Imagine a toucan flying through a rainforest. What did you just do? Did you visualize something? Suppose something? Did you conceive of a toucan, consider possible toucans, hypothesize about them? Did you pretend there was a toucan, or perhaps fantasize about a tropical holiday? Did you imagine yourself seeing a toucan, or did you imagine it from someone else’s perspective, or from nobody’s?

Since each of those acts plausibly fulfils the instruction, anyone trying to say something summary about what substantial features they share has a problem. The profusion and diversity of imagination’s putative kinds, roles, and capabilities might well lead you to think that nothing interesting or important unites them. Nonetheless, much recent work implicitly shares a quite general approach to imaginative phenomena: the imitation theory, according to which imaginative experiences are imitations of other experiences, and the attitudes they involve are likewise imitations of counterpart attitudes.

This descriptive characterization shapes subsequent theorizing about imaginative attitudes, and about the wide range of topics in which imagination is implicated. However, the imitation theory sets theorizing off in the wrong direction; it encourages obfuscatory, unhelpful ways of thinking. Rather than characterizing imagination as an imitating mirror, we’d do better to think of it as a set of lenses: ways to refine, focus, and concentrate the elements and aspects of other experiences. This lens theory yields a way of thinking that better encapsulates what’s distinctive about imaginative experiences, offers brighter illumination of the attitudes that underlie them, and suggests fruitful strategies for explaining imagination’s applications.

The two theories are broad, unifying ways of thinking about imagination. So, before I set out their content, it’s as well to be clear what I mean by a way of thinking, and how such things might be compared.

1. Lumpers, splitters, frameworks
The sparrows, wrens, and stonechats of the Isles of Scilly differ from their cousins elsewhere. The wrens, for example, have unique plumage, and don’t lift their tails when singing. Should Scillonian wrens form
a separate subspecies, as those of Shetland do? In botany and zoology, those inclined to say “no” are lumpers, and those tempted by “yes” are splitters.¹ Lumpers try to corral birds, animals, and suchlike into broad taxa; splitters seek fine-grained taxonomies. Lumpers emphasize similarities, and splitters differences, among putative taxon members. Lumping is only possible if there’s a reasonably well-defined taxon to which all the putative class members might belong.

Similarly, descriptions of mental phenomena can lead to lumping or splitting. Lumping requires emphasis on similarities among phenomenal characters, functions, and so forth. Splitting requires emphasis on differences. For example, should sight and smell be lumped together in the category “perception”, or should they be studied independently? Should they be grouped with itches and pains, or should sense and sensation be split? As in zoological taxonomy, lumping is only possible if there’s a respectable conception of perception or sensation that unites the various phenomena.²

In some fields, lumping and splitting are approaches to explanation as well as to description. Certain historians, for example, argue that some grand concept, such as Capital, Colonialism, or Climate, can explain swathes of historical events. Others emphasize contingencies, contradictions, and complications, and argue that the causes of events are too various to be subsumed under big ideas.³ Lumping is only desirable if the explanatory benefits of the big idea outweigh the costs of eliding detail and nuance.

1. The distinction is often credited to Darwin, but had currency in British botany earlier (Branch 2014).
2. Liao and Doggett also invoke lumping and splitting when discussing whether the alleged imaginative analogues of belief and desire are distinct from their counterparts (Liao and Doggett 2014). Their use of the terminology differs from mine.
3. The lump/split distinction was made (in)famous in historiography by J. H. Hexter’s critique of Christopher Hill’s allegedly lumpy Marxist approach (Hexter 1975). It’s exemplified by the question of whether “feudalism” is a felicitous concept for explaining events, structures, and institutions in medieval Europe. Lumper: Bloch (1939); splitters: Brown (1974); Reynolds (1994).

Similarly, again, we can be lumpers or splitters regarding the explanation of mental phenomena. You might, for example, think that intentionality is the mark of the mental, and you might further think that a unitary conception of intentionality could help to explain many mental phenomena. Alternatively, you might think that the ways in which various mental phenomena manifest intentionality are so diverse that no univocal conception of it could apply to them all.

In historiography, description and explanation are not sharply separated. Once you’ve explained, say, social relations in industrial Britain by appeal to the workings of capital, you’ll be more inclined to describe, say, relations between serfs and lords in medieval Europe in terms that make them amenable to the same kind of explanation. Similarly, explanations of mental phenomena in certain terms are likely to suggest descriptions of further phenomena in consonant terms. But, despite their interdependence, descriptions and explanations do differ, and we can be lumpers or splitters about either. On imagination, Kendall Walton is a descriptive splitter. He points out that you can imagine propositions, things, or actions, and can do so in various ways (Walton 1990, pp. 11–19; see also Strawson (1970, p. 31) Walton (2006)). He then asks whether we should say what all these sorts of imagining have in common: “Yes, if we can. But I can’t” (Walton 1990, p. 19).

Amy Kind, meanwhile, seems to be a descriptive lumper, but an explanatory splitter. She agrees that we readily describe various phenomena as “imaginative” in an undifferentiated manner, but argues that attempts to explicate a single attitude underlying those phenomena often produce intractable inconsistencies: for example, the things said about the attitude in order to explain imagination’s role in modal epistemology are inimical to explaining its role in pretence.⁴ Kind concludes that “no single mental activity can do all the explanatory work”.

⁴. It’s an interesting question how far Kind’s conclusion generalizes. Her argument is really that simulationists say inconsistent things, not that lumping is impossible. Nonetheless, the argument illustrates the challenge facing any lumping approach to imagination. Thanks to Amy Kind for discussion.
that has been assigned to imagining” (Kind 2013, p. 141).5

I’m a lumper about imagination’s description and explanation. Pace Walton, I think that there’s a reasonably coherent conception of imagination that descriptively unifies the phenomena. And, while I agree with Kind that no single mental activity can do all the work assigned to imagination, no single mental activity can do all the work assigned to perception, either; different senses do different jobs. Nonetheless, a general conception of perception and of what the attitudes involved in perceptual activities have in common can help us to understand those activities. Likewise with imagination: a good general approach leads to good specific accounts.

I also think that many philosophers share a general approach to imagination, namely the imitation theory. And I wish to argue for an alternative, the lens theory. Though I’ll usually refer to them as “theories”, the two are really theoretical frameworks for thinking about imagination. A theoretical framework is a broad, general way of thinking about a subject that puts thoughts about it into plausible and coherent order, clarifies and illuminates those thoughts, and suggests ways in which its key ideas could be developed or applied. A framework can be often be summarized in a slogan that broadly characterizes a group of phenomena and explanations of them.6

A framework can be filled out in various ways; it has room for different developments of its central ideas. So several specific accounts of imagination might inhabit the same framework while differing on substantive points. Furthermore, since they are broad and general, the two frameworks I’m discussing don’t offer anything like conceptual analyses of imagination. Nor do they dictate detailed descriptions and explanations of the ever-interesting varieties of cases. Accordingly, my arguments are pitched at a relatively high level of abstraction and generality.

This raises the nice questions of the extent to which the theories are truly competing, and how exactly they might be compared. But abstract, general ways of thinking can still suggest substantial positions. Take the careworn conception of the ontologist’s task as “carving nature at the joints”. This metaphor suggests that (for example) the atomic parts of nature, rather than the connective tissue or the whole, are ontologically most interesting; that nature is inert and ready for dissection, and thus that its fluidity or vitality is not ontologically fundamental to it; and so forth. A different metaphor would suggest different commitments (perhaps ontologists should be botanists, not butchers). Likewise, general and abstract ways of thinking about imagination can nonetheless suggest substantial and competing commitments.

The commitments we might compare can be established via attention to the distinction between explananda and explanans implied by the distinction between descriptive and explanatory lumping. In fact, this is a threefold distinction among imaginative phenomena. First, there are imaginative activities or projects: things we might try to do by imagining, such as considering possibilities, appreciating art, or identifying with others. Second, there are imaginative experiences: distinctively imaginative mental states or acts, such as visualizations, that can be employed in imaginative projects. Third, the imaginative attitude(s): the particular intentional attitude(s) distinctive of imaginative experiences.7

5. Kind thinks that imagination proper involves images (Kind 2001). Hence, properly, “non-sensory imagination” is oxymoronic. So Kind perhaps lumps image-involving states, but splits states involving images from those involving propositional content.

6. I borrow this conception of frameworks directly from Dominic Gregory, and thus indirectly from David Lewis, whose way of thinking about possible worlds as concrete is a beautiful example of a theoretical framework (Gregory 2013, p. vii; Lewis 1986).

7. I’m assuming that experiences consist in an attitude, and a content picking out an intentional object. An attitude is a certain way of intending an object, with particular intensional features. Attitudes can be identified by their phenomenal characters, or by their functions, or by description of their intensional features (for discussion of the phenomenal contribution of attitude-type, see [e.g.] Husserl on attitudes’ “quality” [Husserl 1900, Investigation V, §§20–29], and Tim Crane on attitudes’ “modes” [Crane 2003.]). Token experiences consist in an attitude-type matched to a particular content, which “describes” or represents the intentional object (and, perhaps, a perspective on it. On the phe-
Activities incorporate experiences; experiences incorporate attitudes. The current of explanation tends the other way. Attitudes partially explain experiences, experiences help to explain activities. For example, a description of an attitude’s intensional features might provide a deeper sense of why certain experiences have the phenomenal characteristics that they do; you might explain perceptual experiences’ apparently immediate phenomenal character by saying that the perceptual attitude directly intends its objects without mediating content. Similarly, a description of the functional interactions of an experience might illuminate how certain activities are performed; you might use an account of how perceptual experience generates currency for conceptual economies to explain how it justifies beliefs.8

So theoretical frameworks for imagination might make several sorts of suggestions. Like ontologists’ metaphors, they might suggest a methodology, a way of approaching the tasks of description and explanation. They might also suggest characterizations of both explananda and explanans: that is, certain descriptions of activities, experiences, and attitudes. And they might suggest certain sorts of explanations: certain ways to think about how imaginative activities are performed, and about the particular intensional features of the imaginative attitude(s). In Sections 4–9, I will argue that, on each count, the lens theory’s suggestions are preferable to those of the imitation theory. But first I need to explain the theories.

