

Imagination and the Self

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1. Introduction

Imagine for a moment that you are Napoleon; that is, imagine *being Napoleon*. You are looking out on the desolation of Austerlitz, tucking your right hand into your tunic, wondering whether or not to declare your brother King of Spain. (If Napoleon is too distant or unfamiliar a figure, pick another.) The main issue philosophers have discussed under the rubric ‘imagination and the self’ concerns this sort of imaginative exercise: imagining oneself to be another.

Imaginings of this sort were taken up by Bernard Williams in his paper “Imagination and the Self” (1973). Williams took such imaginings – or our manner of describing them – to raise something of a puzzle. It seems unproblematic for me to imagine that I am Napoleon; asked to do this, I know roughly how to comply. (Contrast this with the instruction to imagine that someone else – Abraham Lincoln, say – is Napoleon; here it is much less clear how to proceed.) But if imagining is a guide to possibility, my imagining may lead me to a further, more metaphysical thought: the thought that *I could have been Napoleon*. And it is this that Williams finds puzzling: “I do not understand, and could not possibly understand, what it would be for me to have been Napoleon” (Williams 1973: 45). How could I (or Williams or anyone other than Napoleon) have been Napoleon? Surely only Napoleon could have been Napoleon.

In Section 2, I examine Williams’s puzzle in more detail. Section 3 then considers the dominant response to the puzzle found in the literature, which is to deny that an imagining that I would report by saying, “I am imagining that I am Napoleon” – a *Napoleonic imagining*, for short – is an imagining whose content is the proposition that I am Napoleon. Section 4 takes up a variation on this response, one couched in terms of the *property theory of de se* attitudes (cf. Lewis 1979). In Section 5, I discuss *Lakoff cases*, another puzzling class of imaginings (and a class not much discussed in the literature emerging out of Williams’s article). Finally, I close in Section 6 with a brief discussion of two further issues, one concerning the relationship between Napoleonic imaginings and mental imagery, another concerning temporal aspects of imagination.

2. Williams’s puzzle

Williams has a bit more to say about why we should deny that I (or anyone other than Napoleon) could have been Napoleon. Note first that when I imagine that I am Napoleon – when I imagine *being Napoleon* – I do not (have to) imagine that my biography is intertwined with Napoleon’s. I do not (have to) imagine

discovering that I am Napoleon, through some freakish twist in history.¹ Rather, I simply imagine that I am Napoleon by taking on his biography and characteristics and abandoning my own.

So the putative possibility that I am contemplating when I contemplate my being Napoleon appears to be a possibility in which I do not have my particular body nor my particular history nor my particular origins. Williams thus worries that if we take such imaginings as indications of possibility, we will quickly be led to a form of Cartesianism about the self:

“If we press hard enough, we readily get the idea that it is not necessary to being *me* that I should have any of the individuating properties that I do have, this body, these memories, etc... The limiting state of this progress is the Cartesian consciousness: an ‘I without body, past, or character.’ (Williams 1973: 41)

Williams is not completely explicit about what a ‘Cartesian consciousness’ is supposed to be. But presumably he has in mind some sort of substance dualism according to which minds are distinct from – and can exist without – bodies. Thus, Williams appears to be suggesting that taking my Napoleonic imagining seriously leads to a form of dualism about the mind. Many contemporary philosophers will already be troubled by this result, but Williams thinks a few more steps are needed in order to reach something really problematic.

It seems true that I (or Williams or you) might not have existed. But if I am a Cartesian consciousness then my not existing is not simply this body not existing nor someone with this psychology not existing, but rather this consciousness not existing. But since there is nothing to distinguish my Cartesian consciousness from any other, “it is impossible to see any more what would be subtracted from the universe by the removal of *me*” (Williams 1973: 42). The objection is that there is a difference between my existing and my not existing, but on the present approach it is hard to see what this difference could consist in.

