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Shared Metamemory and (the Feeling of) Shared Memory

The theme of Candau's stimulating paper is shared memory, of which he distinguishes three "modalities": protomemory (including bodily forms of memory), memory proper, and metamemory. While shared memory proper—which he defines as "the sharing by all members of a group of both the factual memory of an event and the meaning given to that event"—is the primary focus of Candau's paper, our focus in this brief commentary will be on what he has to say about shared metamemory, for which he endorses a narrative conception, and, in particular, on what he has to say about the role of metamemory in giving rise to the feeling of shared memory.

Metacognition, in its broadest sense, refers to one's thinking about one's thinking, with metamemory referring to one's thinking about one's remembering in particular (see Proust 2013). A number of theoretical approaches to metacognition are available, but there is, in line with dual-process theories of cognition, an approximate consensus on the need to distinguish between type 2 (conscious, deliberate, slow) metacognition and type 1 (unconscious, automatic, fast) metacognition. Whereas type 1 metacognition is generally taken to be feeling based, type 2 metacognition is understood as involving explicit propositional thought. Given that he works with a narrative conception of metamemory, Candau is presumably concerned, in the first instance, with type 2 metamemory.

"Collective" metamemory and "shared" metamemory are not, we take it, "modalities" of memory. The distinction rather reflects how we understand each modality. While the notion of shared memory assumes only the existence of individuals sharing a memory, Candau suspects the notion of collective memory to be ontologically more demanding because it assumes the existence of a group of people sharing the memory. While we ourselves are impressed by the difficulty of doing without collective memory and other collective notions (e.g., that of a nation) in both lay and social scientific explanations of the social world and thus are less suspicious than is Candau, an attempt to adjudicate such a large-scale issue would, for obvious reasons, be out of place in this commentary. Moreover, no such attempt is necessary, for we ourselves are suspicious with respect to the notion of collective metamemory in particular: while the concept of individual metamemory is well established, the legitimacy of the concept of collective metamemory is doubtful (Arango-Muñoz and Michaelian 2020).

Now, Candau does not provide an explicit definition of shared metamemory, but a relatively modest notion is sufficient for his purposes: whereas individual metamemory refers to the subject's thinking about his own memory, we will take it that

shared metamemory refers to subjects' thinking about the memories of the members of their group and arises where each of the members of a group subscribes to a narrative according to which each of the members of the group remembers a given item (e.g., an event from the past of the group) in a given way. Candau argues that shared metamemory plays two roles in the emergence of shared memory. On the one hand, it plays a role in the generation of shared memory itself. On the other hand, it plays a role in the generation of the feeling of shared memory. As far as the first role is concerned, the idea appears to be that, when the members of a group subscribe to a narrative according to which the members of the group remember a given item in a given way, they are more likely to come, in practice, to remember the item in question in the way in question. The claim that shared metamemory plays this role strikes us as plausible, and we do not wish to challenge it here. As far as the second role in concerned, the idea appears to be, roughly, that it is because each of the members of the group believes that the members of the group remember a given item in a given way that the feeling of shared memory for that item emerges. Through those processes, Candau appears to suggest, shared metamemory ultimately shapes "a world where sharing is ontologized, particularly in its metamemorial forms." The claim that shared metamemory plays this role seems to us to be in need of further discussion.

There are two issues that we wish to flag here. First, although Candau provides an explicit definition of shared memory, and although it is clear how shared metamemory is to be defined, it is not entirely clear how the feeling of shared memory is to be defined. The difficulty has to do less with the "content" of the feeling—which presumably tells the subject that the relevant memory is shared by the members of the relevant group—than with its character. The feeling in question is naturally taken to be a metacognitive feeling. If it is a metacognitive feeling, however, it is a metacognitive feeling of an unusual sort since it results not from monitoring of remembering but from beliefs about remembering: the feeling of shared memory is, if Candau is right, generated by the subject's belief that a memory is shared. Second, and relatedly, it is not entirely clear what is supposed to be gained by the introduction of the notion of the feeling of shared memory. Shared memory itself is, as noted above, meant to be an ontologically less demanding notion than that of collective memory, and the analogous point holds with respect to shared metamemory. Occam's razor would, however, seem to suggest that the feeling of shared memory is simply redundant: once type 2 shared metamemory (acceptance of a narrative according to which the members of a group remember a given item in a given way) is in the picture, there would seem to be no theoretical work left for type 1 metamemory (the feeling of shared memory) to do since type 2 metamemory already explains the generation of shared memory.

Its inclusion of this puzzling redundancy notwithstanding, Candau's picture is coherent and might, therefore, turn out to be correct. Nevertheless, we suggest that additional argument for the existence of the feeling of shared memory—as well as a more explicit definition of the notion—would be in order.