How Much of Your Self Do You Need to Imagine Being Someone Else?

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Abstract

Imagining being someone else from the inside is something relatively easy to do. In Williams (Imagination and the self, problems of the self: philosophical papers, p 26–45, 1973), for instance, one finds Williams's famous imaginative scenario consisting in imagining being Napoleon from the inside at the battle of Austerlitz. However, providing an adequate analysis for imagination reports like "(1) Williams imagines being Napoleon (from the inside)" is no easy task, because the logical form of such imagination report is controversial. Following Vendler (Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale 84(2):161–173, 1979), the logical form of statements "X imagines F-ing" typically involve a PRO construction. Furthermore, it is generally acknowledged following Chierchia (Semant Contextual Exp 11:1–31, 1989) that PRO constructions require a *de se* reading. Consequently, (1) is argued to be an instance of *de se* imagination (this is the "genuine *de se*" analysis of (1)). Yet, (1) is also crucially about Napoleon and, as forcefully argued for in Williams (Imagination and the self, problems of the self: philosophical papers, p 26–45, 1973), it is not even clear that it is about Williams. So (1) cannot be an instance of *de se* imagination in the standard sense, because Williams does not self-ascribe the semantic content of the imagining episode (this is the "quasi-*de se*" analysis of (1)). In this paper, I vindicate the genuine *de se* analysis, based on some new data involving nested imaginings. I then investigate some consequences of the view, which, I argue, are not available to the quasi-*de se* theorists, including what the view says about failed imaginings.

Keywords Imaginative reports · de se · Centered worlds · Pretence

1 Introduction

Being John Malkovich is a 1999 comedy by Spike Jonze. In the fiction, Craig Schwartz is an unemployed puppeteer in New York City who finds himself an office job in a strange building. Accidentally, he finds a hidden trap in his office, takes it and lives the weirdest experience of his life. Here is how Craig describes his experience to Maxine, a (not very friendly) colleague:

> [Craig] There is a tiny door in my office, Maxine: it's a portal; and it takes you inside John Malkovitch. You see the world through John Malkovich's eyes and then after about 15 minutes, you're spit out into a ditch on the side of the New Jersey Turnpike.
> [Maxine] Sounds great! Who the fuck is John Malkovich?

[Craig] Oh, he's an actor. He's one of the great American actors of the 20th century.
[Maxine] Oh, yeah? What's he been in?
[Craig] Lots of things. That jewel thief movie, for example. He's very well-respected. Anyway, the point is... This is a very odd thing. It's supernatural, for lack of a better word. I mean, it raises all sorts of philosophical-type questions, you know, about the nature of self, about the existence of the soul, you know... Am I me? Is Malkovich Malkovich? I had a piece of wood in my hand, Maxine. I don't have it anymore. Where is it? Did it disappear? How could that be? Is it still in Malkovich's head? I don't know! Do you see what a metaphysical can of worms this portal is?[1]

Of course, in real life, there is no such portal to go through and the only way one can "see the world through someone else's eyes" consists in *imagining* being someone else. Imagining being someone else from the inside crucially consists

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1 A philosophically-minded spectator may wonder: what happens should Malkovich go through this "portal"? I am not going to spoil this.

in seeing through the eyes of the targeted individual, i.e. embracing their perspective. But the imagined experience can also involve different modalities, including the processing of other perceptual input, kinaesthetic sensations, and also an emotional component and eventually a feeling of agency in situation. In the movie, Craig is gradually having a richer experience in all these domains of Malkovitch's experience. In reality, when one imagines, the vividness of the experience may greatly vary depending on the scenario and the imaginer's ability, as we will discuss below. Though *imagining* being someone else from the inside is certainly less mysterious and more familiar than going through Craig's portal, it raises a series of open semantico-metaphysical problems which are nicely reviewed and distinguished in (Ninan 2016) and which can be seen as the formal rendering of Craig's informal disarray. In the following, I will address some of these problems by analysing imagination reports.

The analysis of imagination reports has become controversial and there is an open debate about whether imagining being someone else is *de se* or *de re*. More precisely, there is a debate about who needs figure in the imaginative content: according to the genuine *de se* analysis, it is the imaginer's self who experiences the imaginative content (the "pretend view" below); according to the quasi-*de se* analysis the imaginer's self does not figure in the imaginative content for the center of experience is whoever one imagines about (the "identity view" below). In this paper, I give a new defense of the genuine *de se* analysis. I argue that it fares better than the quasi-*de se* analysis when it comes to accounting for complex imaginative scenarios involving imagining being someone else, viz. nested imaginings and failed imaginings. Let me now introduce the bone of contention from the philosophical literature.

2 Imagining Being Someone Else: the Problem

2.1 Imagination and the Self

In his seminal 1973 paper, Bernard Williams wants to challenge the idea that imagination is a reliable guide to determine what is logically possible. In particular, he focuses on the notion of perspective, which seems to be inherent in imagining *from the inside* that such and such happens.[2] In order

to do so, he devised the famous imaginative scenario which consists in imagining being Napoleon from the inside. Here is the scenario (Williams 1973) (p.43):

> If the activity of imagining being Napoleon involves in any important way imagery, it is bound, I think, to involve participation imagery. Images of myself being Napoleon can scarcely merely be images of the physical figure of Napoleon, for they will not in themselves have enough of me in them - an external view would lose the essence of what makes such imaginings so much more compelling about myself than they are about another. They will rather be images of, for instance, the desolation at Austerlitz as viewed by me vaguely aware of my short stature and my cockaded hat, my hand in my tunic.

