Imagination, Fiction, and Perspectival Displacement[[1]](#endnote-1)\*

Justin D’Ambrosio, Australian National University

Daniel Stoljar, Australian National University

# 1. The Puzzle of Perspectival Displacement

The verb ‘imagine’, like a number of other cognitive and perceptual verbs, admits of perspectival modification. Consider the following sentences:

1. Zeno imagines the battlefield from above.
2. Alex imagines the battlefield from a distant point of view.
3. Sarah imagines the situation in Ukraine from the point of view of a Russian.

In (1), the perspectival modifier is ‘from above’; it apparently gives us information about the perspective or point of view from which Zeno imagines a battlefield. In (2), the relevant modifier is ‘from a distant point of view’, which tells us that the battlefield is being imagined from a perspective or point of view distant from it. In (3), the perspectival modifier is ‘from the point of view of a Russian’, although in this case the literal connotations of the notion of a ‘point of view’—a point in space from which something is viewed—have been dispensed with. What (3) reports, intuitively, is that Sarah is representing the desires, preferences, beliefs, and emotions of a Russian and imagining the situation in Ukraine in their light.

When combined with the verb ‘imagine’, however, perspectival modification is puzzling. Perspectives are perspectives *of* someone; they do not float free. There is always someone to whom a perspective belongs. Yet on the face of it, the perspectives specified by the modifiers in (1)-(3) need not belong to anyone at all. In (1) for example, there needs to be no one either real or imagined who is above the battlefield and who takes a perspective on it. And in (3) while Sarah may imagine the situation in Ukraine from the point of view of a Russian, there need be no Russian, and certainly no particular Russian, whose perspective this is.

We may bring out the issue by contrasting ‘imagine’ with another verb that admits of perspectival modification, namely, ‘see’. Consider (4) and (5):

1. Zeno sees the battlefield from above.
2. Alex sees the battlefield from a distant point of view.

In (4), ‘from above’ tells us that the perspective or point of view from which the battlefield is seen is one above it, and entails that the point of view is Zeno’s—Zeno is above the battlefield. Likewise, (5) tells us that the perspective from which the battlefield is seen is one that is distant from it, and entails that the perspective is Alex’s. It follows from (5) that Alex is distant from the battlefield.

In the linguistics literature, the technical term for this phenomenon is *argument orientation*.[[2]](#endnote-2) Modifiers such as ‘from above’ are oriented toward certain of the verb’s arguments in that they generate entailments about them: the presence of ‘from above’ makes (4) entail that Alex is above the battlefield, while the presence of ‘from a distant point of view’ makes (5) entail that Alex is distant from the battlefield. In particular, the modifiers in (4) and (5) have what is called ‘subject-object’ orientation: they entail that a certain relation holds between the subject and the object of the verb.[[3]](#endnote-3)

But in the case of ‘imagine’, there are no such entailments. In (1), Zeno may imagine the battlefield from above while he is sitting quietly in his study at home in Western Massachusetts. In that case, Zeno is not above the battlefield, and so the perspective specified is not his. Concerning (2), Alex may be in the midst of the battle, fighting on the front line, and yet imagine the battlefield from a distance, wishing he were far away. Alex need not be distant from the battlefield, and so again, the modifier is not oriented towards him. Finally, while (3) does not contrast with ‘see’ in the same way as (1) and (2), (3) again tells us that Sarah imagines the Ukraine situation from a point of view that she need not occupy: the point of view of a Russian. Sarah herself may have no Russian connections at all.

Let us call this the phenomenon of *perspectival displacement*. In perspectival displacement, a perspectival modifier specifies a perspective that appears to be altogether unowned or unoccupied, because it is missing an argument toward which it is oriented. This phenomenon gives rise to what we will call the *puzzle of perspectival displacement*: while a perspective is always someone’s perspective—one of the sentence’s arguments must be the bearer of the perspective—in many reports of imagination, there appears to be no one to whom the imaginative perspective belongs, since there is no appropriate argument in the sentence to which the modifier applies. In cases of perspectival displacement, the subject needed to anchor the perspective is ghostly.

A satisfactory understanding of perspectival modification, and so of sentences (1)-(3) above, requires a solution to the puzzle of perspectival displacement. Without such a solution, we will not understand why those sentences mean what they do, or what exactly is required for their truth. Our goal in this paper is to set out and defend such a solution. The key element of our proposal draws on the idea that reports of imagining conceal questions, and that such concealed questions have an extra argument place for (what we will call) an *experiencer*. We will begin (section 2) with some remarks about the generality of the puzzle before criticising two solutions to it that may be gleaned from the existing literature (sections 3 and 4). We will then present our own solution to the puzzle and distinguish it from rivals (sections 5-7). We will end (sections 8-9) by drawing out two consequences of our proposal for various issues that have emerged in recent philosophy of imagination.

# 2. Language and Mind

We have introduced the puzzle as a problem about language, and will often talk that way in what follows, but the issue we are concerned with generalizes from language to mind. It cannot, therefore, be dismissed as merely a ‘semantic puzzle’, unrelated to the facts about imagination philosophers are properly interested in.

To see the mistake in this attitude, forget for the moment about the English sentences (1)-(3) and sentences like them, and think instead about various states of imagining, states that exist and have a nature independently of how anybody talks about them. In philosophy of mind, there is a view about these states that is common enough in various guises to be called ‘the standard view;’ see, e.g., (Yablo 1993). On this view, when you imagine something, you are in a state that represents a possible situation in which various things are true. Hence, when Zeno imagines a battlefield, he represents a possible situation. One thing that is true in this situation is that there is a battlefield. Other things that are true will include various details or specifications of the battlefield he is imagining.