2. The imitation theory
The imitation theory involves characterizing imaginative activities, experiences, and attitudes as imitations or simulations of counterparts. For example, the role that visual imagination plays regarding knowledge of possibilities is characterized as an analogue of the role that vision plays regarding knowledge of actuality, and activities such as empathic identifications are characterized as matters of imitating other minds. Imaginative experiences are conceptualized as imitations of counterpart experiences—perceptual, cognitive, conative, or otherwise. Visualizations, for example, are imitations of visual experiences. And the imaginative attitudes adduced to explain experiences and activities are construed as imitations of counterpart attitudes; so visualization, for example, involves an attitude that imitates the attitude involved in vision. The theory is thus a comprehensive way of thinking about imagination, both in terms of description and explanation.9

So understood, something like the imitation theory has been propounded at various times in the history of philosophical thinking about imagination. It’s arguably there in the ancients, and maybe in Hume; it forms some of the theoretical basis for the imagery theory of meaning and cognition.10 Attempts to give general accounts of imagination in terms of counterfactual belief, or pretense, or representing as possible, may also be construed in imitative terms.11 In each of these

8. I’m a pluralist about modes of explanation: functional, phenomenological, and neurophysiological modes can make complementary contributions. By competence and temperament, I’m inclined towards the approach outlined. By proceeding on such terms, I don’t intend to cast aspersions on other approaches.
9. I’m not claiming that anyone explicitly endorses this theory in toto, just that it’s a broad way of thinking about imagination with which much contemporary work accords.
11. Pretence: Ryle (1949, ch. 8); entertaining unasserted thoughts: Scruton (1974, ch. 7); counterfactual belief: Russow (1980); representing as possible: O’Connor and Aardema (2005).
cases, imaginative experiences or activities are described and defined in relation to counterparts: pretend seeing against real seeing, counterfactual versus factual beliefs, representing as possible and representing as actual. Explication of the phenomena is approached by considering ways in which they, or the attitudes they involve, differ from or resemble counterpart phenomena and attitudes.

The imitation theory’s contemporary prevalence is due to the felicitous confluence of thinking on two subjects: the role of imagination in engagements with mimetic artworks, particularly fictions, and its role in understanding other minds. In both cases, the relevant imaginative activities and experiences are readily characterized as involving imitation, and explications of the attitudes that underpin them are readily made in imitative terms. A fiction imitates the world; so the experiences we undergo when engaging with a fiction are imitations of the experiences by which we engage with the world; and so, just as we engage with the world via beliefs, desires, and suchlike, we engage with fiction via imaginative experiences that imitate beliefs and suchlike. Similarly, putting yourself in another person’s shoes means imaginatively imitating their experiences, which you do by using attitudes that imitate cognitive attitudes.

This latter thought is at the heart of the simulation theory of “mind-reading”: understanding and anticipating other people’s actions, decisions, and so on (Heal 1986; Currie and Ravenscroft 2002; Heal 2003; Goldman 2006). Simulationists say we read minds by simulating mental states. They agree that imagination is involved in this, but differ over how, exactly. Some think simulation involves running processes “off-line”. Suppose we have a mental “module” that gobbles up beliefs and desires, chews them over, and expectorates decisions. To run this module off-line, we feed it analogues of beliefs and desires. The module masticates in the same manner, but spits out analogues of decisions (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, pp. 66–67; Goldman 2006, pp. 28–29). The analogue inputs are often called “i-beliefs” and “i-desires”; Currie and Ravenscroft describe them as “belief-like and desire-like imaginings”, while Goldman calls them “pretend desires and beliefs” (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, pp. 66–67; Goldman 2006, pp. 48–49). They are belief-like, or desire-like, in that they employ the same kinds of (propositional) contents as the real things, and match them with imaginative attitudes that emulate the attitudes involved in real beliefs and desires. Other simulationists think differently. Jane Heal complains that “we have very little idea of what would be involved, neurophysiologically or functionally, in taking a system ‘off-line’”, and so she “would prefer to use more everyday vocabulary and to talk of my using my imagination and thereby entertaining the same thoughts and making the same inferences as the others” (Heal 1998, pp. 34, 30).

But for all that they differ on how exactly imagination is involved in mind-reading, simulationists agree that it is so involved, and characterize imagining as imitating. The relevant imaginative activity is characterized as imitating other people’s minds; the experiences involved in this activity are characterized as as imitations of others’ experiences or mental states; and, when adduced, the attitudes underlying these experiences are characterized as imitations, analogues, of other attitudes.

Moreover, simulationists tend to use a general imitative approach to imagination to ground their specific view of mind-reading. Currie and Ravenscroft, for example, expound a view of “recreative” imagination which covers not just beliefs and desires, but sensory imaginings, experiential imaginings, and so on. Similarly, Goldman essentially equates simulation and imagination; he says that “cases that comfortably fit under the rubrics of pretense and imagination can also fit under the heading of simulation”, and (thus?) that simulation is deeply enmeshed...

12. Derek Matravers also notes this confluence (Matravers 2014, pp. 1–2).
13. “Simulation” might be a better name for what I’m calling the imitation theory, but the term’s proprietary to simulationists. Conversely, Goldman thinks that “replication” would be better than “simulation” for his view, but keeps “simulation” owing to convention (Goldman 2006, p. 36).
14. Compare Nichols et al.: “discussions of off-line simulation accounts have typically characterized the off-line input as ‘pretend’ input . . . [but] it’s not entirely clear what ‘pretend’ is supposed to mean in this context” (Nichols, Stich, Leslie, and D. B. Klein 1996, p. 42).
with “the fabric of social life: mimicry, fantasy, fiction, and morality” (Goldman 2006, p. 49; ch. 11). So simulationists characterize imagination in general as imitative, as well as characterizing a specific activity as imitative.

The simulationists’ notions of i-beliefs and i-desires have been hugely influential; recent discussions of imagination constantly invoke them, and compare these imaginative states with genuine beliefs and desires.\(^\text{15}\) You might reject the idea that analogues of experiences and attitudes facilitate mind-reading, but still think that they exist, and perform other functions: for example, motivating actions performed in games of make-believe.\(^\text{16}\) Almost all those engaged in discussion of such activities as pretence use the simulation-imitation view to structure their thinking. The activities are characterized in imitative terms, the experiences they involve are characterized as belief-like and desire-like, and then the questions are posed of how these experiences differ from their counterparts, and whether analogues of the attitudes of belief and desire are needed for explication. Some philosophers conclude that both i-beliefs and i-desires are needed, some that only one or the other is required.\(^\text{17}\)

The second major manifestation of the imitation theory is Walton’s hugely influential account of mimesis as prop-oriented make-believe (Walton 1990). He characterizes understanding of mimetic artworks (such as paintings and fictions) as a matter of treating them as props that mandate imaginings; characterizes these imaginings as acts in which one make-believes the things that an artwork mandates; and characterizes make-believing as a belief-imitating state of mind. So, for example, works of fiction contain fictional propositions, whose contents we’re mandated to make-believe; to do so, we generate an imaginative analogue of a real belief. Such analogues relate to a fictional world as beliefs do to the real one. This Waltonian understanding of mimesis as reliant on make-believe, and make-believe as a matter of imaginative imitation of belief, has dominated recent approaches to fiction and film. On fiction, especially, it’s hard to find work that operates outside the structure.\(^\text{18}\)

This account of engagement with fictions converges with simulationism on a number of points, not least the centrality of imaginative imitations of beliefs and desires. And, like simulationism, it impinges on related issues, such as the nature of possible worlds, and the question of whether engagement with fictions and films involves real emotions, or imaginative analogues of them. Walton’s own view is that “quasi-emotions”, imaginative counterparts of real emotions, are central to understanding this engagement (Walton 1978). Others, such as Peter Lamarque, agree that we have imaginative analogues of real emotions, but disagree that they play a role in appreciation (Lamarque 1981). Still others, such as Currie and Ravenscroft, argue that there are no such analogues, and that the emotional states involved in engagements with artworks just are real emotions. (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, ch. 9). This exemplifies a general strategy for arguing that a certain sort of imaginative state is otiose for explanation: one argues that

\(^{15}\) As noted by the vexed compiler of the index for the Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Imagination, whose entry for “belief” reads: “APPEARS ON LIKE EVERY PAGE” (Kind 2016b, p. 478).

\(^{16}\) Indeed, from here on I will talk about identifying with others as an imaginative activity, rather than mind-reading. It’s relatively uncontroversial to say that we sometimes use imagination to identify with others; it’s more controversial to say that mind-reading is predicated on imagination. One might instead be a theory-theorist, or a perceptualist, e.g. Gallagher (2008); Smith (2010); Smith (2015); Roelofs (2017). So a theory of imagination will probably have to accommodate identification, but may not have to accommodate mind-reading.


\(^{18}\) A selective list of work on fiction within the Waltonian paradigm: Currie (1990); Carroll (1997); Davies (2007); Stock (2011); on film, Currie (1995); Wilson (2011). Dissenters include Matravers, and Stacie Friend (Friend 2008; Friend 2011; Friend 2014; Matravers 2014). I stress “Waltonian”. Walton’s work is perhaps not always interpreted as he originally intended, and anyway, his own position has evolved over the years; see Woodward (2016).
the alleged imaginative counterpart is just the real thing. This strategy assumes the imitation theory: in deciding whether imagination is used in a certain activity, the choice is between an experience or attitude that imitates the real thing, or the real thing. So even those who argue that there are no quasi-emotions or i-desires or i-beliefs are arguing within the imitation theory’s framework.