Williams’s discussion here is a bit confusing. The putative possibility we are supposed to be considering is one in which I am Napoleon. But presumably on the Cartesian picture, I am a certain Cartesian consciousness *d*. Thus, nothing is identical to me unless it is identical to *d*. Napoleon, on the other hand, is a distinct Cartesian consciousness *n*, and nothing is identical to Napoleon unless it is identical to *n*. But then it cannot be that what it is for me to be Napoleon is for my Cartesian consciousness *d* to be

¹ I do not, for example, have to imagine a scenario in which Napoleon was cryogenically frozen at birth, put on ice for some two hundred years, and then handed over to an unsuspecting Mrs. Ninan (cf. Velleman (1996: n. 2)).

associated with Napoleon's history, body, and experiences. For the resulting person would not be Napoleon since – as we just agreed – nothing could be Napoleon unless it was identical to Napoleon's Cartesian consciousness n , and in the envisioned scenario, I am still identical to *my* Cartesian consciousness d , not to n . So it would appear that Williams's objection is not an objection to my being Napoleon but rather to my Cartesian self being associated with Napoleon's history, body, and experiences. If that is correct, then nothing has so far been said against the possibility of *my* being Napoleon.

Williams's thought might be rescued as follows. Perhaps on the Cartesian approach, we should regard ordinary referring expressions like "I" and "Napoleon" as ambiguous (even relative to a context of utterance): on one reading they refer to an 'empirical self' (to use Williams's phrase), on another they refer to a Cartesian self.² Cartesian selves and empirical selves are connected, but only contingently so. The Cartesian self I refer to with the first-person pronoun is associated with the empirical self that I refer to with "Dilip Ninan" rather than with the one I refer to with "Napoleon," but this needn't have been the case. The putative possibility in which I am Napoleon is a situation in which my Cartesian self is associated with Napoleon's empirical self. Perhaps it is a picture like this to which Williams is objecting.

So Williams's puzzle is this. It seems easy for to me imagine being Napoleon. But if imagining is a guide to possibility, then we should have to admit that I could have been Napoleon. This might be objectionable in and of itself, perhaps because it contravenes the necessity of identity. But if Williams is right, it is also objectionable since it leads to a Cartesian picture of the self, a picture that may be regarded as unappealing for a number of different reasons.

3. The naïve view and its critics

It might seem that the way out of the puzzle is clear enough: deny the move from *imaginability* to *possibility*. The mere fact that I can imagine that I am Napoleon is not a good reason to judge this possible. I think that I can imagine Lavoisier discovering that water had a chemical composition other than H₂O: I imagine the experiments going differently, the relevant publications making different claims, and so on and so forth. But that doesn't lead to me think that it is metaphysically possible for water to have had some other chemical composition. Imaginability may be a guide to possibility, but it is surely a fallible guide. We see its limitations in all sorts of cases.

² Williams is not explicit about what he means by an 'empirical self.' Perhaps it is simply a body, or a body together with certain essential characteristics of the relevant person.

I am less sanguine than many philosophers in accepting this familiar line about the gap between imaginability and possibility. The problem is that it is very difficult to see how *else* it is we come by our modal knowledge. As Stephen Yablo writes:

“No one would doubt of herself that (e.g.) she could have born on a different day than actually, or lived in different places... But how do we know [these things], if not by attempting to conceive ourselves with the relevant characteristics and finding that this presents no difficulties?” (Yablo 1993: 16)

A more subtle move would be to deny that *apparent* imaginability is a guide to possibility. It seems that I can imagine that I am Napoleon. I might be tempted to conclude from this that I could have been Napoleon. But this inference might fail not because of any gap between imaginability and possibility, but simply because I am mistaken about what it is that I am really imagining. It *seems* to me that I’m imagining my being identical to Napoleon, but perhaps this appearance is misleading.

