompt mental projects, or to give rise to beliefs and desires, only insofar as these beliefs will be true, insofar as these desires will be for the desirable. Only then will imaginings aim at the true and the good at all.

So, this view says that imaginings, as indirect aimers, as second-order mental states of a sort (Frankfurt 1971), take on the fittingness conditions of the direct aimers, as first-order mental states, through which they are related to the true and the good. We ordinarily assess the fittingness of second-order mental states, in part, in terms of the fittingness of the corresponding first-order state. It’s fitting to desire to desire to eat rice. It’s fitting to wish to believe in the true metaphysics. It’s not fitting to desire to desire to eat sand. It’s not fitting to wish to believe in a false metaphysics. How do we explain the fact that the two former second-order mental states are fitting and that the latter are unfitting? We appeal to the only difference between the two: rice is edible and sand is not, the true metaphysics is true and that the false metaphysics is false. Here, the second-order state is fitting because it aims at what it is fitting for the first-order state to aim at.

Yet, it is clear that an imagining can be fitting even if the larger mental project of which it is a part is not. For instance, if it’s not desirable that I play chess, if I nevertheless desire it and in doing so imagine all the various moves that my opponent might make, my imagining is fitting, even though my desire is not. Again, if my fear is unfitting because there is nothing fearful about my circumstance, the imaginings that attach themselves to that fear may still be fitting, e.g. I imagine that I escape through an exit. Here, imaginings seem fitting even though they do not, even “circuitously,” aim at the true or the good.

6.2.3 Account 3: Imaginings Aim to Relate to Other Mental Contents

The above objection to the theory that imaginings aim at the truth indirectly could be avoided by adjusting to the position that imaginings aim to cause or enter constitutive relations with direct aimers, but without regard for whether those aimers are in fact aimed at the true or the good. On this theory, the goal of imaginings is just to receive our attention, to be made use of in some mental project. To illustrate this theory borrowing Hume’s evocative image, the imagination “presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children” (Hume 2007, pt. 11) On this view, imaginings pour forth freely from the mind with the aim of causing or being adopted into mental projects. Imaginings aim

to provide representations of propositions without regard for the true or the good. Whether the mental states they end up related to turn out to be fitting or unfitting is “their problem”—imaginings are fitting simply by causing or helping to constitute these mental states. On this view, the goal of imaginings is just, as it were, to provoke, shunt, or prod, other mental states into existence by their sheer abundance and variety.

Though this view matches well with spontaneity and creativity as excellences of the imagination, I have two objections. First, this view yields the result that imaginings that do not cause (or help constitute, etc.) other mental states are unfitting. This is counterintuitive. Although tracing the actual causal relations between one’s mental contents is, to say the least, difficult, it seems that many simple-imaginings do not cause other mental states—much of the background humming and popping causes nothing further. Yet, we do not judge that these imaginings are unfitting just because they are not utilized by mental projects. This would make the fittingness of imaginative states something wholly contingent and external, rather than anything to do with the nature of the mental state as such.

Second, although we might describe imaginings that cause other mental states as more “vigorous” in the life of the mind — impacting the life of the mind, bringing about more mental states — it seems that being vigorous with respect to our other mental states does not make an imagining more fitting. For instance, suppose I am eating a kidney soup and then I imagine that the chef has secreted a bodily fluid into it. If this imagining is unvigorous, it passes through my consciousness without causing or helping constitute other mental states. If the imagining is vigorous, it alters my experience of the kidney-ish taste of the soup, it prompts a mental project that assesses whether it might be true that the chef has done this, it might make me feel unwell, or it might make me feel disgusted, and so forth. Yet, the former imagining is neither less nor more fitting than the latter imagining.

6.2.4 Account 4: Imaginings Aim to Make Contents Available to Mental Projects

Account 4 provides a more modest view of the goal of imaginings. On account 4, imaginings do not aim at the truth, nor do they aim to cause or come into constitutive relations with other mental contents. Rather, they aim to make contents available to mental projects; a goal that they achieve just by occurring. The mental projects might then make use of the contents either by taking the contents as the objects of a mental project (assessing whether the contents are worthy of belief, desire) or by using the contents of the imagining to fulfil sub-aims of the mental project. However, an imagining itself is fitting simply by making a content available for a mental project, simply by being an imagining, regardless of whether the imagining is in fact recruited by a mental project. The reason we should accept account 4 is that it meets the three desiderata noted at the beginning of this section and does not suffer from the difficulties of previous accounts.

Advancing over account 3, account 4 does not yield the result that the imaginings that do not cause (or, help constitute, etc.) other mental states are unfitting. Advancing over account 2, account 4 does not imply that imaginings aim at whatever it is that the mental states that they may end up in-part constituting aim at. Account 4 fits

with our other desiderata: the endogenous excellences of the imagination, creativity and spontaneity, allow for a wider and more varied range of imaginings to be available to a wide and varied range of mental projects. The mechanisms to which imaginings are subject, their intrusiveness and their contagiousness, are explained by the aim of making contents available to mental projects. Account 4 implies that the presence of an imagining can never be unfitting, because by being present to the mind an imagining has made itself available for a mental project, whether any mental project “accepts its offer” or not. So, every imagining is fitting. This explains why we generally do not think to assess our imaginings in terms of fittingness – we have no contrast class of unfitting imaginings.

Again, account 4 fits with the claim that imaginings can be unfitting by their absence—in some circumstance an imagining has failed to make itself available for a mental project. Importantly, account 4 doesn’t give the absurd result that we must consider it unfitting that we do not at every point in time have every possible imagining present to the mind: rather, since imaginings aim to make themselves available for mental projects, we would predict that absences of imaginings would only be unfitting in the circumstance where a mental project is underway (the sorts of cases mentioned in *local conditions*), or the context in which there should be a mental project underway (the sorts of cases mentioned in Sects. 6.1 and 6.2.1). This is what we find: for instance, it is only given that Tom is deciding whether to adopt a dog that it is unfitting that he doesn’t imagine that he will have to clip the dog’s nails, and it is only given Jane’s weird circumstances in *Fate* that she should be engaged in the mental project of ascertaining whether there is any mysterious connection between events. Again, it is only given the evaluative properties of the star-gazers circumstance, which call for a mental project of the imaginative kind, that the absence of certain imaginings becomes unfitting.

7 Conclusion

I have offered some reasons for thinking that imaginings can in general be evaluated as fitting or unfitting, and discussed four theories of the goal that grounds those general fittingness conditions. Along the way, we saw cases for two alternative views, the *no conditions* and the *local conditions* views. The points that made these views plausible were better accounted for by version 4 of the *general conditions* view. Imaginings have an aim, and this aim is to make contents available to mental projects. This comports with the common sense idea that the imagination’s job is to provide an abundance of mental material to make use of, representations of all sorts of mundane or outlandish states of affairs, from which we can then select as needed. Metaphorically, the imagination is the child of the mind—it prompts us with all sorts of strange ideas, it picks up everything it encounters and eagerly shows it to us; most of what it shows us we soberly reject as irrelevant, but we are nevertheless better off for having been shown.

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