As hinted at above, the imagined content is not restricted to visual content and may involve other modalities, emotions and a feeling of agency. With this scenario in mind, suitably fleshed out, I will take the following report to adequately describe Williams's activity:

(1) Williams imagines being Napoleon.

As performing the imagining, we might call Williams the *imaginer*: he is the one who imagines. The *imagined content*, by contrast, contains who/whatever Napoleon sees and interacts with. To simplify the following discussion, I will use the description "the desolation at Austerlitz" to denote the (somewhat richer) imaginative content of Williams's imaginative scenario. So we have Williams (at his desk in Cambridge) in reality and Napoleon (and the desolation at Austerlitz) in imagination; Williams taking Napoleon's perspective. As is now clear from this first description of the case, we arguably have a case where Williams's self is not part of the imagined content, though the imagining is *from the inside*. Imagination can make one's self disappear, or so it seems. But this clashes with a piece of linguistic evidence which I need to present now.

2.2 Imagining from the Inside

Such an imagination report recalls a famous imaginative scenario presented as the opening of (Vendler 1979):

> We are looking down upon the ocean from a cliff. The water is rough and cold, yet there are some swim-

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[2] This paper generated numerous philosophical responses including the opposite view forcefully spelled out by Peacocke (1985). Several important distinctions were later drawn to make precise what Williams's problems really are (these are systematically reviewed by Dokic and Arcangeli (2014)). "Imagination and the self" now labels a whole research area in which Dilip Ninan is a very influential contributor (see in particular his PhD dissertation Ninan 2008). I should add a caveat regarding my contribution here: the expression "from the inside" points

Footnote 2 continued

to the notion of first-person (as opposed to third-person) perspective, but such notion is not central to my argument. As will become clear below, the imagination reports I am concerned with are *all* from the inside, and both theories I discuss acknowledge this fact. The expression *from the inside* is thus tacitly presupposed throughout. I simply use the expression in this section to construct the problem I here discuss, viz. *who* the imagination report is about.

mers riding the waves. "Just imagine swimming in that water" says my friend, and I know what to do. "Brr!" I say as I imagine the cold, the salty taste, the tug of the current, and so forth. Had he said "Just imagine yourself swimming in that water", I could comply in another way too: by picturing myself being tossed about, a scrawny body bobbing up and down in the foamy waste. In this case, I do not have to leave the cliff in the imagination: I may see myself, if I so choose, from the very same perspective. Not so in the previous case: if I indeed imagine being in the water, then I may see the cliff above me, but not myself from it.

From this passage, we can extract the following minimal pair of imagination reports:

(2) Vendler imagines swimming in the ocean.

(3) Vendler imagines himself swimming in the ocean.

Following Vendler, it seems clear that (3) is ambiguous in a way (2) is not. Indeed, (2) is true if and only if Vendler imagines "the cold, the salty taste, the tug of the current, and so forth". In short, (2) captures the kind of imagining *from the inside*. By contrast, (3) is true whenever (2) is true, but also if Vendler is split into two characters in the imaginative content, so to speak. That is, if Vendler "pictures himself being tossed about" without "leaving the cliff in the imagination". And consequently, (3) is compatible with the kind of imagining *from the outside* in a way (2) is not. This intuitive contrast between the unequivocity of (2) and equivocity of (3) is uncontroversial and very general.[3] Vendler's question is: how should we explain this contrast?

A now standard answer to this question consists in locating the distinction between (2) and (3) at the syntactical level. As can be seen by the contrast of the minimal pair, the subject of the relative clause in (2) is elided, as opposed to (3). This elision is typical of a PRO construction, which is a syntactic structure that anaphorically links the subject of the principal clause with that of the relative clause. In other words, in (2), the subject of the imagined content implicitly inherits the explicit subject of "imagines". By contrast, in (3), the relative clause has a overt subject. That subject happens to be the pronoun "himself" whose meaning consists in co-referring with "Vendler", i.e. the explicit subject of "imagines". Consequently, the two constructions are syntactically very similar, but the ground for the anaphoric link between the two grammatical subjects is crucially different. In (2), that link is implicit and syntactically encoded;[4] in (3),

the link is explicit and semantically encoded. The upshot of this linguistic analysis is that the logical form of (2) is:

(2) Vendler$_i$ imagines [PRO_i swimming in the ocean].

This analysis of (2) as involving a PRO construction is not original and has become a standard syntactical analysis of (2). It can be traced back to (Chierchia 1989), and more recent analyses of Vendler's examples along the same lines can be found in (Recanati 2007), (Stephenson 2011), (Liefke and Werning 2020), (D'Ambrosio and Stoljar 2021).[5] Without going into the details of Vendler's point, this much is enough to make the problem apparent about imagination reports like (1). This is what I need to explain now.

2.3 The problem

Vendler's contrast *prima facie* shows that the PRO construction encodes the fact that an imagination is *from the inside*. In technical terms, one is supposed to interpret (2) as a *de se* imagination report, as opposed to a *de re* reading which typically corresponds to an external perspective. By contrast, (3) is also compatible with another more general kind of self-reference, namely *de re* about oneself, e.g. Vendler imagining of himself that he swims in the ocean. That much explains the semantic contrast between the ambiguity of (3) (either a *de se* or a *de re* reading) and the unequivocity of (2) (only a *de se* reading).[6]

Now we can see the clash between Williams and Vendler. It seems that the two following imagination reports have the same structure:

(1) Williams imagines being Napoleon.

(2) Vendler imagines swimming in the ocean.

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[3] In (Vendler 1979), there are examples ranging over all perceptual modalities, and also other attitude verbs including to remember and to forget.