This strategy is reminiscent of a familiar approach to the water-H₂O case, a strategy that has its roots in Kripke (1980). The approach I have in mind says that, in the aforementioned case, I am, strictly speaking, not imagining a situation in which *water* is not H₂O. Rather, I am imagining a world very much like ours but in which the substance that falls from the sky and flows in the rivers -- the ‘watery stuff’ -- is discovered to have a chemical composition other than H₂O. And this may well be possible, even if water could not have failed to be H₂O. The mistake is not in assuming that imaginability is evidence of possibility; the mistake concerns the correct description of what has actually been imagined.³

Williams -- like many subsequent commentators -- seems to adopt something like this line in response to his initial puzzle. Rather than denying (or rather than *merely* denying) the move from imaginability to possibility, he argues that when I have a Napoleonic imagining, the content of this imagining is not what it would seem to be, viz. the proposition that I am identical to Napoleon. Indeed, Williams thinks reporting such an imagining by saying “I imagined that I was Napoleon” is a bit misleading; he prefers reporting the imagining with a different construction: “I imagined *being* Napoleon” (Williams 1973: 44).

Let’s call the view that when one imagines being Napoleon one imagines the proposition that one is identical to Napoleon *the naïve view*. (In naming it thus, I mean no disrespect; my own sympathies lie with something like this view.) One theme in the literature on ‘imagination and the self’ is that the naïve

³ See Kung, “Modal Epistemology,” this volume for further discussion of the relationship between imagination and possibility.

view is wrong. Consider these passages from Zeno Vendler and Steven Reynolds:

“...in imagining being someone else, the object of the exercise cannot be fancying *me* (Z.V.) being identical with that person. In imagining, for instance, being Ronald Reagan, I cannot be imagining the identity of Z.V. with R.R., for it is patently impossible for these two men to be one and the same, and the patently impossible cannot be imagined.” (Vendler 1984: 105)

“It... seems that the content apparently imagined is not the content really imagined. In saying “I imagine that I am Napoleon” I am not reporting having imagined that a false identity statement is true.” (Reynolds 1989: 618)

But while Williams and subsequent commentators are clear in their rejection of the naïve view, they are often less clear about what they take to be its proper replacement. That said, two (compatible) ideas emerge from this literature. The first is that when I imagine being Napoleon, *I* do not figure in the content of my imagining, only Napoleon does. The second is that when I imagine being Napoleon, *the relation of identity* does not figure in the content of my imagining, another relation does. Both proposals are ways of denying the naïve view.

I’ll return to the first proposal shortly, but let me begin by taking up the second. This idea is advanced by Richard Wollheim who argues as follows:

“I can say – there is such an idiom – that I imagine myself being Sultan Mahomet II. But in this idiom, appearances notwithstanding, identity does not occur: I am not saying that I imagine myself being identical with Sultan Mahomet II. And this we can see from the fact that, though identity is symmetrical, ‘imagining myself being Sultan Mahomet II’ and ‘imagining Sultan Mahomet II being me’ are not synonyms. They are used to pick out two different imaginative projects.” (Wollheim 1984: 75)⁴

While Wollheim’s observation strikes me as both correct and significant, it isn’t clear that the conclusion he draws from it – “identity does not occur” – is warranted. For, as Kendall Walton (1990: 33) points out, it might be that normally when I imagine that *a* is *b*, I imagine (i) that *a* is identical to *b*, and (ii) that *a* has some *b*-ish properties; and when I imagine that *b* is *a*, I imagine (i) that *b* is identical to *a*, and (ii) that *b* has some *a*-ish properties. So for example, when I imagine that I am Napoleon, it might be that I imagine that I am identical to Napoleon, *and* that I have certain Napoleonic characteristics, e.g. commanding

⁴ See also Wollheim (1974): 80.