Once you’re alert to the imitation theory, you spy it informing characterizations of phenomena and explanatory theories in many contemporary discussions in which imagination is implicated, even ones with no direct link to simulationism or Waltonism. One such debate concerns the way in which we use imagination to rehearse or practice actions; some argue that imagination allows us to do such things by imitating bodily states (Jansen 2013). Another concerns visualization’s role in modal epistemology; the “perceptual analogy” seems informed by imitative assumptions (Hart 1988, ch. 2–3; Byrne 2007). So does the “additive view” of sensory imagination, according to which it consists of an “image” that simulates perceptual phenomenology and additional content that fills out details of the imagined scenario (Peacocke 1985; Kung 2010). Yet another example is L. A. Paul’s work on transformative experiences (Paul 2014). You often make decisions about what to do by imagining how things might be for you if you choose a certain option. But sometimes, you can’t make this imaginative leap. When you can’t, the only way to learn how things will be is to follow the course of action in question; the experience you undergo in doing so is transformative. Imagination plays a crucial role in this notion, and throughout the book is normally characterized in terms of imitation.

So, explicitly or not, a good deal of recent philosophical work on imagination accords with a broad, general, unifying idea of what imagination is and how it should be described and explained. In that work, imaginative activities—identification, fictionalizing, foresight—are characterized in imitative terms, as are imaginative experiences. Explication of activities and experiences then proceeds from that characterization; the question, often, is how imagination imitates whatever it’s meant to be imitating, and the answer, usually, is that involves an experience which imitates a counterpart experience by virtue of imitating the relevant attitude. The imitation theory is a comprehensive theoretical framework for thinking about imagination, and is prevalent in recent times. I now want to suggest an alternative way of thinking.

### 3. The lens theory

The imitation theory’s recent prevalence means that there’s plenty of material to use in expounding it. That’s not the case with the lens theory; little contemporary work accords with it. So, in order to explain the theory and demonstrate its viability, I’ll first lay out the central idea, then explore how one might use it to develop an account of some prominent imaginative activities, experiences, and attitudes. This will be enough to allow comparisons between the imitation and lens frameworks.

The central idea of the lens theory is that we can fruitfully think of imagination in terms of lenses. By turning a lens (or an arrangement of them) on something, you can produce an image of the tar-

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20. Imagining possible experiences is characterized as simulating or imitating them at, e.g. pp. 26; 28; 55; 116; 148–149 (Paul 2014). The lens theory is consonant with the suggestions about higher-order experiential structures at pp. 157–173.
22. The lens and imitation theories aren’t the only frameworks available for thinking about imagination. For example, Fabian Dorsch compares three comprehensive accounts of imagination: the epistemological, dependency, and agency accounts (Dorsch 2012). The dependency account, like the imitation theory, conceptualizes imagination as derivative of other experiences. Dorsch argues in favor of the agency account, which treats a kind of mental activity as definitive of imagination. I can’t here explore the relation between the agency account and the lens theory, but I think the former is a view of imagination within the lens framework (likewise with dependency and imitation). Alan White also has his own framework (White 1990).
get or of its elements. The image is related to the target, but different from it: focussed, refined, clarified, magnified, isolated, concentrated, perhaps distorted. Analogously, we can think of imaginative activities and experiences as acts in which the contents and characters of other experiences are brought into focus, through attentive concentration, refinement, or distortion, with some sort of productive aim. And we can characterize the imaginative attitude(s) involved in those experiences in terms of intensional features required to achieve this aim.

Where the imitation theory’s recent motivation comes from consideration of mind-reading and mimesis, the lens theory starts with artistic creation. R. G. Collingwood offers one of the most comprehensive accounts of imagination’s role in such creation (Collingwood 1938). According to Collingwood, art is a matter of imaginative expression. An artist produces their work in the cause of, or by way of, an effort to hold in focus, clarify, and sharpen fugitive and obscure ideas, or “feelings”.

The artist starts from a point where they’re aware of having a feeling, but can’t say clearly what it is; by applying their imagination to that feeling, they work to express it, and they arrive at an artwork when they’ve succeeded in doing so.

To underpin this account of art, Collingwood provides a comprehensive architectonic theory of the mind, and of imagination’s place therein. The theory’s coherence is debatable, but nonetheless, Collingwood represents a certain way of thinking about imagination. He takes a particular imaginative activity, and characterizes it as a process of purposive movement from muddle to clarity, from obscurity to insight. In order to explain how this works, he gives a general account of imagination and imaginative experiences, according to which their central role in the mental economy is to focus and sharpen the matter of other experiences. He describes and explains an imaginative activity, and imaginative experiences, in lens-like terms.

Other imaginative activities are also amenable to such characterization. Consider fantasizing. The imitative characterization of fantasy says that you generate an imitation of some salient experience, and then enjoy it in some salient respect. The lens theory characterizes fantasy as a deliberate act of focusing on relevant elements of a certain experience. A notable difference between the two characterizations is that the lens theory more squarely identifies fantasizing as an imaginative activity. On the imitation theory, it’s tempting to say that fantasizing is imaginative in virtue of the fact that it employs imitations, and this can easily lead to the thought that there’s nothing imaginative about fantasizing qua act; rather, it’s a cognitive act that employs imaginings. This seems to mislocate the interest in, the point of, calling fantasy and suchlike activities imaginative: they’re not imaginative because they employ certain kinds of representations, but because of what they do with those representations. That’s what the lens theory suggests, and moreover it gives a plausible suggestion about what imagination does. Fantasy works by focusing on certain elements of a complex content representing a possible experience, and emphasizing them to the exclusion of others. The problem with real experiences is that they have many, many details, and many confounding factors. If you really won the lottery, you wouldn’t really be happy forever; more money, more problems (or different problems). But in fantasy, you focus on the happy elements of the possible experience, and concentrate them. Not only is fantasy viably conceptualized as an act of focus and refinement; focus and refinement are more central to what makes it

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23. Beginning with Collingwood is an acknowledgement of intellectual debt; what follows is loosely inspired by him. As with imitation, something like the lens theory has been propounded at various historical junctures. For example, the Romantic poets’ conception of imagination might be a sort of lens theory (on the Romantics, see Warnock (1976, Part III); Rosenmeyer (1986)). Collingwood sees his account as a rehabilitation of the best parts of Kant and Hume on imagination. He reads the two as fundamentally similar in their approaches to “the problem of imagination”, which is idiosyncratic interpretation, though not incredible. For Collingwood’s own reading, see Collingwood (1938, ch. IX §§2–6). For discussion, see inter alia Desmond (1976); Ridley (1998); Kemp (2001), though such discussion generally concentrates on Collingwood’s aesthetic theory. On Hume, see works cited at fn. 10 above. On Kant, see Matherne (2016) for overview, and for more detailed treatments, inter alia, Makkreel (1990); Gibbons (1994); Thompson (2013).

24. “Feelings” aren’t just affective states; Collingwood clearly thinks that thoughts can also be expressed. See Wiltsher (2017).
distinctive, and distinctively imaginative, than imitation.

So the lens theory adequately accommodates some prominent imaginative activities (I’ll argue later that it also accommodates those that motivate the imitation theory). You might worry, though, that it does so by being vague, and that the central notion of the theory is insufficiently precise to issue in truly lumping characterizations or explanations. After all, you can do many different things with lenses—too many, perhaps, for the lens theory to provide a cogent way of thinking.

I agree that the notion of lenses being used is not precise, or even univocal. It subsumes several other notions with which we might characterize imaginative phenomena, and those notions are only associated by their collocation under the concept of a lens. However, given my aims, I don’t think this is problematic. For one thing, I’m not offering an analysis of (the concept of) imagination; I’m offering a broad, general way of thinking about imaginative phenomena. I don’t think that amenability to lens-like characterization suffices for an experience to count as imaginative, just as there can be acts of imitative that nobody invested in the imitation theory would care to count as imaginative. For another, a framework for thinking about imagination suggests only a general theoretical direction. Within the imitation framework, a more specific account might define imagination more precisely in terms of an adjacent notion such as pretence or counterfactual belief. Likewise, within the lens framework, a specific account of imagination might be given in terms of one particular lens notion, or some subset of them, or some adjacent notion such as purification or distillation. Or one might want to think in terms of only some applications of lenses; microscopes, for example, rather than glasses. But the fact that an account within a framework will have to be more specific doesn’t impugn the utility of having a broad, general way of thinking about imaginative phenomena.

Furthermore, given the heterogeneity of imaginative phenomena, any framework that accommodates them will have to be fairly flexible. The imitation theory achieves this flexibility by suggesting that we posit a range of analogue experiences and attitudes, as diverse as their counterparts; i-belief is as different from quasi-emotion as belief is from emotion. This suggests a picture of imagination that shows a set of diverse attitudes and experiences, united or associated by the fact that they are imitative. The lens theory, likewise, suggests that we treat a diverse set of phenomena as united by the fact that they are fruitfully characterized in terms associated with lenses.

I will explain this further by moving from activities to experiences. Take the archetypal imaginative experience of visualization. Suppose you visualize a toucan. Both imitation and lens theories will say that, in so doing, you enjoy an experience somewhat akin to that of seeing a toucan. Their further characterizations will differ. The imitative characterization of the visualization would, perhaps, say that you match an imitation of the act-character of visual perception to a complex visual content that represents the bird, its surroundings, and so on, perhaps a “degraded” content (Byrne 2010, p. 19). A lens characterization would say something like: to visualize a toucan is to focus on, concentrate, and refine the matter of visual experiences of toucans. The focus might be on elements of visual content; you can, for example, focus on just the elements that represent the toucan, or its beak, or its colours. Or it might be on elements of the act-character of vision: you can focus on aspects of what it feels like to see, to be seeing. But in any case, some given elements of visual experience are isolated from the others and focused on to produce an experience that is a refined version of vision, not an imitation of it.