[4] In general the identity between the two subjects in a PRO construction "is presupposed" as (Higginbotham 2003) (p.518) puts it.

[5] It should be noted that it is not without alternatives: (Montague 1970) and (Lewis 1979), for instance, theorise about this difference in perspective without postulating a PRO construction. Note also that the contrast between (2) and (3) might be accounted for at the level of pragmatics, on the ground that (3) takes more effort to pronounce than (2), thus prompting for the search of an alternative interpretation (thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion, which I do not know whether it has been pursued). This "standard" interpretation of Vendler's examples is used here to make the debate I am about to present below more striking, and my argument below does not rest on the specifics of this interpretation, and so I safely leave this on the side.

[6] There are further distinctions one can draw regarding the interpretation of a PRO construction (and correspondingly the ambiguity of non-PRO constructions), when we take into account the notion of error through misidentification, coming from (Wittgenstein 1958) (p.67) and greatly developed later. In particular, (Recanati 2007) (p.193) thus distinguishes between the *implicit* and *explicit de se* depending on whether the *de se* content at issue is, respectively, immune to error through misidentification or not. He then argues that "Reports using the PRO construction can only be reports of implicit *de se* thoughts". Since nothing hinges on these finer distinctions in the following, I do not introduce these here and invite the reader to consult Recanati's work for a finer grained theory of *de se* content.

They are both instances of the general schema "*A* imagines ϕing", and Vendler's linguistic point is that the logical form of such statements is: "A_i imagines [PRO_i ϕing]". Consequently, given the standard analysis of *PRO* constructions, both (1) and (2) are predicted to be *de se* imagination reports from the inside. But Williams metaphysical point was that his imaginative scenario is not about *himself*, but about *Napoleon*. In other words, the *PRO* construction in (1) forces Williams to be in the imagined content, but Williams, by stipulation of his imaginative scenario, is simply nowhere to be found in the imagined content. What explained the *de se* nature of (2) becomes a problematic analysis for (1)'s *from the inside* perspective. We now have a specific problem about "imagining being someone else" imagination reports.

3 The Debate

There are obviously two ways out of this problem: we need to modify either Vendler's or Williams's analysis. In other words, either (1) is genuinely *de se*, despite Williams's claim to the contrary, and we need to show where Williams is to be found in the imagined content so that we can save the generality of Vendler's analysis; or (1) is indeed a counter-example to the generality of Vendler's analysis and we need a theory which tells us how to narrow down the *PRO* constructions which do force a *de se* reading, as opposed to those which do not. The first side of the debate I call the "pretend view" and the second the "identity view", for reasons that will become clear when the details are given. After I have presented the views, I will defend the pretend view, based on some new data involving nested imaginings.

3.1 The pretend view

The pretend theorist takes as a starting point the idea that Vendler's analysis applies to (1). Thus the syntactic structure of (1) is:

(1)   Williams$_i$ imagines [PRO_i being Napoleon].

In order to make sense of this construction, they add that "to be X" *in the context of imagination* is tantamount to pretending to be X, or to playing the role of X. Note by contrast that in a non-imaginative context, like that of Craig in *Being John Malkovitch* where he experiences being John Malkovitch as a result of going through "the portal", pretence or role-playing is *prima facie* irrelevant. So, the pretend theorist holds that "to imagine being X" should be explained as "to pretend to be X" or "to play the role of X", and argues that this explanation is in fact helpful, as I aim to show below.[7]

This appeal to pretence is not unreasonable because identity statements often occur in the context of pretence.[8] Such statements as "Daniel Craig is James Bond" written on a poster are indeed very familiar and unequivocally mean that Daniel Craig plays the role of James Bond, i.e. that he pretended to be Bond in the relevant movie set when the camera was on. That is what actors do. They are identified with the character(s) they play *via* pretence.

Walton, in the book in which he develops a very general theory of pretence, applies this simple idea to Williams's imaginative scenario and concludes (Walton 1990) (p.34):

> Let us say that [Williams] illustrates for himself what he imagines Napoleon to experience, by imagining experiencing it himself. [...] [Williams] does not imagine an identity between himself and Napoleon. But he does imagine both himself and Napoleon, and these two imaginings, though distinct, are significantly linked.

Let us satisfy ourselves with the analogy between Williams and the actor to understand what "significantly linked" means here, and I will dwell on this analogy later on. Importantly, *contra* Williams, Walton asserts that Williams is indeed imagining *both* Williams and Napoleon, hence he *inter alia* imagines about himself. In other words, Williams's imaginative scenario is indeed *de se*. Thus, according to the pretend view, Williams is somehow to be found in the imagined content, as "significantly linked" with Napoleon. The imagined Williams is of course distinct from Williams the imaginer; let us call this new instance postulated by the pretend theorist the *imaginee*. This instance, as it happens, will become the *casus belli*, for quasi-*de se* theorists reject it.