French armies and longing for Maria Walewska. Assuming it even makes sense for me to imagine Napoleon being me (something many authors deny), it might be that I imagine that Napoleon is identical to me, *and* that Napoleon has certain DN-properties, e.g. sipping coffee while grading a stack of logic exams. Walton's suggestion would make sense of the subject-object asymmetry that Wollheim observes without requiring us to relinquish the view that the identity relation figures in the content of such imaginings. Of course, Walton's point does not establish that identity *does* occur in the content of such imaginings; it merely shows that Wollheim's observation is not sufficient to establish that it does not.⁵

What about the idea that *I* do not figure in the content of my Napoleonic imaginings? This view is usually attributed to Williams who claims that when I imagine being Napoleon "what I am doing, in fantasy, is something like playing the role of Napoleon" (Williams 1973: 44). Williams's proposal is not entirely straightforward. At various points, Williams suggests that imagining being Napoleon is akin to *pretending* to be Napoleon. This is undoubtedly correct on some construal. But it would appear to offer us little guidance on the matter at hand, since it simply raises the further question of what it is to pretend to be Napoleon. What is the content of such a pretending (assuming, as seems natural, that pretendings are content-bearing states)? Moreover, while imagination and pretense are surely similar in important respects, there are some disanalogies that seem relevant to the issues at hand.⁶ For example: just as I can pretend that I am Napoleon, I can pretend that *you* are the Duke of Wellington, defeating me/Napoleon at Waterloo. But many commentators in the literature – including Williams himself – think that while it is clearly possible for me to imagine being Napoleon, it is not so clear that I can imagine your being the Duke of Wellington.⁷ If this is right, then while there is a certain first-person/third-person asymmetry when it comes to imagining, it is not so clear that there is a similar one when it comes to pretending. That at least suggests that getting clear on the nature of pretending will not by itself resolve all of the relevant issues concerning imagination and the self.

⁵ Wollheim's observation raises an interesting linguistic question: why do we see subject-object asymmetries of this sort in imagination reports? The issue is not in fact specific to *imagination* reports *per se* (as Wollheim seems to think), since similar asymmetries occur with belief reports. See Cumming (2008) for some examples of the latter.

⁶ For some relevant discussion of the relationship between imagining and pretending, see Kind (2001: 96-97) and Piccuito and Carruthers, "Imagination and Pretense," this volume.

⁷ See, for example, Wollheim (1974, 80-81) and Nichols (2008: 519). On the other hand, Walton (1990: 25-27) seems to take it for granted that I *can* (for example) imagine your being the Duke of Wellington. But his examples suggest to me that there may be a sense of "imagine" on which it is more or less equivalent to "pretend," at least in some dialects of English.

In any case, one thing that emerges from Williams's discussion is the thought that my Napoleonic imagining concerns only Napoleon and not myself (Williams 1973: 44–45). While this thought is often endorsed in the literature,⁸ little has been done to develop it in detail. On the simplest interpretation of this proposal, when I imagine that I am Napoleon, gazing out upon the desolation at Austerlitz, the content of my imagining is simply the proposition that Napoleon is gazing out upon the desolation at Austerlitz. But this proposal raises at least two questions.

First, there is a difference between imagining *being* Napoleon at Austerlitz and merely imagining a scenario in which Napoleon is at Austerlitz, e.g. imagining a scenario in which Napoleon is at Austerlitz and is 'seen' from the outside. But on the present proposal, this is not a difference in the content of the two imaginings. So how, on the present proposal, do the two imaginings differ? After all, as Fodor (1987: 11) observes, "...the canonical way of picking out an attitude is to say (a) what sort of attitude it is (a belief, a desire, a hunch, or whatever); and (b) what the content of the attitude is...". But if imaginings are not individuated in the canonical way, how are they to be individuated?⁹

A second question that arises is why such imaginings are reported using the first-person pronoun.¹⁰ If I do not figure in the content of such imaginings, why can I report my imagining by saying, "I imagined that I was Napoleon"? Of course, Williams regards such reports as misleading, as we noted above. But his suggestion that we pay attention to the corresponding reports with non-finite clauses (e.g. "I imagined being Napoleon") does not help matters much. For on influential accounts of the structure and meaning of such sentences, they are true only if the subject x of the attitude report has an attitude whose content p is such that x could express p using a sentence containing a first-person pronoun (e.g. "I am Napoleon").¹¹ Is Williams's proposal about the content of Napoleonic imaginings compatible with any reasonable account of the syntax and compositional semantics of such sentences?