No proponent of the standard view can reasonably deny that there a difference between imagining the battlefield from above and imagining the battlefield but not from above, for example, from the perspective of the poor sod on the front line. If you do the latter, you might well find yourself flinching or ducking. If you do the former, by contrast, you would do none of these things. What then is the difference? The standard view seems unable to answer this question. On that view, the difference must be located either in the content of the imagining—that is, in what is true in the imagined situation—or in the way the subject represents that situation. But on the face of it neither of these options is right. In particular, in the situation Zeno imagines, there need not be anyone above the battlefield, nor is Zeno himself above it. As we noted above, Zeno may be safely far away in his study in Western Massachusetts. Nor does it seem that there are any other good candidates for being the bearer of the perspectives that differentiate these episodes.

Thus the problem of perspectival displacement is both a problem concerning the semantics of ‘imagine’ and its attendant modifiers, as well as one concerning the nature of imagination and imaginative perspective. This tells us that both our semantic and our metaphysical understanding of imagination is far from complete. It also provides an important constraint on any solution, namely, that such a solution must address the problem in both linguistic and nonlinguistic form.

# 3. Vendler and Peacocke

We have introduced the puzzle of perspectival displacement, and noted that it generalizes from language to mind. How then to solve it? Before turning to our proposal, let us review two lines of thought already present in the literature and explain why they are implausible.

The first of these is due to Zeno Vendler and Christopher Peacocke; see Vendler (1979; Vendler 1982) and Peacocke (1985); see also Martin (2002). Considered as a thesis in philosophy of language, the Vendler-Peacocke view (as we will call it) is that, (1) is elliptical for (6), (2) for (7), and (3) for (8):

1. Zeno imagines seeing the battlefield from above.
2. Alex imagines seeing the battlefield from a distant point of view.
3. Sarah imagines seeing the Ukraine situation from the point of view of a Russian.[[4]](#endnote-4)

This ellipsis hypothesis provides us with at least two candidates for being the thing above the battlefield: the event of seeing and the agent who sees. Whichever of these we choose, the proposal solves our puzzle, construed either as a puzzle about language or about mind. Instead of modifying ‘imagine’, the perspectival modifiers in (6)-(8) modify ‘see’, and tell us about some relationship between the subject of the event of seeing—the person who sees—and what they see. Thus, the Vendler-Peacocke view solves our puzzle by positing that the complements of (1)-(3) elide a perceptual verb. When the elided verb is made apparent, as in (6)-(8), it provides an argument toward which the perspectival modifier is oriented, and so provides a bearer for the perspective.

On the Vendler-Peacocke view, whose perspective do perspectival modifiers specify? Who, in (6)-(8), is the subject of the seeing? The most natural response in the case of (6) is to treat the subject of the seeing as Zeno himself. From a syntactic point of view, a sentence like (6) would normally be treated as containing an unarticulated constituent, PRO, which acts as sort of pronoun. Standardly, PRO is interpreted as co-referring with the subject of the main clause.[[5]](#endnote-5) What this means is that (6) should be read as saying something like this: Zeno imagines he himself seeing the battlefield from above. Hence, since (6) simply spells out the material allegedly elliptical in (1), (1) likewise means this. The point applies, mutatis mutandis, to (2) and (7), and to (3) and (8).

But the problem is that this gets (1)-(3) wrong. On the Vendler-Peacocke view, when (1) is true, and Zeno imagines the battlefield from above, he is imagining he himself seeing the battlefield; Zeno himself, in other words, is present in the situation he is imagining. But as we have seen (1) can be true without anything like this being the case. Suppose, for definiteness, that Zeno is imagining a battlefield from the distant past, the battle of Thermopylae, say. Does it follow that he is imagining a situation in which he himself is above the battlefield at Thermopylae, looking down on it, or somehow floating above it? Surely not; but that would have to be so on the Vendler-Peacocke view.

Nor does this problem go away if we transpose the Vendler-Peacocke view from language to mind. Considered as a proposal in philosophy of mind, their view is that when Zeno imagines the battlefield from above, he represents a situation in which he, Zeno, sees the battlefield from above. But again this need not be the case. Zeno can imagine the battlefield from above without imagining a situation in which he is above the battlefield.

The problem here is no news to Vendler or Peacocke; at any rate, it is no news to Peacocke. On the contrary, Peacocke (1985) explicitly notes this consequence of the view, and notes it is connected to a classical problem in philosophy, namely, the problem of whether it is possible to imagine a tree unseen. As Peacocke points out, Berkeley denies that this is possible in the course of defending his distinctive idealist world-view, on which ‘esse est percipi’, to be is to be perceived. Peacocke has no brief for idealism in general, but he defends Berkeley’s idea that is impossible to imagine a tree unseen, on the ground that imagining a tree is imagining seeing a tree, in which case you cannot imagine a tree unseen.

Peacocke is right that his view has this Berkeleyan consequence, as we will call it, but that does not remove its underlying implausibility. As against Berkeley, surely you *can* imagine a tree unseen. Take the tree outside your window, and imagine that life on earth had evolved differently so that, while plants evolved, animals never did. In such a situation, that tree might well have existed unseen by anyone. Or suppose a neutron blast happens, wiping out all life on earth but with minimal damage to buildings. One can still imagine the Sydney Opera House in such a case, in the same place as it always was, on the harbour foreshore, but with nobody around it. That is to imagine it unseen.