It will be useful for discussion to use the drawing in (Fig. 1).[9]

3.2 The identity view

The rationale for the identity view is a development of Williams's original point: indeed, what Williams imagines is *Napoleon*'s experience, so he cannot *self*-ascribe the
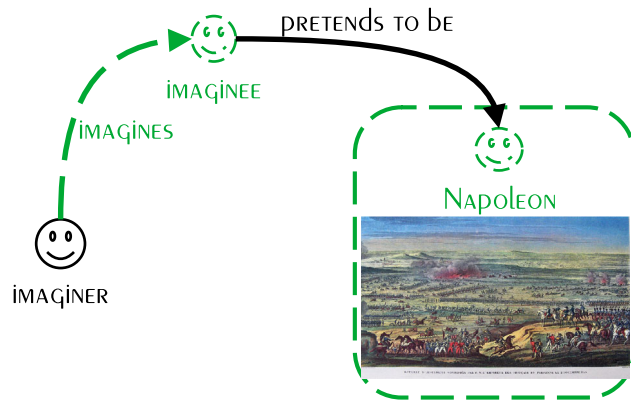

Fig. 1 The pretend view

imagined experience.[10] The point of Williams's imaginative scenario is that it is *by design* that Williams cannot be part of the imagined content. Here is how Recanati puts it very clearly in (Recanati 2016) (p.6):

> There are [...] only two characters actually involved: the imaginer [Williams], and Napoleon. What is imagined (the content) is *what it's like to be Napoleon on the [Austerlitz] battlefield* - various features of Napoleon's experience which we do our best to imagine. This is similar to Vendler's example of imagining "the cold, the salty taste, the tug of the current and so forth". According to Williams, it is to *Napoleon himself* that the imagined properties and experiences are ascribed. In Vendler's example, the imagined properties and experiences may well be ascribed to the imagining subject in the counterfactual scenario in which that subject would

be among the swimmers. But that's only one way of understanding the imaginative project at stake. Perhaps what the subject is asked to imagine is only what it's like to be a swimmer riding those waves; in which case the imagined properties and experiences are implicitly ascribed to *those swimmers*, or to anybody in their position - not, or not necessarily, to the imagining subject herself.

In the imagined content, so the identity theorist says, the imaginee *is* Napoleon. Contrary to what Walton suggests, there is no "significant link" between two characters, there is simply one character. That is what identity is about: two identical things are one, and we shall not distinguish them.

To illustrate this very point Williams indeed quotes a colourful passage from Leibniz, in which he discusses a similar construction with "wish", that Recanati takes to be a "devastating objection" to the pretend view (Williams 1973) (p.42):

> Leibniz, perhaps, made something like this point when he said to one who expressed the wish that he were the King of China, that all he wanted was that he should cease to exist and there should be a King in China.

Imagining being someone else trivially means imagining being *someone else*. The identity theorist thus stresses the fact that we have to "do without the imaginee" (Recanati 2016) (p.6).

As a result, *pace* Vendler, even though (1) *looks like* a *de se* imagination report, it is in fact not about Williams, *hence not de se*. (Recanati 2016) (p.6–7) thus proposes to introduce the term "quasi-*de se*"

> to refer to the type of thought one entertains when one imagines, say, being Napoleon. The type of imagining at stake is clearly first personal, in a sense to be clarified, yet the imaginer's self is not involved. The properties that are imaginatively represented are not implicitly ascribed to the subject who imagines them, but to the person whose point of view she espouses. In other words, the person in whose situation the imagined state of affairs is supposed to hold need not be the imaginer himself; it may be anybody, including Napoleon, or the last man to be alive on earth. The imaginer "sees" the world vicariously, through the eyes of his imaginative target [...].

Doing without the imaginee can be schematised in the following way (Fig. 2):

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[10] Williams endorses the assumption that it is impossible that Williams be identical with Napoleon, and that is why he does not self-ascribe the imagined content. Williams's original intention was to talk about imagination and impossibility in (Williams 1973). However, Williams's imaginative scenario can be extracted from this argumentative context. In fact, he is somewhat vague in his article because he uses a distinction between the "empirical self" and the "Cartesian self" which is confusing and unhelpful, as shown in (Ninan 2016). I thereby follow Ninan in the way he distinguishes between the problem of imagining an impossibility and the debate at issue here, i.e. about the place of the self in imagining being someone else. Maybe there are deep connections to be made between the different problems: for instance, Justin D'Ambrosio suggested to me that it might be because it is metaphysically impossible for Williams to be identical with Napoleon that he would rather pretend to be Napoleon; in other words, one might try and argue from a metaphysical vantage point for the pretend analysis. I leave this interesting suggestion for further work, and try to stick to the linguistic vantage point in this paper, though.
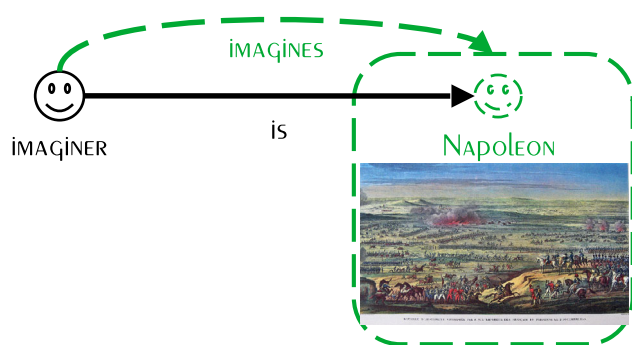
Fig. 2 The identity view

Fig. 3 Intended pretend reading of (6)

4 Vindication of the Pretend View

4.1 Nested Imaginings

We now have two opposing interpretations of (1).[11] Here is a new piece of data which, I contend, vindicates the pretend view: *nested* imagining about someone else.

What is the difference between the following two imagination reports?

(4)   Recanati imagines being Napoleon.

(5)   Recanati imagines being Williams imagining being Napoleon.

Relying on intuitions might be difficult on this one, so I will first flesh out precisely the intended difference. (4) is structurally the same as (1), though it features Recanati as the imaginer: the imaginative content is supposed to be identical, viz. the desolation at Austerlitz, as viewed by Napoleon, with all its experiential richness. (5), by contrast, is a nested imaginative scenario. However, it is intentionally very similar to (4): (5) has the same imaginer and the same imagined content as (4). For both (4) and (5): in reality, there is Recanati imagining; in imagination, there is the desolation at Austerlitz, etc. The point of this pair of imagination reports is that the only difference between (4) and (5) happens in *the way* Recanati imagines the same content. This will serve to adjudicate between the two views.