4. Contents as properties

François Recanati (2007: 203–210) puts forward a proposal that retains something of Williams's idea, while avoiding the preceding objections. On Recanati's approach, when I imagine that I am Napoleon, the content of my imagining is a

⁸ See, for example, Reynolds (1989: 625), Velleman (1996: 39–40), Blackburn (1997: 196), and Nichols (2008: 528).

⁹ If the relevant sorts of imaginings are a type of phenomenal experience, then the present approach would appear to be committed to denying *representationalism* about experience, the thesis that the phenomenal feel of an experience is determined by its content. See Byrne (2001) for an explication and defense of this thesis.

¹⁰ This question is taken up in Reynolds (1989).

¹¹ See, for example, Chierchia (1989).

property – in this particular case, the property of being Napoleon. Recanati here builds on an approach to the content of first-person (*‘de se’*) thought, according to which the contents of so-called “propositional attitudes” (beliefs, desires, etc.) are taken to be properties rather than classical propositions (Loar 1976; Lewis 1979; Chisholm 1981). An individual believes a property *p* just in case she ‘self-ascribes’ *p*, i.e. she believes *de se* that she has *p*. Properties are construed as things that vary in truth value across worlds, times, and individuals. A triple of a world, time, and individual is a *centered world*. A property *p* is *true* at a centered world (w, t, x) iff the individual *x* has *p* at time *t* in world *w*. David Lewis (1979) is often understood as identifying a property with the set of centered worlds at which it is true.

Recanati’s property account avoids the two problems discussed above. Firstly, it has the resources to distinguish imagining being Napoleon at Austerlitz, on the one hand, and simply imagining ‘from the outside’ a scenario in which Napoleon is at Austerlitz. The content of the first imagining would be the property of *being Napoleon at Austerlitz*, while the content of the second would (e.g.) be the property of *being such that Napoleon is at Austerlitz*. These are different properties, since only Napoleon had the first, whereas many people had the second. Secondly, the property account dovetails nicely with an approach to attitude reports that features prominently in the formal semantics literature. Several accounts of attitude reports like “I imagined being Napoleon” have been offered, all of which would predict that the sentence is true (relative to a context) iff the speaker had an imagining whose content is the property of being Napoleon (see, e.g., Chierchia 1989; Schlenker 2003; Anand and Nevins 2004; Ninan 2008, 2009). The details of such proposals needn’t detain us here, but it is worth observing that Recanati’s approach enjoys this apparent advantage over the accounts discussed earlier.

How should we understand the link between imaginability and possibility once we move to the property view of content? Having an imagining whose content is property *p* is imagining that you yourself have *p*. So it would be natural to think that such an imagining is evidence that is possible for you to have *p*. If this is correct, then Recanati’s approach seems similar to the naïve view, insofar as both views yield the result that if imagining is a guide to possibility, then my Napoleonic imaginings are evidence that I could have been Napoleon.

Recanati does not wish to challenge the link between imaginability and possibility, but nor does he wish to accept the conclusion that anyone other than Napoleon could have been Napoleon. He manages to maintain this position by rejecting the claim I made above about what my Napoleonic imagining is evidence for: it is not evidence that *I* could have been Napoleon, but only that Napoleon could have been Napoleon. To understand how Recanati achieves this result, we need to understand a further feature of his overall framework.

On a traditional approach to attitude content, the content of an attitude is a proposition, something that is true or false *simpliciter*. A token belief can then be said to be true (false) just in case its content is true (false). Since properties are not true or false *simpliciter*, more needs to be said about how the truth of a belief is to be characterized on the property account. To resolve this problem, Recanati introduces the notion of the *circumstance of evaluation* of a (token) belief: Given a token belief *b* possessed by individual *x* at time *t* in world *w*, *b*'s *circumstance of evaluation* is (w, t, x) . A token belief with content *p* and circumstance of evaluation (w, t, x) can then be said to be true *simpliciter* iff *p* is true at (w, t, x) .¹² So if Joe believes, at a particular time *t* in the actual world, that he is in danger, then his belief is true iff Joe is in danger at that time *t* in the actual world.