Peacocke’s embrace of this consequence does not render it plausible, but there is a different reply that might be made to the objection that the Vendler-Peacocke view is mistaken in representing (1) as equivalent to (6). We have so far interpreted the view as entailing that (6) requires that Zeno himself is doing the seeing, on the ground that the unarticulated constituent, PRO, is controlled by, or co-refers with, the subject of the main clause. However, there is a different interpretation of PRO that is available here, sometimes called the ‘generic interpretation’. On a generic interpretation of PRO, (3) is equivalent to something like this: Zeno is imagining someone seeing the battlefield from above. This seems an improvement since we are no longer maintaining that Zeno must imagine himself above the battlefield, but rather only some arbitrary person who serves as the subject of the event of seeing. However, while this is better, the underlying problem still remains. One can imagine the battlefield from above not only without imagining Zeno seeing the battlefield, but without imagining any episode of seeing at all. One can imagine the battlefield from above completely unseen. If so, the generic interpretation of PRO provides no support to the Vendler-Peacocke view.[[6]](#endnote-6)

# 4. Camp

The Vendler-Peacocke view is elegant, but it represents a sentence like (1) as having a Berkeleyan consequence that it does not have. A different possible solution to the puzzle of perspectival displacement may be extracted from a recent important paper by Elizabeth Camp (2017). Camp does not approach the issues quite as we have done, but as we will understand her, her view is that the puzzle may be solved not by looking at what you imagine, but at how. Vendler-Peacocke ask us to concentrate on the contents of imagination, Camp asks us to concentrate on the mode.

Let us focus again on what the difference is between imagining the battlefield from above, and imagining it but not from above. On Camp’s view, the difference here is not in the imagined situation—in both cases you imagine a situation in which the same things are true. The difference is rather in *how* you imagine or represent the situation. In particular, to imagine the battlefield from above is to imagine the battlefield and to be disposed to focus on certain aspects of the scene or to elaborate what is imagined in certain ways. This is what Camp calls ‘characterization’. On her view, perspectives are dispositions to characterize what you imagine in certain ways. To imagine the battlefield from above is, roughly, to be concerned with some of its features rather than others—less with the swords and blood, for instance, and more with the distribution of soldiers, the areas of most intense combat, and perhaps the strategic positions of the armies.

Camp’s view is not a semantic proposal, but it does provide a solution to the puzzle of perspectival displacement construed as an issue in the philosophy of mind. Points of view or perspectives are, on her view, psychological dispositions that go along with various states of imagining. The difference between one point of view and another is the difference between these dispositions. When Zeno imagines the battlefield from above, he imagines it in a particular way—namely, from above—which is understood as analogous to imagining the battlefield intently or feverishly. Thus there is a sense in which the perspective at issue here is Zeno’s, but his having this perspective is not something that requires him to be above the battlefield.

If we were to transpose Camp’s proposal from mind to language, it would be as follows. In a sentence like (1), the perspectival modifier ‘from above’ is not oriented toward any of the arguments of ‘imagine’. Unlike when $x$ sees $y$ from above, where $x$ must be above $y$, Camp’s view, roughly, is that for Zeno to imagine the battlefield from above is for him to imagine-from-above the battlefield. This does not entail that any argument of the verb ‘imagine’ must be above any other—it modifies the verb in a different way entirely. Thus Camp’s proposal solves the problem by altogether eliminating the need for an argument position occupied by something that is above the battlefield.

One thing that is right in Camp’s proposal is that, when you imagine the battlefield from above, you do indeed have a disposition that you would not have if you imagined the battlefield from some other perspective. But there are nevertheless several major weaknesses in her view.

The first weakness is that it is mysterious on Camp’s view why the particular dispositions constitutive of perspectives go together with the cases of imagining that they do. To bring out the problem, contrast her view with that of Vendler and Peacocke. They can agree with Camp that when you imagine the battlefield from above you will have various dispositions, including the disposition to focus on certain properties of the battlefield rather than others. But the Vendler-Peacocke view has an account of why you have these dispositions, namely, because of what you imagine. You imagine seeing the battlefield from above, and that is why you focus on the areas of heaviest fighting and the strategic positions of the armies, rather than the gorier aspects of the melee. Likewise, you imagine seeing the battlefield from the perspective of someone in it, and that is why you focus on the lance-wielding horseman approaching, and so flinch and duck.

The second weakness in Camp’s view is that having a disposition to characterize imagined contents does not seem to be sufficient for adopting a perspective on what is imagined. One can be disposed to characterize what is imagined in a variety of ways, but these dispositions are not always rightly considered perspectives. Suppose Zeno is disposed to characterize some aspects of the battlefield as more important than others—suppose, for instance, that he is disposed to focus on or treat as important the aspects of the battlefield most relevant for the purposes of philosophical argumentation. This is a disposition to characterize, but it is not yet a perspective. What is needed is something further that connects characterization with what is imagined—mere dispositions to characterize are not themselves perspectives.

A third weakness emerges when we interpret Camp’s proposal (as she admittedly does not) as one in the philosophy of language. The idea that ‘from above’, in (1), does not specify a relation between any of the verb’s arguments is highly implausible as a general proposal about the semantics of perspectival modifiers. When one sees something from above, it follows that one is above that thing. But Camp’s view entails that ‘from above’, when used to specify an imaginative perspective, has an altogether different and unrelated function. Thus, while Camp’s proposal has some attractive features, there are reasons to seek an alternative.