Before making my argument, let me emphasise what (5) is *not*. The intended reading of (5) is crucially different from the following imagination report:

(6)   Recanati imagines Williams imagining being Napoleon.

(6) typically reports the following situation: Recanati imagines Williams at his desk in Cambridge moving his

shoulders softly as if confidently riding a horse. In other words, the imagined content of (6) is *not* the desolation at Austerlitz etc., but it is *Williams at his desk in Cambridge* (at that moment when he imagines being Napoleon). *A fortiori*, the point of view in this imaginative scenario is *not* that of Napoleon, neither is it *from this inside* in the sense we have been talking about thus far (either *de se* or quasi-*de se*). That squares well with Vendler's syntactic analysis we take as a working hypothesis, since Recanati in (6) is not anaphorically linked as a constituent of a PRO construction here. (6)'s logical form is rather the following:

(6)   Recanati imagines [Williams$_i$ imagining [PRO_i being Napoleon]].

If we want to draw it using as a base the pretend reading, we get (Fig. 3).[12]

By contrast, (5) is a proper nesting in which Recanati is anaphorically linked in a PRO construction:

(5)   Recanati$_i$ imagines [PRO_i being Williams$_j$ imagining [PRO_j being Napoleon]].

Now, my claim is that the pretend theorist can make a structural distinction between (4) and (5) in a way the identity theorist cannot. That it is an advantage of the pretend view over the identity view.

As a matter of fact, the pretend view has no special difficulty with nested imaginings. Indeed, the pretend theorist interprets PRO as referring to the imaginee that they postulate and simply copies the syntactic structure by introducing as many imaginees as there are PRO constituents. Applying Walton's recipe here: Recanati imagines both himself and Williams and those two imagined entities are significantly linked in the following way: Recanati pretends to be

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[11] I should note here that (Recanati 2016) clearly uses a notion of pretence, and therefore the contrast between the identity and the pretend view is not as clear-cut as I here suggest. Eventually, Recanati holds that the quasi-*de se* is to the *de se* what pretence of the first-personal perspective is to the real first-personal perspective. More on this below.
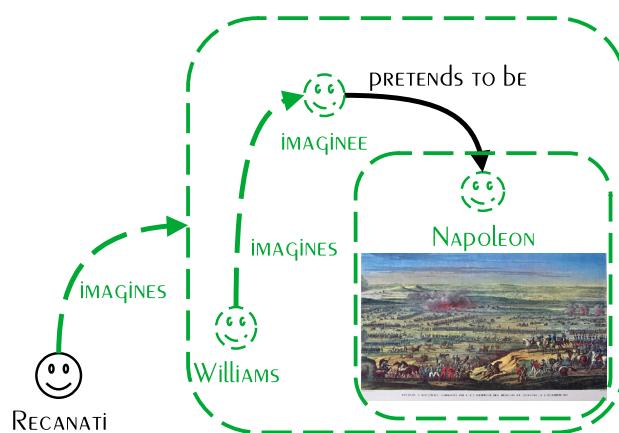
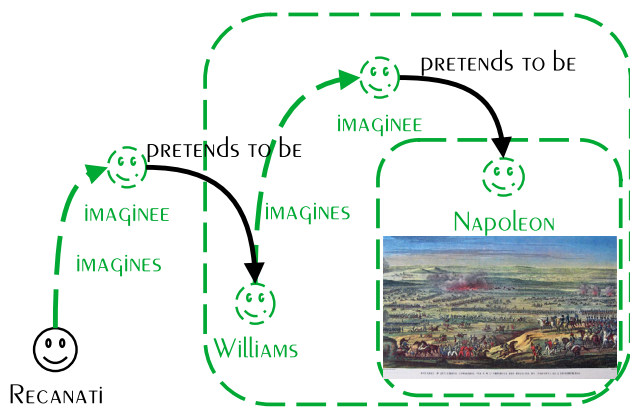[12] It is simple to draw the alternative using the identity reading as a base.
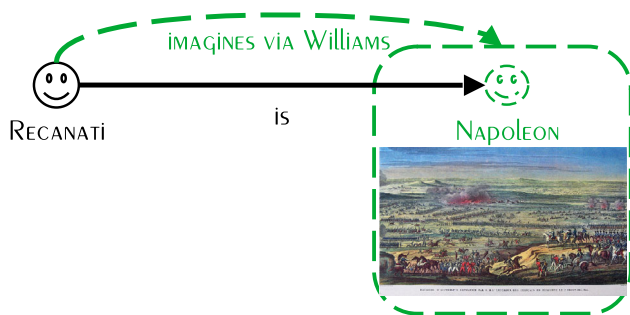
Fig. 4 The pretend reading of (5)

Fig. 5 The identity reading of (5)

Williams; then, in the imagined world, Williams imagines both himself and Napoleon and the two imagined entities are significantly linked in the following way: Williams pretends to be Napoleon. More than ever, a drawing speaks a thousand words as in (Fig. 4).

Since they are committed to doing without the imaginee, the identity theorist has a problem with the interpretation of the nested *PRO* construction. If I follow their rationale correctly, we have to conclude that there are only two characters involved in (5): the imaginer is clearly Recanati, and the imagined content is by design the same as that of (4) and so features the desolation at Austerlitz as viewed by Napoleon, etc. It is as if Williams got lost in the nested imaginative scenario reported in (5). And the identity theorist lacks the resources to keep Williams in sight. The identity theorist thus end up with a situation structurally similar to that of (4), as shown in (Fig. 5).