You might well have several qualms about this characterization of visualizing, and by allaying them I hope to illustrate some general points about the lens theory. The first qualm might be that the idea of focus and refinement doesn’t differ substantially from that of imitation, especially if the latter is understood in terms of etiolation. After all, to imitate something by producing a copy of it that represents it only faintly is not so different from producing a refined version of it. Furthermore, saying that visualization involves deliberate focusing on relevant elements of target experiences suggests that it involves some sort of sensuous encounter with experiences and their elements (a sim-
ilar point applies to the characterization of fantasizing above). If this is so, phenomenal reproductions of experiential elements need to be available for refinement. So fully elaborated lens characterizations of experiences like visualization will need to invoke imitative ideas in order to explain the reproduction of elements of experience which can then be refined.

Two points might allay this qualm. First, the inputs of lens processes might just as well be original experiences, rather than imitations of them. Second, even if the inputs of lens processes are, always or sometimes, imitations of other experiences, there is a difference between saying that imitations are those inputs, and saying that they are the outcomes of imaginative processes. The lens theorist is not disbarred entirely from using imitative notions; they are disbarred from saying that imitations are the outcomes of imaginative processes. So the lens theory can accommodate the idea that, sometimes, the experiences or elements being refined might be imitations or reproductions.

A second qualm might be that, granted the two characterizations are different, the lens characterization of visualization is not obviously better than the imitative one. This is true, but the point at this juncture is not to argue for the theory’s superiority, but only to demonstrate its viability.

A further qualm concerns whether the characterization is in fact viable. Consider the fact that you can visualize something in a blurry, imprecise, vague manner. But the lens theory characterizes visualizations as refinements, involving focus. Surely this means that visualizations should tend towards sharpness and precision, and surely this means you shouldn’t be able to have fuzzy visualizations. Yet you clearly can.

The worry is assuaged by distinguishing between attempts to imagine and successful imagining. On the lens theory, you imagine more or less successfully the better or worse you achieve the productive goal of your imagining; in this case, the goal of clearly bringing into focus some element of a visual experience. Considered thus, fuzzy visualizations may (depending on how fuzzy) be considered failed imaginings. This corresponds to everyday talk; when you say that you can’t, or failed to, visualize something, the “failure” is often an unacceptably imprecise visualization, which fails (on the lens theory) because it doesn’t deliver a refined version of the experience. But this needn’t imply that you can’t successfully imagine (seeing) a fuzzy thing, if that’s what you intend to do. You then focus on what it’s like to see a fuzzy thing, or what it’s like to see a thing fuzzily. The success conditions are relative to the intended goals of the imagining.

This brings out a more general point: a theory of imagination brings with it a theory of what successful imagining is. The most obvious way to conceive of success and failure on the imitation theory is in terms of better or worse, more or less accurate, imitation of the target. The lens theory suggests instead that success and failure are relative to intended outcomes of lens processes. I defer comparing these suggestions until Section 9.

Likewise, I defer discussion of a fourth possible qualm: that characterizing visualization in terms of focus and refinement brings with it a suggestion of purposive manipulation, and would thus exclude visualizations lacking purpose or active manipulation from the extension of imagination. This is a reasonable worry, which I will discuss in Section 6, but I first wish to complete the case that the lens theory is a comprehensive framework. To do so, I need to show that it can be used to think about imaginative attitudes. The lens theory and the imitation theory now start to diverge more sharply. They suggest quite different things both about the coarse-grained imaginative attitude, and the fine-grained attitudes it subsumes.

Some broad and general attitudes subsume more finely individuated ones. For example, we can paint a plausible picture of a general perceptual attitude, which encompasses distinct visual, aural, and tactile attitudes. The perceptual attitude is a sort of abstraction, describing intensional features that the individual sense-attitudes have in common.
mon. With imagination, the situation is similar in one respect, and dissimilar in another. It’s similar, because both imitation and lens theories suggest plausible specifications of a general imaginative attitude that captures the common features of a set of more fine-grained imaginative attitudes. It’s dissimilar, because the two theories make different suggestions about the membership of that set. Most theorists agree about what the fine-grained perceptual attitudes are, or at least the principal ones. But that’s not how it goes with imagination.

The imitation theory suggests that we posit a range of imaginative attitudes modelled on other attitudes. It also suggests that they are subsumed by a general imitative imaginative attitude, whose intensional features explicate a general imitative capacity; these features are shared by the individual i-attitudes that implement the capacity. The lens theory does not suggest a range of analogue attitudes. What it does suggest is an open question; it might be developed in various ways. I will adumbrate two examples.

First, a way that I prefer: posit a range of attitudes corresponding to a range of imaginative experiences and activities—fantasizing, rehearsing, visualizing, creating, and so forth. The attitudes would be individuated by two dimensions: the purposes for which each is undertaken, and the set of lens-like features that allows them to achieve that purpose, with different terms emphasized or de-emphasized as appropriate (some attitudes might be more about refinement; some might be more about distortion). Second, a bolder development: posit a set of basic attitudes each related to a lens-like function—focus, refinement, distortion, concentration—and propose that imaginative experiences comprise the selective and successive employment of some such attitudes, much as a telescope relies on a particular arrangement of lenses and a microscope on another.

In either case, one could extrapolate a similar account of the general imaginative attitude. Such an account would describe the intensional features shared by the individuated attitudes, and explicate their co-occurrence in lens-like terms. This illustrates the point that the lens theory is a framework. Both the approaches to imaginative attitudes adumbrated would fit within it, and would have similar things to say about the general imaginative attitude, while differing quite markedly over the individual attitudes.

Both approaches also indicate that the lens theory does indeed make viable suggestions about how to approach imaginative attitudes. I can’t pursue those suggestions far in this paper, but I can at least show that my preferred lens-like account of the attitudes can viably distinguish and unite various imaginative attitudes. Consider the pair of fantasy and rehearsal. You can use your imagination to fantasize about and rehearse for the very same situation: a sporting event, a public speech, a job interview. Saying what the two activities share is easy enough. For one thing, a token of each could involve the same visual contents. As for attitudes, both work through attentive focusing on a set of content-elements smaller than the set of elements that would be involved in actual experience, and attentive, manipulative development of a sort of narrative, with careful control of what things are allowed in from the world and which aren’t. The attitudes involved in both fantasy and rehearsal are thus amenable to lens-like characterization, and would support the extrapolation of a lens-like account of the general imaginative attitude.

The more challenging thing is to differentiate the two, given how closely related they seem to be. The lens theory suggests that this should be done with reference to the aims of the activities: the attitudes are individuated according to what the refinement and focusing and so on is being pursued for, and what specific modes of refinement are therefore required. In fantasy, the aim is (something like) pleasure, and you fail to fantasize well if you don’t enjoy your fantasy. In rehearsal, the aim is practice, and enjoyment is besides the point; you fail to practice well if you fail to spot mistakes and problems in your imaginary performance, and to go back and correct them.

This differentiation by intention is not in itself lens-like. But intensional manipulation is often how lenses are employed, and kinds of lenses can be differentiated in part by reference to their aims (lenses for magnification differ from those for photography). Since the lens
theory says that imagination manipulates the material of other states, it suggests (on one development) that we individuate imaginative attitudes according to the sort of manipulation being undertaken and the ends for which it is being undertaken. This delivers a picture showing a set of imaginative attitudes correlated with a range of different imaginative activities. Since the imitation theory says that imagination imitates other states, it suggests that we individuate imaginative attitudes according to what they imitate. On that theory, we end up with a quite different set of attitudes, each correlated with an attitude that it imitates. So the two theories make quite different suggestions concerning the identity of individual imaginative attitudes, and of the generalized imaginative attitude that subsumes them.

So there are viable lens-like characterizations of imaginative attitudes, both fine-grained and generalized. Given that there are also viable lens-like characterizations of imaginative experiences and activities, the lens theory is a framework that provides a comprehensive way of thinking about imaginative phenomena. I now want to argue that this framework is better than that provided by the imitation theory.

4. Methodology

Since they’re quite general ways of thinking about imagination, the frameworks can’t offer detailed accounts of imaginative phenomena. But they can certainly make both descriptive and explanatory suggestions, which can be compared and evaluated. On the descriptive side, their central notions should first, be apt for characterizing clear cases of imaginative phenomena, and, second, demarcate a theoretically approachable extension (we want the framework to lump all the right things, but only the right things). Somewhere between the descriptive and explanatory, their central notions should help to identify the imaginative attitude(s) that should contribute to explanation of imaginative phenomena. In the realm of explanation, their notions should help to illuminate the features of the imaginative attitudes, and to explain how imaginative activities and functions are performed.

I will argue in subsequent sections that the lens theory is prefer-
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The lens theory encourages descriptions of types of imaginative experiences and activities that focus on what they, themselves, are like. The primary terms of characterization concern the things that imagination does, rather than the things that it imitates. Take visualization. The lens theory suggests that we should characterize this experience as a matter of focusing and refinement of elements of visual experiences. This characterization encourages us to then spell out the nature of those lens-like activities, and this can be done without specific reference to elements of visual experience; the lens characterization can stay neutral about what those elements are. By contrast, an imitative characterization encourages us to say which elements are imitated (and which not), and this draws us into the mire of trying to be specific about visual experience, and encourages us to describe imagination in terms of that specification. Where the imitation theory encourages us to describe imagination relationally, the lens theory encourages us to describe it intensionally, on its own terms.27

Since both theories are only frameworks, the methodological division is not sharp. One could spell out a notion of imitation in intensional terms, and a full-dress lens-like account of, say, visualization will need to make some reference to the elements of visual experience. Nonetheless, our general theory of any phenomenon should be the one whether visualization always, sometimes, or never replicates the first-personal perspective and peculiar directness of vision (Wollheim 1974; Peacocke 1985; Martin 2002; Noordhof 2002; Goldie 2005; Gregory 2013). Such debates are frustratingly hard to resolve. (Further relevant reading: Thomas (2014); Korschch (2018).) Some who think there is no fundamental difference consider the question settled by a particular interpretation of the Perky experiments (Perky 1910), according to which they show that subjects can confuse visualization and vision, but this interpretation is disputed by both psychologists (e.g. Segal (1972)) and philosophers (e.g. Hopkins (2012)). For further discussion, see Nanay (2012); Hopkins (2013).