Recanati's account of imagination has two relevant features. The first is that the circumstance of evaluation of an *imagining* needn't contain the imaginer himself; in this respect, imaginings differ from beliefs. More specifically, Recanati implements Williams's idea that my Napoleonic imagining concerns Napoleon and not myself by claiming that the circumstance of evaluation of my imagining does not consist of a world, a time, and *me* (DN), but rather of a world, a time, and *Napoleon*:¹³

"It is to *Napoleon himself* that the imagined properties and experiences are ascribed... I – the actual imaginer – do not come into the picture. The content of the imagination is assumed to hold in *Napoleon's* situation."
(Recanati 2008: 205-206)

The second feature of Recanati's proposal concerns how to interpret the imaginability-possibility link within this framework. Given a token imagining *i* with content *p* and circumstance (w, t, x) , Recanati claims that the fact that *p* is imaginable is evidence for the possibility of *x's* *having p*. Note that since *x* needn't be the imaginer, this is not necessarily evidence that the imaginer could have had *p*. In particular, when I imagine that I am Napoleon -- when I imagine the property of being Napoleon -- this is only evidence that Napoleon could have had that property, not that *I* could have that property. In this way, Recanati avoids having to say that my Napoleonic imagining is evidence that I could have been Napoleon.

This is a very interesting proposal, and perhaps the most sophisticated development of Williams's line of thought. That said, one worry for Recanati's proposal runs as follows. On the property account of attitudes, circumstances of

¹² The expression "circumstance of evaluation" is used by Kaplan (1989) in his theory of languages containing indexicals. Recanati extends the notion into the philosophy of mind.

¹³ Recanati does not say how the world and time of the circumstance of my imagining are determined. Presumably the world of the circumstance is the actual world, and the time is either the time of the imagining or a time at which Napoleon lived.

evaluation are needed to evaluate a token belief for truth or falsity. But what is the role of the circumstance of evaluation of an *imagining*? We do not ordinarily think of imaginings as things that can be evaluated for truth or falsity, since imaginings (unlike beliefs) do not appear to have correctness conditions.¹⁴ What then is meant by talking about the circumstance of evaluation of an imagining? Why do we need it, other than to avoid the result that Recanati wishes to avoid?¹⁵

A second question is how the circumstance of evaluation of an arbitrary imagining is to be determined. Given a token belief *b* possessed by *x* at *t* in *w*, the circumstance of *b* is (w, t, x) . This is something we know even before we know anything about the content of *b*. But what is the circumstance of a token imagining *i* possessed by *x* at *t* in *w*? It seems that on Recanati's picture, we cannot answer this question until we know more about the content of *i*; for presumably the circumstance associated with imagining being Napoleon will differ from the circumstance associated with imagining being Hillary Clinton. Perhaps this is an acceptable asymmetry between belief and imagination. But it takes us back to the question we raised before: what does it mean to say that a token imagining has a particular circumstance of evaluation? What aspect of an imagining are we attempting to capture when we say that it has such-and-such a circumstance of evaluation?

5. Lakoff cases

Having explored alternatives to the naïve view, let us return to it. Williams's particular objection to that view, recall, depends to some extent on a particular interpretation of it. Williams seems to assume that if the naïve view is true, then when I imagine that I am Napoleon, I am imagining that my Cartesian self is associated with Napoleon's empirical self. But that is not so obvious. For example, a Fregean about mental content might instead hold that when I imagine that I am Napoleon, the content of my imagining is a thought that contains a certain mode of presentation of myself and a certain mode of presentation of Napoleon. This account appears to make no mention of Cartesian or empirical selves. Or, as we noted above, an advocate of the property view might hold that the content of this imagining is simply the property of being Napoleon. Again, no mention of 'selves,' Cartesian or otherwise.