At this point, the identity theorist can bite the bullet and deny that there is any relevant structural difference between (4) and (5). But I think biting the bullet is really hopeless once we see the distinction between the two scenarios (more on this in the next section).

Alternatively, they can try to unpack the difference between (4) and (5) in the *scenario* somehow, and explain what is the difference between "directly imagining" of (4) and the "imagining-via-Williams" of (5), so to speak. One

way of doing this consists in holding that, contrary to what I have said, the imagined contents of (4) and (5) are in fact different. This amounts to denying that the data here presented is relevant to adjudicate between the two views. I think this strategy is based on an equivocation on the notion of imagination, which plays two distinct roles in nested imagination scenarios. On the one hand, the imagination is used to flesh out the scenario, i.e. to conjure up the imagined content. Somehow, our faculty of imagination generates some propositional content associated with the description "the desolation at Austerlitz" (or any other richer imaginative content). On the other, "to imagine" denotes a propositional attitude which operates on the imagined content. I think it is crucial to keep this distinction in mind, and see that the relevant intended difference between (4) and (5) is merely attitudinal. Locating the difference between (4) and (5) at the level of content consists in disregarding the attitudinal aspect of imagination which is under discussion in this paper.

Finally, looking at (Recanati 2016) more closely, it is not clear how he would actually account for the nested imagination scenario. According to the quasi-*de se* analysis, Williams in (1) does not self-ascribe the imagined content, but merely simulates self-ascription of the imagined content (the scenario is not *de se*, but quasi-*de se*). It is difficult to understand what a simulation of a simulation of self-ascription is, under the explicit constraint that no imaginee be postulated. By contrast, the pretend theorist can say quite simply that Recanati's "simulation of self-ascription" means real ascription to a simulated self. The imaginee is another name for this "simulated self". The nested scenario is thus rendered as ascription of the imagined content to a self (that of Napoleon) simulated by a self (that of Williams) simulated by a self (that of Recanati). But, of course, interpreting Recanati this way would be incompatible with his claim that we "should do without the imaginee", and would amount the vindication of the pretend view I am here advocating for. Let me then advocate.

4.2 On the Difference Between Direct and Nested Imaginings

We thus have a case, or so I claim. Now I need to argue that this case is in favour of the pretend view. For, in a sense, Williams indeed got lost in the nesting process. However, he is also the only relevant difference between (4) and (5), so we better find him somewhere.

(4) and (5) are different imaginative scenarios. Although the imagined contents are identical in some respect (same imagined events and individuals, same vantage point on the events), they are crucially different when it comes to what I shall call the *cognitive make up* of the imagining. Here is one relevant difference between Recanati and Williams which can illustrate how (4) and (5) differ: Recanati is a native French speaker (just like Napoleon) and Williams is not. (4)

would thus plausibly report a situation in which Recanati imagines the desolation at Austerlitz as viewed by Napoleon, and Napoleon's stream of consciousness is likely to be in French. Recanati's Napoleon would think: "J'ai vaincu; les idéaux de la Révolution, par ma main, ont balayé l'ancien monde. Pauvre Marie Walewska, je me demande où elle se trouve à cette heure."[13]

(5), by contrast, reports a situation in which Recanati imagines how Williams imagines the same scene. In Williams's imagination, it is likely that Napoleon's stream of consciousness is in English (or maybe it is in French, with a British accent). Recanati would thus imagine that way: from the inside, Napoleon reflecting on his victory and sentimental life in English.

Of course, this talk of accent or choice of language for the imaginative scenario voice over is just one way of bringing about the cognitive make up which I identify with the imaginee in the pretend view. In some other imaginative scenarios, it may be fleshed out differently. For instance, it may be cashed out as relevant background knowledge. Suppose for example that Serge Haroche imagines being Einstein at the Nobel Prize ceremony in 1921.[14] Now suppose Haroche imagines being Recanati imagining being Einstein at the Nobel Prize ceremony in 1921. When Haroche imagines directly being Einstein from the inside, he is liable to bring into Einstein's stream of consciousness a lot of the theoretical physics that he knows about (perhaps not all of the post-einsteinian physical developments) to flesh out Einstein's awareness of the prize's significance; by contrast, when Haroche imagines via Recanati, I think he would not bring in so much theoretical physics, evaluating first what he thinks Recanati knows about theoretical physics.

"Cognitive make up" is thus a blanket term at this point, and I will elaborate on it in the next section. For the time being, the point is that having some room for the imaginee allows oneself to include the cognitive make up in the structure of the imagining, at the level of the self. And such information is relevant to the understanding of (5). As a result, imagining being someone else is *de se* because the cognitive make up of the imaginative scenario comes from the imaginer's self. The imaginer's self is present in the imaginative content in some sense, though it is not a character in the scene.[15]

To sum up: though somewhat convoluted imaginative scenarios, nested imaginings being someone else are possible and distinct from direct imaginings being someone else. Moreover, they help understand what imagining being someone else amounts to in that they are straightforwardly accounted for in the pretend view. By contrast, the identity view does not extend easily to account for them. As a result, I think we should prefer the pretend view of imagining being someone else. Consequently, imagining being someone else is a kind of imagining *de se*. The part of oneself involved in such imagining I loosely called "cognitive make up". I now need to say something more precise about what this is supposed to be.

5 From One Self to Another

On the pretend view here defended, imagining being someone else is not a counter-example to Vendler's point. We have just seen how we can use PRO constructions to favour the pretend view of imagining being someone else. But this does not tell us anything about the underlying psychological or computational process. The pretend view has a story to tell here, which is *pretence*. It is time to unpack this notion and discuss Walton's "significant link" in more detail. I think it sheds new light on the subtle relationships between imagination and the self.