27. It’s important to note that this argument is about types of imaginative experiences, activities, and attitudes. One the lens theory, a token imaginative experience will always stand in some relation to a token counterpart. But the point here is that, when characterizing types of imagining such as visualization, the imitation theorist is bound to describe them by contradistinction from types of experience such as vision, and so has to say quite a lot about vision, whereas the lens theorist can remain fairly quiet.
that gives us the best chance of getting it in clear sight, and the lens theory improves here on the imitation theory. It directs descriptive attention to the phenomena themselves, rather than to the relations they bear to other phenomena. This encourages better, less obfuscatory description of the phenomena, and better theorizing about the attitudes that underlie them.\footnote{I acknowledge that several philosophers have adopted the imitation methodology consciously, and have made quite some progress by so doing (e.g. Nichols 2004). Imitative characterizations and explications aren’t wholly obscure. But relative descriptions and explanations depend significantly for their success on that of the descriptions and explanations to which they are relative.}

Whether or not you agree that contradistinction is a less attractive methodology than direct description, I hope you at least agree that the two frameworks make different methodological suggestions. These differences will become more apparent in the comparisons that follow. The first comparison concerns what each theory can say about characterizing imaginative activities.

5. Description: activities

The lens and imitation theories are both motivated by thoughts about certain imaginative activities: imaginative identification with others and understanding fiction for imitation, artistic creativity for lenses. So a reasonable question for each is whether it is apt for characterizing the activities that give the other its impetus.

The lens theory is able to provide reasonable characterizations of the imitation theory’s core cares. Take first imaginative identification with others. To characterize this after the fashion of the lens theory, we first need to consider the ends we usually have in mind when we try to identify with another. In most cases, we do so in order to understand some aspect of their thought, character, perspective, motivation, or suchlike, not with the end of grasping completely their thinking or experience. Given this, imaginative identification can be construed as a matter of focusing on and refining impressions of others’ experiences in order to bring into focus the salient aspects of their supposed experiences that will deliver the insight being pursued.

With fictions, things are more complex, but similar thoughts apply. Three (putative) imaginative phenomena need characterizing: authors’ mental states, readers’ mental states, and the fictional worlds with which they engage. Taking authors first, a lens-like description of their role in fiction-making might say that they engage in acts of focus and refinement with the aim of making thematic and salient features of the world that are lost amid the detail. In fact, a novel can’t help but be an act of refinement, since by its nature it has to tell by exclusion.

This leads to the thought that imaginative worlds are not best construed as (imperfect) imitations of the real thing, but rather as refined and focused versions. The difference here between imitative and lens characterizations may only be a matter of emphasis, but the emphasis affects (for example) the kind of questions we ask, and answers we give, about the transfer of truths from the imaginary world to the real one.\footnote{For an introduction to such issues, see Lamarque and Olsen (1994).} As for readers, the question is whether they understand novels by building an imitation of a belief structure aimed towards the fictional world, or whether they do so by focusing and refining what’s given in the text. The question needs more attention than I can give it here. But, briefly, I think Derek Matravers’ criticisms of Waltonism are correct: understanding fictions, in the sense of comprehending them, involves neither imitation nor imagination (Matravers 2014, and see Section 7 below). But, I suggest, there is imagination at the level of understanding the significance and import of a work; this is a matter of refining and focusing what’s given in the novel to reach an understanding of its thematic features, unifying structure, and suchlike.\footnote{The idea that truly grasping the import of a novel involves some exercise of imagination has a long pedigree; for a pithy statement of it, see Lamarque (2016). How that works is an open question, but my bet is that combining the lens theory with work on the moral imagination (e.g. Nussbaum (1990); Chappell (2014)) and on the distinction between grasping and understanding a fiction (e.g. Gibson (2003)) will prove rewarding.}
So the lens theory can adequately characterize the cases that motivate the imitation theory. However, the converse is not true. The lens theory is primarily motivated by consideration of artistic creativity. The imitation theory suggests characterizing such creativity in terms of imitation, before theorizing about how exactly the imitative imagination contributes to it. But thinking of creating in terms of imitating seems so far removed from the everyday conception of the phenomenon that it’s hard to grasp such a characterization of it, let alone to understand the contribution of imagination. Imitation seems positively inimical to creativity. For example, what sorts generic works of fiction from truly creative works of literature is that the former are more-or-less mechanical imitations, rolling off a production line of pastiches. The latter, by contrast, might borrow, or steal, but they don’t imitate—that’s what makes them genuinely creative. Imitation seems to be quite the wrong notion with which to characterize creativity.

Perhaps this is no surprise, since some imitationists already accept the point. For example, Currie and Ravenscroft only give a theory of “recreative” imagination, and explicitly avoid saying anything much about creative imagination (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, pp. 8–11). That might be acceptable for their purposes. But I’m exploring the best way of characterizing the full range of imaginative phenomena, so it’s certainly a mark against the imitation theory that partisans of accounts of imagination couched in imitative terms explicitly accept that their theory can’t speak to some part of that range. Of course, there could be some reasonable understanding of imitation on which it’s not so puzzling to characterize creativity as imitative. For example, if “representing as possible” is a gloss on imitation, perhaps a plausible imitative characterization can be generated. But there is, at the least, substantial explaining to be done here.

However, it’s easy to conceive of artistic creativity in lens terms. If imagination in general is characterized as a matter of focus and refinement, creativity can be characterized as the application of such processes to deliver something new: a refined, clarified idea based on the deliverances of past experiences. Not only does this obviously involve novelty, it also distinguishes genuine creativity from mere manufacturing. Imaginative creation is not mechanical imitation, but active refinement; you don’t imaginatively create when you make a new cake by following a recipe, but you might do so by refinement of existing recipes.

Two objections might be made here. First, the lens characterization implies that creation is always derivative of other experiences. The imitation theory has a similar implication, and so perhaps there is no reason to prefer one over the other. But the objection is misguided. The difference between the two is not over whether creativity involves derivation, but rather over the kind of derivation involved. I’m arguing that conceiving of creation as the active, focusing, refining manipulation of extant material is more true to the phenomena than thinking of it as derivation by imitation.31

Second, one might object that making my points in terms of artistic creativity is tendentious. There are distinct types or modes of creativity, of which the artistic is one. So, the lens theory might not actually be apt for characterizing them all, and the imitation theory might actually be better for characterizing some.

The idea that creativity comes in distinct types stems from the observation that we generally describe as “creative” any activity or process (or person or product) that is novel and valuable.32 The range of activities fulfilling these two criteria is broad and heterogeneous, and so it may seem that a heterogeneous typology of creativity is required to capture them all. So, for example, Margaret Boden proposes a model on which there are three forms of creativity: recombinatorial, where extant matter is put into new configuration; exploratory, where empty areas of a conceptual space are filled out; and transformative, where a

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31. Perhaps the objection is that the lens theory cannot characterize creation ab initio. But I don’t think any account of human creativity needs to do so; humans start from extant material, even if deities don’t.
32. Dustin Stokes’ overview of the links between imagination and creativity informs my discussion here (Stokes 2016). While the two conditions are generally accepted, Alison Hills and Alexander Bird deny the value condition (Hills and Bird 2018).
new conceptual space is created (Boden 2003; Boden 2010). Adopting this typology as an example, the objection might either be that the lens theory cannot adequately characterize all three types of creativity, or that the imitation theory is better for characterizing some of them.

The second suggestion doesn’t appear promising. I concede the possibility that imitation might be a more apt concept with which to characterize some forms of creativity, but I’m sceptical about its plausibility. None of Boden’s three forms, for example, seem aptly characterized as imitative. But the suggestion that the lens theory might not be apt for characterizing some forms of creativity is more worrisome. For example, it is not obvious that Boden’s recombinatorial creativity can be characterized in terms of lenses.

A lens theorist might say two things in response. Neither refutes the objection, but both suggest how it might be addressed. First, they might argue that, in fact, at least some sorts of recombination are readily captured in lens terms. Consider a pair of binoculars. They consist in two sets of lenses, each of which delivers a separate image of the target. But they produce one, seamless, fused image. What emerges is a combination of elements with no trace of the seams. This might distinguish the imaginative recombination involved in, say, writing a novel, from the intellectual combination required to make an argument, or the mechanical imitation involved in writing a generic thriller. The joins of an argument are visible: the premises are divisible. But a true novel presents an individual and seamless whole.33

This response involves denying that at least some recombination is truly creative. A second possible response is a similar, stronger denial of the idea that recombination is truly creative, or perhaps that it is imaginative creativity. Several philosophers, including Boden, augment the two basic criteria of creativity with further conditions: for example, that creativity involves a person managing to do something previously beyond them (Boden 2003; Stokes 2011), or that it involves agency (Gaut 2010; Gaut 2012; Stokes 2011; Stokes 2014). Some such condition, sufficiently supported, might well lead us to revise our initial intuition that cases of recombination are truly creative. Kant, for example, thinks that proper explication of the originality condition on creativity leads to the conclusion that scientific discovery is not truly creative (Kant 1781, §47). So the lens theorist might avoid the objection by limiting the scope of the truly creative.34

This second response might seem ad hoc; why should one modify one’s theory of creativity to save one’s theory of imagination? This point gets to the heart of why the objection cannot adequately be met here. It invites us into a morass of issues concerning how exactly one should characterize creativity, and how one should spell out the intimate links between imagination and creativity. How creativity should be characterized is far from settled, and how to characterize its links with imagination isn’t either. I have been treating creativity as a function of imagination much like mind-reading or exploration of possibilities, but in fact I think there are fundamental conceptual links between the two, such that to give a theory of imagination is to give a theory of creativity, and vice versa.35 And of course, I think both theories would best be given in lens-like terms. So getting the two theories in alignment is not an ad hoc manoeuvre, but rather a progressive strategy. This is not the place to pursue that strategy, but I hope I have made enough of a gesture towards it to allay the worry that the lens theory is not actually adequate for characterizing creativity.