¹⁴ For relevant discussion, see Sinhababu, "Belief and Imagination," this volume.

¹⁵ If I imagine being Napoleon at Austerlitz with the aim of trying to understand what it was like to be Napoleon at Austerlitz, my imaginative project would seem to have correctness conditions: it is correct just in case *that* is what it was like to be Napoleon at Austerlitz. But not all imaginative projects come with such a goal: I can imagine being Napoleon and landing on the moon, without attempting to understand what it was (or would be) like for Napoleon to land on the moon (cf. Walton 1990: 39).

Of course, on either of these versions of the naïve view, there remains the question of how to understand the relation between imaginability and possibility. If we accept that such imaginings are indications of possibility, then we might be tempted to conclude that I really could have been Napoleon. Williams objects to this claim by objecting to a particular Cartesian interpretation of it. So perhaps we can avoid the objection by offering an alternative interpretation.

Here is one. Suppose we accept the property view of content. How then should we understand the link between imaginability and possibility? Suppose, *contra* Recanati, we say this: if x imagines property p , this is evidence that x could have had p . Since I can imagine the property of being Napoleon, this is evidence that I could have had that property. But many philosophers will reject the idea that there is any *possible world* in which I am identical to Napoleon. Perhaps this is correct. Then what we need is an alternative way to analyze such a possibility claim. One alternative is to analyze it in terms of quantification over *centered worlds*: I could have been Napoleon just in case there is a centered world (w, t, x) accessible from me such that x is Napoleon. (cf. Ninan 2008, 2009). Alternatively, we might attempt to analyze the relevant possibility claims using some version of counterpart theory (cf. Lewis 1986: 230ff.) (though perhaps these two options come to the same thing once they are spelled out in more detail).¹⁶

In any case, I want to put aside these issues concerning imagination and possibility for the moment in order to focus on a different problem for the naïve view. The problem arises in connection with what we might call “Lakoff cases,” since they are inspired by similar examples due to the linguist George Lakoff. Lakoff (1972) was interested in *dream reports* like “I dreamt that I was Brigitte Bardot and that I kissed me.” Here we consider the corresponding imagination reports: “I imagined that I was Brigitte Bardot and that I kissed me.” The interpretation to focus on here is not one in which Bardot engages in an act of self-kissing, but in which the speaker imagines being Bardot and then kissing the speaker.

I will presently argue that such imaginings pose a problem for the naïve view, but I first want to respond to an objection sometimes directed at Lakoff cases, namely that these cases are too weird or obscure to merit serious attention. I myself have little sympathy with this objection, at least if one has already granted that it is possible to imagine being someone else. For if that is possible, then surely it is possible to imagine being (e.g.) Bardot and interacting with other people. Suppose, for example, that I point at a figure I see a few feet from me, and decide to imagine being Bardot and kissing that person. Lo and behold, I suddenly realize that that person is me: the figure in question is my image reflected in a cleverly-placed mirror. Does this discovery now render it

¹⁶ See Hare (2009: Ch. 6) for yet another analysis that renders some utterances of “I could have been Napoleon” true.

impossible for me to imagine being Bardot and kissing that person? I can't see why it should. If it doesn't, then it seems possible to imagine being Bardot and kissing me. Moreover, if it is possible in this case, then surely it is possible even when I haven't recently been involved in a confusion about my identity. Sitting here now in my mirrorless office, I can imagine being Bardot and kissing me.

What problem do the Lakoff cases pose for the naïve view? Consider, for example, a Fregean version of that view. The Fregean might say that the content of my imagining is a thought that involves two modes of presentation of me, and one of Bardot. To appreciate the proposal, consider the following sentence, noting the underlining and the italics:

(*) I imagined that I was Bardot and that I kissed *me*.