5.1 Impersonations

Pretence is helpful, because it is a general term which applies both to imagining being someone else and to what actors do when they perform on stage. In imagination, Williams is Napoleon; on stage, the actor is the character. I think the analogy is quite strict, and helpful: just like an actor projects their body into the fictional world, one projects one's mind, i.e. one's cognitive capacities, into the imagined content, when one imagines being someone else. Cognitive capacities are just as physically real as the actor's body. Linguistic abilities, for instance, whatever they really are, involve some computations which are actually done by a brain with all its singularity.

Take Shakespeare's *Richard III*, whose opening famously features Richard III's self-centered monologue. At some point Richard III says: "But I, that am not made for sportive tricks".[16] Take two impersonations of Richard III by two dif-

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[13] This is the French translation of (Williams 1973) (p.43)'s *narration*: "I have conquered; the ideals of the Revolution in my hand are sweeping away the old world. Poor Maria Walewska, I wonder where she is now".

[14] Serge Haroche is one of the 2012 Nobel prize winner quantum physicist, and colleague of François Recanati at le Collège de France.

[15] Readers who are familiar with the literature on imagination and the self might think I am calling "cognitive make up" what is denoted by "bare Cartesian I" in the literature. Maybe, but I am not so sure. Later on, I will insist on the fact that the relationship between the imaginer and the imaginee on the pretend view is to be understood as *embodiment*

Footnote 15 continued

(understood primarily in the sense in which an actor plays a role, taking up Walton's analogy). Embodiment does not sound to square well with Descartes's idealist view of the mind, though I am not a Descartes scholar and could not say for sure.

[16] He comments upon his (in)famous scoliosis, which is the reason of his surname "the Hunchback King".

ferent actors, say Kenneth Branagh and Ian McKellen. When Branagh utters the quoted line, "I" does not refer to him, but to Richard III: in the fiction, he *is* Richard III.[17] Same for Ian McKellen.

To have a perfect analogue of (1) and (4), we need to suppose further that the stage setting of Branagh's and McKellen's productions are identical. It is not actually the case, but we can certainly imagine such a case to hold (maybe one is the double body of the other in the same tour). In this case, the fictional scene is relevantly the same as Williams's and Recanati's imagined content: not only are the worlds and the character the same, but also the background.

Though the fictional content (what Richard III says, his surroundings, etc.) is fixed, there remains a difference in the two impersonations: Branagh's body and McKellen's body are different. For instance, if you look carefully enough, you will find that McKellen's ears are protruding in a way Branagh's ears are not. This is clearly irrelevant to Shakespeare's plot, but it is still there to be seen.[18] The reason for this difference is clear: Branagh and McKellen, by impersonating Richard III, *embody* the character. On stage, embodiment consists in the following pretence: your body is someone else's body. In other words, what actors do is that they project their body into the fiction. It does not mean that Branagh is to be found in Richard III's world. By definition of what pretence means here, the actor *is not* part of the world of the character he embodies. It merely means that the actor projects some of him or herself into the fictional world. That is what embodiment is all about.

I think the same holds for Williams and Recanati. Williams's English language or accent is analogous to McKellen's protruding ears. It is not relevant for identifying and individuating the imagined content, but it is there if we care to look for it. What it takes for Williams to imagine being Napoleon consists in projecting his cognitive abilities into Napoleon in imagination, just like what it takes for McKellen to play Richard III consists in embodying the character and thus project his body into the fiction. The only difference is thus a difference in degree. When one imagines being someone else, the *embodiment* is arguably a lot *thinner* than when one plays a role. Yet, the structure of the two activities is the same.

The analogy extends to the nested cases and further illuminates what I defended earlier. We see exactly what is meant by the following description:

(7)   Branagh plays McKellen playing Richard III.

Suppose McKellen has a very idiosyncratic way of uttering the word "sportive", which differs from Branagh's. Then, (7) can be used to describe a situation in which Branagh plays Richard III in a way that imitates McKellen's impersonation of Richard III. Branagh would in particular change his pronunciation of "sportive" to match that of McKellen. The pretence analysis works perfectly: while McKellen is lost in the pretence, there is still room for him as a middle imaginee/pretendee, so to speak.

Such nested playing acts are certainly much more familiar than the nested imaginative scenarios I considered earlier to vindicate the pretend view. Actors regularly imitate each other. In some cases, it is even crucial to the understanding of what happens on stage (or in a movie) that the audience recognises the indirect quotation, so that they get the irony of the stage setting. Such effects are not directly part of what is represented, but it is conveyed all the same. The pretend view, having room for the imaginee/pretendee can explain such effects as regular cases of nesting. Again, one can see how helpful is the strict analogy between imagining being someone else and impersonating a character.

5.2 Failed Imaginings

Finally, I will consider what I take to be a good consequence of the pretend view (as opposed to the identity view): it can explain what can be called *failed imaginings*.

Suppose Betty is a bat. It seems that the following imagination report is true of Thomas Nagel's famous thought experiment:

(8)   Nagel tried and failed to imagine being Betty (from the inside).