I submit, then, that the lens theory can adequately capture the activities that motivate the imitation theory, but that the imitation the-

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33. Compare Collingwood’s discussion of synthesizing combinatorial imagination, and his thoughts on what a “true” novel is (Collingwood 1938, p. 253; ch. 6 §3).

34. The thought that imaginative or “true” creativity might be a narrower category than all that is typically called creative might be encouraged by the diversity of phenomena discussed in collections on creativity, e.g. Gaut and Kieran 2018.

35. As Stokes (2016) notes, various philosophers (Gaut 2010; Gaut 2012; Stokes 2014; Carruthers 2006; Carruthers 2011) have explored conceptual links between imagination and creativity. Most recently, Hills and Bird have argued that “creativity is essentially a matter of the imagination” (Hills and Bird 2018).
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ory cannot reciprocate. We thus have reason to think that the lens theory is better as a way of thinking about imagination. A more general point is suggested by Kind’s useful distinction between two families of imaginative activities (Kind 2016a, pp. 7–10). Imagination is sometimes instructive or informational, used to tell us about the world, and sometimes transcendent, used to take us beyond the world. Imaginative identification is an example of an instructive activity; artistic creation is a transcendent activity. The imitation theory seems well-suited to characterizing instructive activities, but less apt for characterizing transcendent activities. On the other hand, while the lens theory’s motivation comes from transcendent activities, it can still give reasonable characterizations of informational activities. I will furthermore argue in Section 9 that it actually makes more fruitful suggestions about how to explain such activities, but for now I want to stay with description, and compare the two theories’ suggestions about how to demarcate the extension of imagination.

6. Description: experiences
The central notion of a theory of imagination needs to encompass important imaginative activities. It also needs to exclude activities and experiences that aren’t imaginative. Now, I said already that one might worry that the lens theory excludes too many. The characterization I offered of visualization seems likely to deny the claims of various phenomena to count as imaginative, phenomena that you might think should be included.

This raises a point of difference between the imitation and lens theories, concerning penumbral cases. The imitation theory leans towards libertarianism; the lens theory recommends restraint. Imitative characterizations invite the thought that imaginative experiences are those that seem like or behave like or resemble, but actually are not, some counterpart. For example, if any experience that imitates perception has a prima facie claim to count as imaginative, a motley crew of experiences could press a case: dreams, hallucinations, thinking with maps, reading a poem in your head, a wide range of cognitive phenomenology, and so on. Likewise with non-sensory imagination: any non-assertoric holding in mind of a statement, for example a supposition or an assumption for argument’s sake, seems to imitate belief, and so would have a claim to count as imaginative.

You might think all these claims are plausible, and indeed some have been defended. For example, Peter Langland-Hassan argues that memories are imaginative, Jonathan Ichikawa does the same for dreams, and Keith Allen thinks that hallucinations are “degenerate kinds of imagination” (Langland-Hassan 2015, §3.2; Ichikawa 2009; Allen 2015, p. 287). On the other hand, you might think that, when conceived of imitatively, the extension of “imagination” appears unappealingly capacious, and prefer a more restrictive conception. Even if one is inclined to be a lumper, one should want the lump to be a manageable size. The larger it becomes, the less likely it is that the lumping notion is demarcating a theoretically approachable set of phenomena.

The lens theory is more restrictive than the imitation theory, at least so far as pseudo-visual experiences go. Many of those just mentioned are dubiously focusing, refining, or otherwise lens-like, and thus on the lens theory are dubiously imaginative. Reading a poem in your head wouldn’t count, for example; hallucinations probably wouldn’t; memories perhaps would. Granted, there might be some cases where the lens theory suggests inclusion and the imitation theory recommends exclusion, but all the same, the imitation theory makes a prima facie case for many more candidates. So if you prefer an approach to imagination that limits the range of candidates for imaginative status, it seems that you should prefer the lens theory to imitation.

But you might think that the lens theory is too restrictive. Most obviously, its suggestions of activity and purpose seem to exclude “idle”, purposeless, static visualizations. But it’s debatable whether such experiences should count as imaginative. Mental images aren’t in them-

On thinking with maps, see Camp (2007). On cognitive phenomenology, see e.g. Bayne and Montague (2011); Smithies (2013); Chudnoff (2015).

I think memory involves refinement and focus of past experiences, and that this partially explains its chronic unreliability. But that’s another paper.
selves imaginative. They’re items of representational content which may be employed in a wide range of activities and experiences, some of which might be imaginative. According to the lens theory, what makes an act imaginative (or not) is what’s done with images, not that images are involved (we can, for example, think with images just as well as we can imagine with them). So if an idle visualization is just a passive holding in mind of image-content, that won’t count as imagining, just as holding in mind some propositional content may well not aptly be called imagining that content.38 Indeed, it seems to me that merely holding in mind an image-content doesn’t deserve the name “visualization”, never mind “imagination”; having sensuous content doesn’t suffice for a state to count as quasi-perceptual, as something like vision.39

This response is an adumbration; making it good requires more theorizing about visualization and imagination. But it does show how the lens and imitation theories have different emphases when it comes to penumbral cases of visualization, and how they face converse problems as a result. The imitative characterization’s problem is that of excluding, or explaining the inclusion of, a wide range of dubious pseudo-visual penumbral cases; the lens characterization’s problem is that of including, or explaining the exclusion of, some cases that seem closer to the core than it apparently allows. I suggest that the second is a better problem to have, if the aim is to develop a conception of imagination that’s theoretically approachable; excessive extensional capacity militates against this.40

Visualization is an example of how the lens and imitation theories suggest we handle penumbral phenomena. In general, the point is that the imitation theory encourages us to make decisions on the basis of whether the phenomenon is reasonably characterized as an imitation. The lens theory encourages us to do so on the basis of whether it involves lens-like active manipulation. This latter leads to fewer penumbral phenomena being included. I have suggested that this is preferable. Moreover, I have suggested that the lens theory is better-suited to characterizing comprehensively the activities that should form the core of any notion of imagination. On extensional matters, then, there is reason to prefer the lens theory over the imitation theory.

7. Attitudes
Moving on from activities and experiences, I now wish to examine each theory’s suggestions concerning description and explication of the at-

38. Whether supposing (as opposed to conceiving) counts as imagining is an open question, on which I’m implicitly taking a position (Tamar Szabo Gendler 2000; Meskin and Weinberg 2006; Kung 2010; Kind 2013). I think that dividing conceiving and supposing on these grounds is a promising strategy, but I can’t explore that here.

39. If you produce a mental image by visualizing, and then sustain that image by merely holding it in mind, does the mental state cease to be imaginative? Well, why not? Perhaps the image, the chunk of content, remains imaginative, if “imaginative” here refers to the content’s origin. But the mental state employing the image changes, from being active, focusing, and so on to being passively contemplative. Generally, I’m happy to say that we can pass from one kind of mental state to another while employing much the same content: I can move fairly seamlessly from thinking about ice cream to desiring ice cream to hoping for ice cream. So I’m likewise happy to say that one can start out imagining, and end up entertaining.

40. I’ve argued that the lens theory limits the extension of imagination, but perhaps it’s not really restrictive. If every process of refinement counts as imagination, then various forms of reasoning will do so; surely they shouldn’t. But I’m not arguing that all experiences amenable to lens-like characterization are imaginative. Similarly, there are various experiences amenable to imitative characterization that imitationists wouldn’t count as imaginative. But perhaps my argument against the imitation theory only works if it’s committed to saying that all imitating experiences are imaginative. If I can plead exemption from such commitment for the lens theory, surely the same plea can be entered for imitation? But my argument doesn’t force that commitment on the imitation theorist. The argument is that the natural imitative way of characterizing visualization is to say that it imitates vision. Once you say that, the implication that any experience that apparently imitates vision counts as imaginative bulks large—not because the view says that all imitations are imaginative, but because it says that at least some imitations of visual experience are imaginative, and then has to explain why some are and some aren’t. Neither theory is committed to saying that every experience fitting its central notion is imaginative; but once either is applied to some particular imaginative phenomenon, questions about the implications of that application for associated phenomena become legitimate.
titudes that underlie imaginative experiences. The argument, briefly, is that the imitation theory tends towards a reductive or eliminative approach to imaginative attitudes, that this is undesirable, and the lens theory avoids this tendency.

The imitation theory characterizes imaginative experiences as imitations of counterparts. It is natural, therefore, to characterize the attitudes they involve as imitations of counterpart attitudes. Just as visualization imitates vision, the attitude involved in visualization imitates that involved in vision, and the same for i-beliefs, i-desires, and so forth. This means that the attitudes are characterized and explicated in terms derived from the counterparts; and this builds momentum behind the idea that imaginative attitudes should be reduced to counterparts, or eliminated in favour of them.

Reduction begins with a characterization of some putative imaginative attitude in terms of the features of its counterpart that it imitates, and those it lacks. So, for example, imaginary emotions might imitate the feel of the real things, but lack their motivational force; you don’t run out of the cinema when the monster attacks, though you do feel scared (Walton 1978). Similarly, visualizations might share vision’s perspectival orientation, but lack its phenomenal immediacy. But characterizing imaginative attitudes in terms of what they lack makes it seem as though they are etiolated versions of “real” attitudes: much the same, but deficient or lacking in some respect. And if this is so, the imaginative attitudes reduce to their counterparts: all the resources needed to explicate the imaginative attitudes are contained within accounts of the attitudes they imitate. Once we have our accounts of belief and vision and so forth straight, we will have everything we need to explain their imaginative counterparts.

Elimination, meanwhile, is the result of arguing that some putative imaginative experience in fact involves the “real” counterpart attitude, and so we don’t need to posit an imaginative analogue. I mentioned this argumentative strategy when discussing the imitation theory: Susanna Schellenberg, for example, adopts it with regard to conative states (Schellenberg 2013). Another nice example is Matravers’ critique of the Waltonian approach to fiction. Matravers argues that imagination has nothing to do with understanding fictions (or, as he prefers, narratives). Except he doesn’t, quite, argue that; he argues that imitations of beliefs have nothing to do with understanding fictions, and hence that imagination understood as imitation doesn’t, either (Matravers 2014, ch. 3). Instead, understanding fictions involves real beliefs. Implicitly, Matravers accepts that imagination is imitation, and he argues against its involvement in fiction by saying that the alleged imaginative analogues of beliefs are just the real things.