# 5. Three Observations

Neither the Vendler-Peacocke view nor the Camp view provides a plausible solution to the puzzle of perspectival displacement. The time has come to formulate our own positive view. To do so, we may start with three observations about ‘imagine’.

**Observation #1** is that ‘imagine’ can take *wh*-complements. It is well known that a distinction may be drawn between knowing-that and knowing-how, though the precise contours of the distinction remain a matter of dispute.[[7]](#endnote-7) Much less well known is that a parallel distinction may be drawn in the case of imagination. You may imagine that your car keys are on the roof, for example, and also how to get them down. Indeed, not only may you imagine how to such and such, almost the whole gamut of ‘imagination-*wh*’ is in principle available: you may imagine where you last saw your keys, who put them on the roof, what they will be like when you get them back, and so on. In what follows we will be concerned with one sort of construction in particular, namely, ‘imagining what something is like’. Just as one can imagine a battlefield, one can imagine what the battlefield is like, and this is a case of imagining-*wh*.

In general, *wh*-clauses have two readings, an interrogative reading and a free relative reading—and when embedded under ‘imagine’, wh-clauses can receive either interpretation. In the case of the interrogative reading, the semantic value of the clause is a set of propositions each of which is an answer to the question expressed by the corresponding interrogative. So, for example, on its interrogative reading, ‘what the battlefield is like’ has as its semantic value a set of propositions each of which is an answer to the question ‘what is the battlefield like?’ Given the close semantic connection—if not outright equivalence—between the interrogative clauses ‘what it is like’ and ‘how it is’, we may equally say that the semantic value of the *wh*-clause is a set of propositions each of which is expressed by a sentence of the form ‘the battlefield is way W’. Here we will focus on the interrogative reading of such embedded clauses.

Observing that ‘imagine’ embeds interrogatives of the form ‘what X is like’ and that such interrogatives denote sets of propositions is not yet to provide a full semantics for such constructions. In order to do that, we need to answer a range of further questions. For instance, are the propositions that answer the questions true answers? Or should we allow the set to include both true and false answers? In order to imagine what the battlefield is like, must Zeno imagine only some way that it is? Or need he imagine all of the ways that the battlefield is? How is the semantics of interrogatives embedded under ‘imagine’ derived compositionally? Since we have discussed these questions elsewhere, we will set these points aside.[[8]](#endnote-8) The main thing for our purposes is that, when ‘imagine’ takes a ‘what X is like’ complement, the resulting ascription is true if and only if the subject of the ascription stands in a relation to one or more of the propositions in the answer set denoted by the interrogative. ‘Imagine’ is, to use terminology common in the literature on the semantics of embedded questions, a *responsive* embedding verb.[[9]](#endnote-9)

**Observation #2** is that ‘imagining what X is like’ has more structure than is apparent at first, and that is because the *wh*-clause here has more structure than is apparent at first. We may ask, for example, not only ‘what is getting home late like?’ and ‘what is Sally’s getting home late like?’ but also ‘what is Sally’s getting home late like to Mary?’ (Suppose for example Mary is Sally’s mother sitting up concerned about Sally’s getting home late.) Thus, at least in cases where interrogatives concern what certain events are like, we must keep separate both the agent of the event with which we are concerned, and the subject to whom that event is like something.[[10]](#endnote-10)

This entails that in constructions that embed ‘what it’s like’ interrogatives, there will sometimes be three subjects to keep track of that are in principle distinct. In cases where a subject imagines what a particular event is like, such as ‘Suzy imagined what Sally’s getting home late was like’, there is, first, the subject doing the imagining, namely, Suzy; second, the agent of the imagined event—in this case, Sally; and third, the person to whom Sally’s getting home late was like something—in this case, Sally’s mother Mary. We can call this last subject the *experiencer*, for it is this person to whom the event or object is like something.[[11]](#endnote-11)

**Observation #3** is that imagining what things are like is more widespread than you might think. Some nominals, when they appear as the complements of certain verbs, conceal questions. ‘Sarah knows the capital of Vermont’, for example, is naturally interpreted as ‘Sarah knows what the capital of Vermont is’, and, ‘The Guardian exposed the corrupt member of cabinet’ is naturally interpreted as ‘The Guardian exposed who the corrupt member of cabinet is.’[[12]](#endnote-12) Something similar is true in the case of ‘imagine’, though here the question at issue is very often a ‘what it is like’ question, rather than a ‘what it is’ or ‘who it is’ question. For example, ‘Zeno imagined the battlefield’ is naturally understood as ‘Zeno imagined what the battlefield is like.’ Likewise, ‘Sarah imagined the situation in Ukraine’ is naturally heard as ‘Sarah imagined what the situation in Ukraine is like.’

This observation entails that many reports in which ‘imagine’ is complemented by a nominal expression are in fact semantically equivalent to constructions involving a ‘what it’s like’ interrogative. This equivalence can be stated schematically as the equivalence between (9) and (10):

1. Zeno imagines NP.
2. Zeno imagines what NP is like.

Given our semantic assumptions above about the nature of embedded ‘what it’s like’ interrogatives, (10) is true just in case Zeno imagines that $P$, for some $P$ among the answers to the question ‘what is NP like?’. Thus there is a general equivalence between what we is sometimes called ‘objectual’ imagining and propositional imagining. Imagining NP is always, in fact, to imagine that something is the case.