(8) is clearly a complex case involving an imaginative scenario of the type we are concerned with. As a first approximation, we could say that (8) presupposes the falsity of:

(9)   Nagel imagines being Betty (from the inside).

whose logical form is identical to (1) and (4). If actual failures of imagination are possible, as the intuitive truth of (8) suggests, we need to have a story about how statements like (1), (4) and (9) can fail to be true. The important point here is that Nagel *tried* hard to imagine being Betty, though he did not succeed in carrying out the imaginative scenario that he nevertheless carefully designed. Failed imaginings in this sense are particular kinds of false imagination reports: (9) is false because (8) is true, and not because he set about imagining Betty and ended up, say, imagining Napoleon (having read too much of Bernard Williams lately). According to the identity view, it is not clear how one can *fail* to identify with the target. Indeed, it seems that identifying with the imagined target is a matter of stipulation for the identity theorist, and I

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[17] Nothing hinges on the fiction / non-fiction distinction in what I say here. If you dislike my example because you think *Richard III* is not typically a fiction, please change the example for whatever you prefer.

[18] If one wants to use (Friend 2016) (p.2)'s influential terminology for fictional content: such a detail is not a mandate, nor a prescription, but a mere invitation to imagine.

do not see why Nagel could not simply stipulate to endorse Betty's perspective.

By contrast, the pretend theorist has an interesting story to tell about failed imaginings. The pretend theorist holds that imagining being someone else consists in performing an activity of de-centering. As we have seen above, this corresponds to a psychological process which is closely analogous to actor's impersonations of characters. The performance of actors can clearly vary, and it is conceivable that they might fail to impersonate the character they tried to impersonate. Here is, for instance, an easy way to fail to impersonate Richard III: mess up with the part.

Suppose I go on stage and recite Richard III's opening monologue: "Now is the winter of our discontent", etc. I then go on and eventually say: "But I, that am not made for... Darn. What's the last bit again?". There is an intuitive sense in which I thereby failed to impersonate Richard III though I really tried. Being an actor is not easy, as anyone knows, and it involves a lot of skills.[19] The analogy goes both ways: just as the actor can fail to impersonate a character, one can fail to imagine being someone else. Such failure is *possible*, because pretence is not a matter of stipulation: one must do certain things.

But Nagel's thought experiment is grounded not on an accidental failure to imagine being Betty, but on what Nagel argues is an *impossibility* to imagine being Betty from the inside, or "what it's like" to be Betty. On this point, the story I have told about projecting one's cognitive capacities is illuminating. I would even go as far as to say that the force of Nagel's thought experiment lies in the empirical fact that what it takes to imagine being someone else (i.e. to de-center oneself) consists in projecting one's cognitive capacities into the imagined content's center. In (Nagel 1974), the failure to imagine Betty's perspective is due to the failure to construct in imagination an ego-centric representation of space based on eco-location. This thought experiment is meant to give us information about the comparative nature of both Nagel's and Betty's cognitive capacities. From this essential failure to imagine, Nagel concludes that there something incommensurable between Nagel's and Betty's spacial experience. Nagel further argues that this actual failure indicates the limit of Nagel's (and respectively Betty's) consciousness, what has famously been termed the "what-it's-like-ness". Putting aside Nagel's last claim, I think the whole reasoning presupposes something like what the pretend view is trying to articulate, namely the idea that, in imagining being someone else, one projects one's cognitive capacities in the imagined content.[20]

Failed imaginings are clearly understudied in the literature on imagination, and it plays virtually no role in the debates surrounding imagination and the self. It has to be said that (Vendler 1979) (p.166) is an exception, for he amusingly remarks that

> What is impossible is to imagine being a thing with no experience: a stone, or a coffee-pot. "But pots often talk in fairy-tales" you say. True, I answer, but look at the picture: the pot has eyes and ears...

Impossibility to de-center is arguably important for the philosophy of consciousness. By the same token, a systematic study of failed imagination reports should also prove beneficial to the semantics of imagination.

6 Conclusion: on Being John Malkovich

I hope we have touched upon several of Craig's "philosophical-type questions" in the course of this argument. I want to end this paper with a praise to Charlie Kaufman, who wrote *Being John Malkovich*'s script, for he somehow inspired the data I present here as a vindication of the pretend view.

The fictional character Craig Schwartz is a puppeteer. He is a great, fantastic puppeteer. But it is difficult to make a living out of the art of puppetry in late 20th-century New York City. Craig's talent is not recognised.

The relationship between the puppeteer and the puppet is the matrix of Kaufman's scenario, that which hangs all of the surrealist bits together. In particular, Craig's discovery of the portal is the fictional trick which enables nested puppeteer-puppet relationships. Indeed, Craig eventually finds a way to control Malkovich from the inside, turning Malkovich into a flesh-and-blood puppet. Having done that, Craig has Malkovich become a successful puppeteer, benefiting from Malkovich's previous notoriety as an actor. Through Malkovitch, Craig's talent is finally recognised.

The "cognitive make-up" I have come up with corresponds to the puppet's strings. Strings are clearly *essential* to the puppet's moving. Yet the game of make-believe associated with a puppet show consists in disregarding the strings: we should forget about the strings. If you look at the strings closely though, they will lead you straight to the puppeteer, where ever she may hide. In this paper, I tried to have you look at the strings of Williams's imaginative scenario by displaying nested imaginings. In our theoretical debate, the imaginee (that the identity theorist say we should dispense of) corresponds to the strings, and dispensing of the strings amounts to

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[19] Here, one might very well connect my pretend account of imagining being someone else and Amy Kind's general theory of imagination according to which "imagination is a skill" (Kind 2020).

[20] I think this shows that part of the semantics of imagination reports involves the "what-it's-like-ness" and my aim here has been to articulate

Footnote 20 continued

this idea with the constraints of compositional semantics. As such, I think my paper is a special case of D'Ambrosio and Stoljar (2021)'s more general point about persepctival imagination.

destroying the puppet. Napoleon, as perhaps you had guessed all along, was a puppet.

Declarations

Conflict of interest I have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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