The end point of such local scepticism concerning the existence of particular i-states is the globally sceptical position that are no imaginative attitudes at all. The attitudes involved in experiences and activities that we tend to call imaginative are, in fact, just the the attitudes involved in their counterparts. This is, essentially, Peter Langland-Hassan’s position (Langland-Hassan 2012; Langland-Hassan 2015). In the earlier of these papers, Langland-Hassan argues that imaginative activities such as pretence can be explained without recourse to a “distinctive cognitive attitude” of imagination (Langland-Hassan 2012). In

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41 Explication mainly concerns attitudes, because it’s commonly thought that there can be examples where “seeing and . . . visualizing have the same contents” (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, p. 28), and the same goes for belief, desire, and so on. If imaginative states and counterparts can have the same contents, any difference of kind must be a difference in their attitudes.

42 I assume that if X reduces to Y, i.e. if all of X’s properties are underwritten by or specifiable in terms of properties of Y and Y is (somehow) more “basic”, then Y is the fundamental explanatory entity that accounts for X’s behavior, and X is retained in theoretical vocabulary only as convenient shorthand. I’m not sure this principle is true, but I am sure that it’s widely held, and so won’t argue for it. See e.g. Smart (1959, p. 143); King (1998); Rosen (2010); Skiles (2013).

43 Schellenberg also offers a third route to eradication of imagination. She argues that there are no differences of kind between belief and i-belief, and so we should treat the two as sharing the same attitude, and standing at either end of a continuum of states involving that attitude. Here, again, we end up with no distinctive imaginative attitude (Schellenberg 2013). For discussion, see Liao and Doggett (2014). Nigel J. T. Thomas says something similar about visualization, dreams, images and hallucinations (Thomas 2014).
the later paper, he argues that sensory imagination involves the pairing of sensory content with attitudes “copied from” other mental states such as judgement (Langland-Hassan 2015, pp. 12–13). Thus a globally eliminativist position concerning the imaginative attitude(s) is constructed.

It seems to me that the momentum of an imitative approach pushes firmly in the direction of Langland-Hassan’s position. If imagination involves derivative imitation of other states, what special, distinctive attitude is being picked out? What unique explanatory work can it possibly do? Why not eliminate it? But whether or not you go so far as elimination, the imitation theory at least lends itself to reduction, with the result that the imaginative attitudes cease to be seen as distinctive attitudes with their own special features.

You might wonder why this matters. Could it not be true, after all, that imagination is just a degraded form of other states? Perhaps. But it seems clear that many people spilling ink over imagination and its attitudes really do think that they’re employing, or working towards employing, some conception of imagination apt to do good, explanatory work; work, moreover, that can’t be done just by the attitudes involved in other experiences. Such people are thus placing themselves in an awkward dialectical position by characterizing imagination in imitative terms, since this suggests a direction in which imaginative attitudes are reduced or eliminated.

The lens theory heads off this threat by, again, suggesting characterizations of imaginative attitudes primarily in terms of what they do, rather than in terms of how similar they are to counterparts. Concentrating on the special intensional features of imagination, on what makes it a special intentional engagement with elements of other experiences, makes it less tempting to (implicitly) treat imaginative attitudes as derivative of other attitudes; we’re encouraged to specify what marks imagination out, rather than what it’s similar to. This encouragement is likely to suggest theorizing in terms that provide a conception of the imaginative attitude better able to do the distinctive explanatory work demanded of it. I’ll demonstrate this point now by, first, arguing that the lens theory does better than the imitation theory in suggesting explanations of some plausible intensional features of the imaginative attitude, and, second, arguing that the lens theory makes superior suggestions about how we might explain imagination’s apparent role in certain activities.

8. Explanation: intension

The literature on imagination presents a cat’s cradle of its putative intensional features; threads and patterns of ideas, often overlapping and interlocking, but without a stable, unifying core. There’s little agreement on which features definitively differentiate imaginative experiences or attitudes, and little agreement either on what the mooted features exactly amount to. Such disagreements partially motivate the pessimism about the possibilities of lumping that I discussed earlier—perhaps, the thought is, the disagreements persist because no single notion can unify and illuminate the various plausible elements of imagination’s intension. If a way of thinking about imagination can, in fact, unify and illuminate them, and give good reasons for excluding any it omits, that’s a significant achievement. I’ve suggested that the lens theory encourages concentration on the imaginative attitude’s intensional features; I now want to suggest that its central notion offers a fruitful way of thinking about what those intensional features might be, and why they might be co-occurrent in imaginative experiences, and further that the imitation theory’s central notion offers much less by way

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44. Kind says that the idea that imagination is primitive, i.e. not reducible to other mental states, is one of four fundamental, widely agreed claims about it (Kind 2016a, p. 2).

45. Compare Liao and Doggett, offering general morals for imagination debates drawn from their discussion of Schellenberg’s positions: “If we follow a principle of having the borderline cases between two states lead to a single box including those states, we might as well draw all one’s mental life as one giant box, or just a few, with lots of continua inside. Such a boxology would be rather unhelpful for explaining observable psychological phenomena” (Liao and Doggett 2014, p. 273).
of illumination.⁴⁶

Given the number of putative, plausible intensional features of imagination, I can’t show that the lens theory can convincingly address them all.⁴⁷ But I can demonstrate its promise by attending to a frustrating sub-set of such features: the observations clustered around the notion that imagination is somehow active. These observations often start from the idea that imagination isn’t forceful, doesn’t compel. James Pryor, for example, says that visualizing can be distinguished from seeing by the phenomenal force with which perception compels beliefs, and Hume attempts at one point to distinguish imagination from perception on the grounds of “force or vivacity” (Hume 1740, bk. 1 pt. 1 §1; Pryor 2000, p. 547, n. 37).⁴⁸ Perhaps imagination’s lack of force suits it for certain roles. Considering possibilities involves indifference to actuality. Likewise, in their own ways, do fantasizing and pretending.

Pendant to this idea is the observation that imagination is somehow volitional; it usually doesn’t press itself upon consciousness, but rather waits to be called upon, and furthermore, needs to be called. Pretending.

Volition, effort, and attention point towards the notion that the contents and objects of imaginative experiences are “subject to the will”, as Wittgenstein puts it (Sartre 1940, p. 14; Wittgenstein 1967, §621). You can vary what’s going on in your imagination as you wish. This contrasts with perception: what you see isn’t a matter of what you will. It also contrasts with non-sensory states. Belief, for example, quite plausibly can’t be willed (pace William James). Imagination is, in principle at least, under the subject’s control.

These features of imagination form a frustrating set because, reasonable as the observations seem, they’re quite easily counter-exampled. There seem obviously to be cases where imagination isn’t obedient: images that pop unbidden into your head, or a child who can’t stop hearing a monster under their bed. Conversely, imagination sometimes refuses to run; it can be difficult or impossible to make yourself imagine something ethically abhorrent, for example.⁵⁰ In a way, these cases fit the observations about volition, subjection to the will, and so on: the puzzling thing about them is that imagination should be, but isn’t, obedient. But in a way, they don’t, and a serious challenge for any theory of imagination is to offer a good way of grasping what’s going on. Since these observations about imagination share a thematic connection, a theory of imagination might usefully give us a way of

⁴⁶ This section’s argument concerns intensional features of the “general” imaginative attitude, which are shared to greater or lesser degrees by the specific attitudes.

⁴⁷ Numerous plausible intensional features are presented by Sartre (1940, pt. 1 ch. 1), Casey (1976, ch.s 1–2), and Dorsch (2012, pt. 1), and are scattered throughout Wittgenstein (1967) and Wittgenstein (1958).

⁴⁸ See also Sartre on the “poverty of the image”, and the impossibility of learning from images (Sartre 1940, pt. 1 ch. 1 §3; Stock 2007).

⁴⁹ This observation motivates Heinrich Wansing’s semantics of imagination ascriptions (Wansing 2015).

⁵⁰ This gestures towards “imaginative resistance”, a somewhat misleading name for a group of puzzles concerning cases of trying and failing to imagine. Hume mentions something like it (Hume 1785); Walton revives it (Walton 1994); Tamar Gendler makes it much more precise and pressing (Tamar Szabó Gendler 2000); Brian Weatherson distinguishes several related puzzles (Weatherson 2004). See also, inter alia, Stock (2005); Tamar Szabó Gendler (2006); Walton (2006); Liao (2016).
thinking about imagination’s attitude that elucidates the connection, and so goes some way to illuminating the observations it connects.

If lenses are the central organizing notion by which we think about imagination, that notion is already suggestive of aspects of the notion of activity. Using a lens on a target is something you do. Microscopes, telescopes, binoculars and camera lenses all require active direction, focus, and manipulation towards the desired refinement of the target. Lens processes take time, effort, and often skill. If imagination is like a lens, it’s no surprise that it requires attention. If it’s essentially a matter of deliberately focusing and refining the matter of other experiences in some purposive manner, it’s no surprise either that it’s volitional, effortful, and subject to the will.

Once more, I’m not offering a full account of imagination’s active nature here, but a sketch of how an account might look, and a suggestion that an account couched in lens terms looks promising. Similarly, I can only sketch what such a theory might say about cases where imagination escapes one’s control. Regarding unbidden visions and compulsive monsters, one might deny that such things are truly imaginative. They involve images, perhaps, but aren’t themselves acts of imagination, just as entertaining an image-content isn’t such an act. As for imaginative resistance, the lens theory’s application would first sort cases that genuinely involve imagination from those that don’t; if understanding fictions doesn’t require refinement, it isn’t imaginative, and so failure to engage with a fiction isn’t a failure of imagination. Cases that really do involve imagination failing to run could result from a mismatch of the intended results of the imagining and the materials available for refinement.