# 6. Our Proposal

In the light of these observations, our proposal about perspectival modification may be stated very simply. Considered as a thesis in philosophy of language, our view is that (1) is semantically equivalent to (11), (2) is equivalent to (12), and (3) to (13):

1. Zeno imagines what the battlefield is like to someone above it.
2. Alex imagines what the battlefield is like to someone distant from it.
3. Sarah imagines what the situation in Ukraine is like to someone with a Russian point of view.

Like the Vendler-Peacocke approach, on this view, perspectival modifiers modify the clause that specifies the content of an event of imagining—such modifiers change what is imagined. To imagine the battlefield from above, as opposed to from any other perspective, is to be the agent of an event of imagining with a certain propositional content. And like the Vendler-Peacocke view, our proposal provides an argument toward which the perspectival modifier ‘from above’ is oriented: ‘someone’. This argument is analogous to Mary in our case above—it is the experiencer. Just as Sally’s getting home late is like something for Mary, the battlefield is like something to someone above it.

What is distinctive about our proposal is that in the case of (11), for example, ‘someone’ need not pick out a specific, existent person. Just as you can seek someone to lead your team to a championship without there being a particular, existent person whom you seek, so you can imagine what the battlefield is like to someone without there being some particular existent person to whom you imagine it being that way. Hence the argument place associated with the experiencer, toward which perspectival modifiers are oriented, can be occupied by NPs that are nonspecific and existence-neutral. This is why perspectives seem ghostly: they are ghostly in exactly the same way that the objects of intentional states such as searches and desires are ghostly. I might seek or want a puppy, but not a particular one. Analogously, I might imagine what the situation in Ukraine is like to a Russian, but without there being a Russian to whom I imagine it being that way.

A final point concerns the default reading of (1). The most natural understanding of (1) is that Zeno is *visualising* the battlefield; that is, he is imagining what it looks like, rather than what it sounds or smells like. On our proposal, however, (1) tells us only that he is imagining what it *is* like, without specifying the sensory mode in which he imagines it. How, then, on this view, is this default reading generated? Our proposal is that this has nothing to do with the semantics of sentences like (1), or the equivalent (11). Rather, there is a default pragmatic connection between imagining what an object is like and imagining what it looks like.

Such default pragmatic connections are both extremely common and well-understood in pragmatics. In fact, they form one component of Horn’s (1986) ‘division of pragmatic labour’. According to the division of pragmatic labour, when a speaker’s utterance contains a general term that can be specified in various ways, the speaker is standardly understood as conveying the stereotypical strengthened reading. For instance, suppose I utter :

1. I am drinking a glass of milk.

Here, ‘milk’ admits of many different specifications: I might be drinking, for instance, cow’s milk or goat’s milk. But given the relative prevalence of cow’s milk, and the relative paucity of goat’s milk, the division of pragmatic labour tells us that the general, ‘unmarked’ term will come to convey the stereotypical, ‘unmarked’ meaning. So when I utter (14), I will implicate that I am drinking a glass of cow’s milk. In order to convey that I was drinking goat’s milk, when cow’s milk is overwhelmingly prevalent, I would need to say something more specific: I would have to say that I am drinking a glass of goat’s milk.[[13]](#endnote-13) But in a context in which goat’s milk was overwhelmingly prevalent, the opposite would hold.

Much the same is true, we maintain, for imagining what an object is like. When you tell me that you are imagining what the battlefield is like, the default or stereotypical interpretation, given the background frequencies of use, is that you are visualising the battlefield—you are imagining what it *looks* like. By contrast, to convey that you are imagining what the battlefield *smells* like, you would need to say so. The general construction ‘imagining what the battlefield is like’ conveys, pragmatically, the stereotypical visual interpretation. But in other cases, the stereotypical interpretation may be different. Suppose that I imagine winning the 100m at the Olympics. In this case, it is very natural to understand me as imagining not what winning the 100m at the Olympics looks like, but rather what it feels like.

# 7. Comparisons

The proposal we have just set out has advantages over both the Vendler-Peacocke view and Camp’s view. Unlike Vendler-Peacocke, our proposal has no Berkeleyan consequence. When Zeno imagines what the battlefield is like to someone above it, it does not follow that there is someone above the battlefield, nor does it follow that he imagines someone seeing the battlefield. This is because our view makes available a distinction between there being a particular person to whom the battlefield is like something, and the battlefield being like something to someone, but no one in particular. Again, the perspectival argument-place can be occupied by noun phrases that are nonspecific and not existence-entailing.

Unlike Camp’s view, on our proposal, to imagine from a particular perspective is to be the agent of an event of imagining with a particular propositional content, and it is this content that explains why we have the dispositions that standardly accompany events of imagining. If I imagine the battlefield from the perspective of someone on the front line, the reason that I am inclined to flinch is that I am imagining what the battlefield is like to him: horses whinnying in terror, lanced riders charging, infantrymen approaching with swords, etc. Such imagining has all of the power one could possibly need to generate dispositions to attend to certain features and have certain emotional or affective responses.

Not only does our view avoid the problems we presented for Camp’s view, it also allows us to avoid Camp’s own objections to the propositional-attitude view of imagining of which ours is a version. According to Camp (2017, 77–79), merely representing how things are cannot account for the perspectives that we take on the worlds we imagine. How could propositions that simply state how things are with some object incorporate a perspectival element? Our answer is that Camp underestimates the complexity of the propositions that are true in the imagined situation and so serve as the contents of our imaginings. The propositions that serve as the contents of states of perspectival imagining, on our view, are propositions concerning what things are like *to* people of particular kinds. To imagine the battlefield from above is to imagine that the battlefield is a particular way to someone above it. This is a proposition like any other, but it incorporates perspectival information by making mention of a person to whom the battlefield is or looks a certain way.

Finally, our proposal is also an improvement on a different approach to perspectival displacement that we have not encountered in print but which has been suggested to us by David Chalmers. On this proposal, a sentence like (1) is equivalent to:

1. Zeno imagines the battlefield as seen from above.

This proposal faces several problems which ours does not. First, it is unclear why (1) should be interpreted as containing a covert ‘as’-phrase, and so unclear why (1) should be equivalent to (15). There is no syntactic evidence for the presence of such a phrase, and the ‘as’-phrase is merely posited to solve the semantic puzzle. Thus the proposal appears unmotivated. Our own proposal, by contrast, is that (1) is equivalent to (11), a claim which is motivated by the literature on concealed questions, and follows from the general idea that ‘imagine NP’ is equivalent to ‘imagine what NP is like.’

Second, as it stands, the proposal is crucially underspecified. To defend it properly requires a theory of ‘as’-phrases. Depending on which theory is adopted, however, the proposal may face the same objections that doomed the Vendler-Peacocke view. In (15) the ‘as’-phrase employs the passivization of the perceptual verb ‘see’. But the verb ‘see’, in all other cases, requires a specific, existent person as a subject. If this is required here as well, the proposal will entail that there is a specific, existent subject in the world imagined who sees the battlefield—i.e. it will have the Berkeleyan consequence. In order to avoid this consequence, the proponent of this view needs an account of ‘as’-phrases that does not entail the existence or particularity of the subject doing the seeing. But if (15) is understood in this way, and the qualifier is taken to mean something like ‘as seen by someone above it’, with ‘someone’ construed nonspecifically, then the proposal will be all but indistinguishable from our own.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Third, the paraphrase in is too specific, and has entailments that (1) does not have. (1) requires Zeno to imagine the battlefield from above. But, as noted before, he may do this by imagining how it looks, smells, or sounds; his imagining need not be visual. By contrast, (15) requires Zeno’s imagining to be visual, and rules out imagining in other sense modalities. Thus the proposal cannot be right as it stands. Our own proposal does not have this consequence, since while the ‘what it is like’ phrase is typically interpreted in visual terms, it need not be: the connection between imagining what the battlefield is like and imagining what the battlefield looks like is pragmatic, rather than semantic.

# 8. Application 1: Fiction

In this paper we have offered and explored a solution to the puzzle of perspectival displacement. The picture of imaginative perspective that emerges from our solution is one on which, whenever you imagine something from a perspective, you imagine what that thing is like to someone with that perspective. As we have seen, this does not require you to imagine that there is a person from whose perspective the object is imagined, or to whom it is like something—one can imagine things completely unperceived. This approach solves the puzzle of perspectival displacement by providing an argument toward which perspectival modifiers are oriented. But because of the distinctive nature of this argument—it is nonspecific and existence-neutral—our proposal does not have the Berkeleyan consequence of the Vendler-Peacocke view. At the same time, unlike the Camp view, it provides an explanation of the dispositions and affective responses that are associated with episodes of perspectival imagining.

We will now close the paper by noting two ways in which our view advances discussions in contemporary philosophy of imagination. First, our proposal satisfies three desiderata laid out by Camp on an adequate account of perspective in fiction. Second, our account provides a novel solution to a persistent puzzle discussed by Peter Langland-Hassan concerning how imagination interacts with desire.

In her (2017), Camp sets out three conditions of adequacy on any theory of perspectival engagement with fiction. She phrases the first as follows:

[A] reader’s emotional and interpretive responses are not simply a function of the focal character’s mental state: they also depend upon his beliefs about the fictional world as a whole, including facts of which that character is ignorant. Thus, I fear for the heroine fixing a late-night cup of hot chocolate because I know, as she doesn’t, that a burglar is hidden in the pantry. (Camp 2017, 78)

Our proposal concerning perspective straightforwardly accommodates this feature. On our view, one can imagine the heroine making hot chocolate not only from her perspective, but from the perspective of someone who knows that the heroine is in danger. Such perspectival imagining, on our view, will be to imagine what the heroine’s making a late-night cup of hot chocolate is like to someone who knows that there is danger afoot. In turn, this will be for the imagining subject to imagine that there is some way it is to someone who knows that danger is afoot. Thus, by giving us the resources to target propositions that specify what the heroine making a late-night cup of cocoa is like to people other than the heroine herself, our view captures the way in which our reactions to fiction are sensitive to things that we or others may know that the characters in the fiction may not.

Camp states her second desideratum as follows:

[I]n reading fiction I don’t only locate myself imaginatively inside each successive scene. In addition, I often also adopt an acentral and external perspective on the fictional world as a whole. As a result, even as I rehearse a scene through the eyes of a specific character, my responses are modulated by how sympathetically the author presents that character—that is, by the degree to which the author ‘deputizes’ them as someone whose perspective is to be adopted. (Camp 2017, 78)

Again, our account is well-placed to accommodate this form of perspective-taking. On our view, one can imagine not only what the objects and events of a work of fiction are like to characters in the fiction, but also what they are like to someone who knows everything about the fictional world, and who is unsympathetic to the characters. This is yet another form of imaginative perspective-taking licensed by our view.