Perhaps, in the end, a full lens theory of imaginative activity would offer different answers to these puzzles; all I want to suggest here is that, since the lens theory provides a grasp of the ways in which imagination is active, it also provides ways to think about apparent counterexamples to that claim. By contrast, the notion of imitation seems less apt for providing such insights. Certainly, one might think that imitating is something you do, not something that just happens. But one might equally take it that imitation involves passive copying. Indeed, Goldman explains simulation with reference to mirror neurons; mirroring, you might think, is passive (Goldman 2006, ch. 6). There’s nothing in the everyday notion of imitation (or simulation) that pushes one way or another on this point. And that’s a reason to think that imitation is a poor candidate notion to underwrite or explain imagination’s active nature.

Activity is an example. There’s more to be said about it, and much more to be said about other mooted features of imagination. But brief consideration of it demonstrates that thinking of imagination in terms of lenses promises a certain sort of conceptual unity, clarity, and illumination concerning features of the imaginative attitude that the imitation theory seems less able to provide.

9. Explanation: activities
To conclude the comparison between the theories, I want to explore how they might facilitate or frustrate theorizing about activities besides those I have already discussed. I have argued already that the imitation theory is a poor candidate for characterizing creativity, and suggested that this will be the case for any transcendent activity. I now want to argue that, while the theory aptly characterizes informational activities, its suggestions about their explanation are less promising than those of the lens theory.

The imitation theory suggests that informational functions of imagination should be characterized in terms of imitation of a counterpart experience that’s similarly informative. It’s then tempting to think that the more successful the imitation, the more informative the imagining will be. For example, with regard to modal knowledge, there is a ques-

51. Contingently suggestive, admittedly: the notion of activity is not inherent in the very concept of a lens. Part of the work to be done in transmuting the abstract suggestions of the present paper into concrete theorizing is making more precise which of the contingent associations of the notion should figure in an elaborated account of imagination, and why they should do so.
52. See Matravers 2014, pp. 135–145.
tion about how visual imagining can provide grounds for thinking that a thing is possible. In exploring this question, philosophers tend to characterize visualization’s role in modal knowledge as the counterpart of vision’s role in knowledge of the actual world (Hart 1988, ch.s 2–3; Byrne 2007). They then suppose that, the more like vision visualization can be, the more probative it will be, and so tend to worry about how aspects of visual experience might be replicated in imaginative experience (Kung 2010). Another example is empathy. If you think that this is an imaginative activity, and you think that imagination is imitation, you will be likely to think that, the more closely and completely you imaginatively imitate someone else’s mental states, the better you’ll empathize with them.53

The imitation theory does not demand that all informational imaginative activities be treated so. Perhaps some other conception of imagination’s success conditions could be consonant with it, or applicable to other activities. But within the theory’s framework, this is a natural way of thinking about success, and a problematic one: it seems to set imagination up for failure. Once you’ve claimed that imagination informs better the closer it imitates, you’re likely to concentrate on the question of how closely it can imitate, and it won’t be hard to find reasons to worry that we’re unlikely ever to be in a position to achieve anything much like close imitation. Take visualization: how often do you manage to clearly visualize some imagined scenario? Or how about empathy: how often do you really, fully imagine someone else’s mental states? How often could you?54

53. How empathy should be characterized is controversial, but as Karsten Stueber says, it’s generally assumed that it depends on imagination (Stueber 2016, p. 368). Some simulationists assimilate empathy to simulation, e.g. Heal 2003. But some people argue that simulation cannot explain empathy, e.g. Gallagher (2012). However, one can maintain that empathy is a useful concept while dissociating it from simulation; see Smith (2017). And in contexts independent of simulationism, empathy is often characterized (and problematized) in terms of similarity or imitation, e.g. J. Jones (2004); Wirling (2014); Luo (2017). See also papers in Coplan and Goldie (2011).

54. Peter Goldie argues that it’s impossible to replicate another’s mental states in the full-blooded way required to achieve empathic success as it’s conceived on an imitation approach (Goldie 2011).

Now, you can resist the idea that perfect imitation is required for success, but if you’re characterizing imagination in terms of imitation, it’s hard to resist the idea that better imitations are more successful. This brings another worry. Suppose that your imitations are better the more you know about the world. If so, the better the imitation is, the less you stand to gain from it. If you already know a lot about someone’s mental states, such that you could imitate them fairly closely, what more do you learn by actually performing the imitation? It seems that nothing new is added save for a certain vividness, and what significant epistemic contribution does vivacity make?55

The imitation approach conceptualizes imagination’s informational functions as matters of imitating other informational experiences. This in turn encourages conceptualization of imaginative success in terms of more or less accurate imitation of those other experiences; the worry is that this success condition is either nigh-on impossible to fulfill, or requires such extensive prior knowledge as to make the imaginative experience otiose. In either case, it seems we’ve failed to explain how it is that imagination fulfils its informational roles, and perhaps made mysterious how it ever could.

But what if imagination is a lens, not a mirror? In that case, doing something like empathizing might involve starting from a vague, diffuse sense of what the other is feeling, perhaps a sense as obscure as the starting point of Collingwood’s artist. Through focusing and refining this impression of a feeling, you gain a progressively sharper idea of what it’s like to be the other, by getting a clearer idea of some aspect or other of their experience. On this approach, it seems much more viable to try on someone else’s shoes: you do so, not by fully replicating their mental states, but by focusing on and trying to sharpen your idea of salient elements of the experiences you’re trying to understand. Further, it’s more obvious what you achieve by doing so. You don’t re-
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So the lens theory sets up different success conditions for informational imagining: sharpened understanding, not closest approximation to perfect replication. If informational applications of imagining are understood in terms of lenses, success is achieved when the refining, focusing experience is illuminating or revelatory of an aspect of the target. When we empathize, conceive, or rehearse, we try to fully understand, concentrate on, or clarify an experience or a salient element of it. We succeed when we do, in fact, grasp that clarified idea or element in a way that reveals to us something new about its object. The lens theory thus suggests a fruitful way to think of informational uses of imagination, by providing a particular way of thinking of their success conditions.

10. Conclusion

I have argued that the lens theory and imitation theory suggest different methodologies for approaching the study of imagination, and that the lens theory’s suggestion is preferable; that the lens theory is better able to characterize a wide range of imaginative activities; that the lens theory makes preferable suggestions concerning which experiences count as imaginative; that imitation theory tends towards undesirable reduction or elimination of the imaginative attitude; that the lens theory does not, and moreover is better-placed to explain the intensional features of such an attitude; and, finally, that the lens theory provides a conception of imagination’s success conditions that is more useful in explaining how imagination fulfils its informational functions.

One might wonder, still, whether the two theories are truly competing. While I have provided points of comparison, and argued that they favour the lens theory, the two frameworks nonetheless might be filled out in various ways. Given this, one might have two thoughts. One is that they might both be useful: perhaps it’s best to see imagination sometimes as a kind of imitation, and sometimes as a kind of lens. Another is that the two might be assimilated. Perhaps applying a lens is how imagination imitates, or perhaps imitation is an aspect of a lens process.

On the first thought: I noted above (fn. 8) that I’m a pluralist about explanation. The same goes for description. I don’t think there is necessarily one most useful taxonomy of mental states; different ways of categorizing phenomena can serve different explanatory ends (Hochstein 2016). So, given two different specifications of such ends, a different framework might be more apt for each. However, if we assume that we have one set of explanatory ends—to explain, as cohesively and coherently as possible, the many imaginative phenomena—it does seem that one framework will genuinely be better than the other. Perhaps one could apply to (say) mind-reading and fiction and the other to creativity and so on; but that is to make the kind of splitting move, positing two types of imagination, that I’ve been trying to resist in the interests of explanatory unity.

As for the second thought, there is certainly room within the frameworks for, say, a lens-type theory in which the notion of imitation plays a starring role, or an imitation theory that employs the concept of lenses. In that sense, the two could be assimilated. However, in both of those cases, one notion—one framework—is setting the terms of description and explanation. To set out a lens account which employs the notion of imitation as a sort of lens process is still to to set out a theory within the lens framework; likewise, to explain that imagination imitates via the application of lenses is still to theorize in imitative terms. So, for all that they can be brought closer together, the two frameworks are genuine competitors; and I think that the lens theory wins the competition.

I began this paper by talking about lumping: the possibilities and virtues of unifying a heterogeneous set of experiences under a univocal conception of imagination. Lumping is only possible if there is such a conception, and only worthwhile if it proves fruitful for theorizing about imagination’s features and roles. The imitation theory is just such a lumping theory, and one adopted implicitly in much re-
cent work. But the theory isn’t fruitful: its characterizations lead in the direction of obfuscation and confusion. Fortunately, a better theory is available. The lens theory likewise lumps, but does so by saying that imaginative experiences are best characterized using the concept of lenses: they involve active, intentional focusing, refinement, and clarification of the elements of other experiences. This theory offers viable descriptions of imaginative phenomena, avoids various problems attendant on the imitation theory, and promises fruitful application to such difficult issues as the senses in which imagination is active. We should describe and explain imagination in terms set by the lens theory.56

References

56. This paper has been in progress a long while, and I couldn’t possibly footnote every point at which it’s been improved by a suggestion or comment; these generalized thanks will have to do. I wrote the first version while employed at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), Porto Alegre. I undertook subsequent revisions in Leeds, Auburn, and Antwerp. Thanks to colleagues at all four institutions for creating collegial, supportive academic environments. I presented versions of the paper at UFRGS, the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, the Universidade de São Paulo. Richard Woodward’s imagination class in Hamburg, and the Centre for Philosophical Psychology at the University of Antwerp. Thanks to audience members for many helpful comments. For comments on drafts, many thanks to Robert Hopkins and Aaron Meskin; to two referees for another journal; and to Shen-yi Liao and an anonymous second reader for the present journal. The prize for helping to name the theory goes to J. Robert G. Williams.


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