Camp states her third desideratum as follows:

Finally, and most importantly, an adequate account of perspectives must explain how a perspective can apply to multiple situations or even multiple worlds. Many theorists …have argued that we read fiction to acquaint ourselves with new perspectives on the real world…To make sense of these claims, we need to analyze perspectives in a way that allows them to be extracted from particular scenes.(Camp 2017, 78)

Here again, our account is well-placed to meet Camp’s challenge. One can imagine not only a battlefield from above, but the ocean from above, a desk from above, or the street-plan of Chicago from above. The perspective *from above* can be extracted from a particular instance of imagining, and can instead apply to a whole range of objects and situations. Likewise, we need not only imagine the situation in Ukraine from the perspective of a Russian. We might also imagine what post-Soviet policing is like to a Russian, what the renewal of the Orthodox church is like for a Russian, or what the vestiges of Soviet propaganda are like for a Russian. On our view, the Russian perspective is extractable, and the modifier ‘from the perspective of a Russian’ makes a particular compositional contribution to the content-specifying clause of a report of imagining.

Beyond just meeting these three desiderata, our proposal provides an attractive general account of how we engage with fiction, and do so from different perspectives. Fiction is naturally understood as a collection of instructions to imagine. Authors describe various objects and events, and implicitly instruct those who engage with them to imagine these objects and events. Tolstoy describes Anna and Vronsky, the events of their courtship, and the climactic event in which Anna throws herself on the tracks. Given our second observation above, to imagine these objects and events—Anna, Vronsky, and the events in which they are involved—is to imagine what these things are like. Readers of *Anna Karenina* are instructed to imagine what Anna is like, what her meeting Vronsky is like, and what her throwing herself on the tracks is like.

But Tolstoy does not just instruct us to imagine what these people and events are like. He also asks us to undertake certain perspectives on them. He might, for instance, ask us to imagine Anna throwing herself on the tracks from the perspective of someone standing on the platform, or from the perspective of Karenin, her husband. On our view, this amounts to asking the reader to imagine what Anna throwing herself on the tracks is like to a person standing on the platform or to Karenin. This kind of instruction accounts in a simple and intuitive way for fiction’s emotional and affective consequences. If we imagine what Anna throwing herself on the tracks is like to someone on the platform, we might naturally imagine what it looks like and feels like to that person, and so imagine the horror, sadness, or disgust that such a person would feel. Thus, viewing fiction as primarily a set of instructions to imagine what various things are like to some person or other yields an attractive overall view of what authors are doing in creating fiction.

# 9. Application 2: Desire

The second and final application of our proposal is to a persistent puzzle concerning how desire interacts with imagination. The following example due to Peter Langland-Hassan serves to make the problem vivid:

In the HBO mini-series *The Wire*, Wallace is a sixteen-year-old caregiver to his younger siblings and cousins, and occasional drug dealer. At the end of Season One, he is murdered by his peers on the off chance that he’ll become a police informant. I felt anxiety and distress as the scene unfolded, having grown attached to Wallace. Langland-Hassan (2020, 212)

The puzzle here is the following: why do you, as a viewer, feel distress or anxiety at Wallace’s death? Langland-Hassan discusses three potential answers to this question. The first is what he calls the Simple View: you feel anxiety because (a) you imagine that Wallace will die, and (b) you don’t want him to die. This view is not at all plausible. Wallace doesn’t exist, he is a fictional character, so it is not rational for you to want him not to die.

The second view is what Langland-Hassan call the Change of Content view. On this view, you feel anxiety about Wallace because (a) you imagine that he will die and (b) you don’t want him to die *in the fiction*. This also seems an inadequate account of why you feel anxiety. Is the reason you feel anxiety that you want the fiction to be different than it in fact is? If Wallace didn’t die, the fiction wouldn’t have the power that it does; without confronting deaths of sympathetic characters, *The Wire* would be far less emotionally engaging, and would hardly be able to teach us the lessons it aims to teach. Thus, the Change of Content view is inadequate.

The third view is that you feel anxiety concerning Wallace’s fate because you (a) imagine that he will die and (b) you don’t $I$-want him to die, where to $I$-want Wallace not to die is to be in a state that is satisfied if he does not die in the fiction, but is distinct from wanting him not to die in the fiction. The problem with this view is that it’s hard to see what the difference between it and the previous view is supposed to be. If $I$-desiring is a state that is satisfied just in case Wallace does not die in the fiction, it seems to be equivalent to not wanting him to die in the fiction. And as we saw, that is not what you want.

Unlike any of these three views, our view provides an immediate and intuitive answer to the question of why you feel anxiety about Wallace’s death. On our view, you don’t just imagine that Wallace dies. Rather, you imagine what his dying is like to someone who cares about him deeply, and wants him not to die. In doing so, it is natural to imagine what Wallace’s death feels like to such a person: it would produce incredible anxiety and sadness. But in imagining someone feeling this way, you are apt to feel these emotions yourself, or at least empathize with the person you imagine feeling them, and that is why you feel the way you do.

# References

Camp, Elizabeth. 2017. “Perspectives in Imaginative Engagement with Fiction.” *Philosophical Perspectives: Philosophy of Mind* 31 (1): 73–102.

Carnie, Andrew. 2006. *Syntax: A Generative Introduction*. Second Edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Chomsky, Noam. 1981. *Lectures on Government and Binding*. Vol. 9. Studies in Generative Grammar. Foris Publications.

D’Ambrosio, Justin, and Daniel Stoljar. 2021. “Vendler’s Puzzle About Imagination.” *Synthese* 199 (5-6): 12923–44.

Frana, Ilaria. 2017. *Concealed Questions*. Oxford Studies in Theoretical Linguistics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Franke, Michael. 2013. “Game Theoretic Pragmatics.” *Philosophy Compass* 8 (3): 269–84.

George, B. R. 2011. “Question Embedding and the Semantics of Answers.” PhD thesis, Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles.

Gisborne, Nikolas. 2010. *The Event Structure of Perception*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Horn, Laurence. 1986. “Presupposition, Theme and Variations.” In *CLS 22 Part 2: Papers from the Parasession on Pragmatics and Grammatical Theory*, edited by Karl-Erik McCullough Anne M. Farley Peter Farley, 168–92. Chicago: Chicago Linguistics Society.

Keenan, Edward L, and L.M Faltz. 1985. *Boolean Semantics for Natural Language*. Springer Netherlands.

Kracht, Marcus. 2002. “On the Semantics of Locatives.” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25 (2): 157–232.

Lahiri, Utpal. 2002. *Questions and Answers in Embedded Contexts*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Landman, Fred. 1989a. “Groups 2.” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 12.

———. 1989b. “Groups I.” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 12: 559–605.

Langland-Hassan, Peter. 2020. *Explaining Imagination*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Loets, Annina J. 2021. “Qua Qualification.” *Philosopher’s Imprint* 27.

Martin, M. G. F. 2002. “The Transparency of Experience.” *Mind and Language* 17 (4): 376–425.

Moltmann, Friederike. 2006. “Generic One, Arbitrary Pro, and the First Person.” *Natural Language Semantics* 14 (3): 257–81.

Nam, Seungho. 1995. “The Semantics of Locative Prepositional Phrases in English.” PhD thesis, Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles.

Nathan, Lance. 2006. “On the Interpretation of Concealed Questions.” Dissertation, Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Peacocke, Christopher. 1985. “Imagination, Experience, and Possibility.” In *Essays on Berkeley: A Tercentennial Celebration*, edited by John Foster and Howard Robinson. Oxford University Press.

Stanley, Jason. 2011. *Know How*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stanley, Jason, and Timothy Williamson. 2001. “Knowing How.” *Journal of Philosophy* 98 (8): 411–44.

Stoljar, Daniel. 2016. “The Semantics of ‘What It’s Like’ and the Nature of Consciousness.” *Mind* 125 (500): 1161–98.

Szabó, Zoltán. 2003. “On Qualification.” *Philosophical Perspectives* Language and Philosophical Linguistics.

Vendler, Zeno. 1979. “Vicarious Experience.” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 84e Année (2): 161–73.

———. 1982. “Speaking of Imagination.” In *Language, Mind, and Brain*, edited by T. W. Simon and R.J. Scholes, Reprinted as Chapter III of *The Matter of Minds*. Oxford University Press.

Yablo, Stephen. 1993. “Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53 (1): 1–42.

1. \* We presented earlier versions of this paper to the Global Consciousness Conference and the Bochum Language Colloquium; we are very much indebted to the audiences on those occasions for their helpful and encouraging input. We are particularly grateful for comments from David Chalmers, Matt Duncan, Uriah Kriegel, Adriana Renero. Kristina Liefke, and Markus Werning. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Keenan and Faltz (1985), Nam (1995), and Kracht (2002) for discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Nam (1995), among others. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Similarly to the case of (3), in the complement of (8), ‘see’ is used in a non-visual sense. But nothing about this changes the basic Vendler-Peacocke proposal, which is that there is some verb elided in the complements of (1)-(3). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For discussion of PRO and its motivations, see Chomsky (1981), Carnie (2006), and Moltmann (2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In the text, we are presuming that the sentence ‘Zeno is imagining seeing the battlefield from above’ reports a state in which what is being imagined—the content of the imagining—is *seeing the battlefield from above*. But Uriah Kriegel points out to us that, in principle, one might understand the attitude as a particular mode of sensory imagining: ‘imagining-seeing’. On that view, what is imagined-seen is the battlefield from above. We won’t attempt to address this in detail here beyond making the following two points. First, this is not the view that Vendler and Peacocke have in mind. On the contrary, they think that the content clause of (6) involves a gerund that denotes an event of seeing. Second, as a proposal about the semantics of reports of imagining, it is implausible, for it does not generalize to other cases. For example, in ‘John is imagining dancing Swan Lake with Baryshnikov’, what John is imagining is surely an event of dancing, modified by the prepositional phrase ‘with Baryshnikov’. There is no special kind of imagining—‘imagining-dancing’—that John bears to the denotation of ‘Swan Lake with Baryshnikov’, whatever that would be. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For discussion of this distinction, see Stanley and Williamson (2001) and Stanley (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See D’Ambrosio and Stoljar (2021) for extended discussion of the semantics of interrogatives embedded under ‘imagine’. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For this terminology, see Lahiri (2002) and George (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For discussion of this point, see Stoljar (2016) and references therein. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For an example of the use of the experiencer role in semantic theorising, see Gisborne (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The topic of concealed questions is a large one in semantics. For two recent discussions, see Frana (2017) and Nathan (2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For extensive discussion of Horn’s division of pragmatic labour, see Franke (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Existing accounts of ‘as’-phrases in the literature include Landman (1989b; Landman 1989a), Szabó (2003), and Loets (2021), among many others. To our knowledge none of these views vindicate, or even raise the possibility that the subject of ‘see’ in (14) is an intensional position. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)