The mode of presentation associated with the underlined occurrences of the first-person pronoun in (*) would be a first-person mode of presentation; the mode associated with the italicized occurrence of that pronoun in (*) would be a third-person mode, perhaps the one I associate with the name "Dilip Ninan."

The difficulty with such a proposal is that "I imagined that I was Brigitte Bardot and that I kissed me" (as uttered by me) is not equivalent to "I imagined that I was Brigitte Bardot and that I kissed DN" (Ninan 2008: Ch. 1). In a situation in which I fail to realize that I am DN, these would appear to report different imaginings.¹⁷ Moreover, if one accepts the arguments of Perry (1977, 1979) and Lewis (1979), it would appear doubtful that we will be able to find any third-person mode of presentation to associate with the italicized first-person pronoun in (*). For suppose I awake from surgery with a serious case of amnesia. I know that I am not Bardot (perhaps you tell me this), but I have no idea who I am. Despite my confusion, I am still able to imagine that I am Bardot and that I'm kissing me. I know that I am a certain objective person in the world, and I can imagine being Bardot and kissing *that person*, whoever it is he or she may be. I needn't possess any third-person way of thinking about myself in order to engage in this sort of imagining.

A parallel problem arises for the property view. What is the content of my 'Bardot imagining' according to that view? The property of being Bardot and kissing DN? But, again, what if I do not realize that I am DN? In that case, imagining that I am Bardot and kissing me would appear to be different from imagining that I am Bardot and kissing DN. But it isn't clear how the property view would distinguish these.¹⁸

¹⁷ That is, there are many contexts (in which I am the speaker) in which these two reports would convey different information about what I was imagining. This is true even if these reports have the same truth-conditions, as some philosophers of language hold.

¹⁸ The account of *de re* attitudes presented in Lewis (1979: 358ff.) is of little help here, since it seems that I can imagine that I am Bardot and that I am kissing me without there being any acquaintance relation *R* such that (a) I bear *R* uniquely to

A Fregean might claim that what this shows is that, when it comes to the imagination, there are *two* first-person modes of presentation, one associated with the underlined occurrences of the first-person pronoun in (*), another with the italicized occurrence of that pronoun in (*). But unless more is said about how to understand these two modes of presentation, such a proposal appears highly schematic. And it isn't clear how to reconcile this idea with the best-developed Fregean accounts of content, such as the one presented in Evans (1981).

Ninan (2008: Ch. 2) offers a different solution, one that involves modifying Lewis's centered worlds version of the property account. On the standard centered worlds account, the content of an attitude is a set of centered worlds. On the modified account, the content of a *belief* is still a set of centered worlds, but the content of an *imagining* is a *function* from a centered world to a set of centered worlds, i.e. a *two-dimensional intension*. The idea is that states of imagining are 'anaphoric' or 'parasitic' on states of belief: given a centered world c compatible with what I believe, we can characterize a set of centered imagination worlds relative to c . This gives us 'two centers' with which to characterize an imagining, a belief center and an imagination center. So the content of my Bardot imagining would be a function that maps one of my centered belief worlds (w, t, x) to the set of centered worlds (w', t', x') such that x' is Bardot and x' is kissing x at t' in w' . This is a coherent (i.e. non-empty) two-dimensional intension. Furthermore, the proposal respects the fact that I can engage in a Bardot imagining even if I lack any third-person way of thinking of myself.¹⁹ I leave as topic for future inquiry how one ought to think about the connection between imaginability and possibility if one adopts this two-dimensional view of the content of imaginings.

6. Further issues

I close the discussion by mentioning two further issues: the relationship between Napoleonic imaginings and imagery, and a parallel issue that arises in connection with imagination and *time*.

We have yet to say much about the sort of imagery involved in imagining oneself to be another. Much of the literature follows Williams in holding that,

myself, and (b) I imagine the property of being an x such that x is Bardot and x is kissing the one to whom x bears R . One problem is connected to the issues discussed in the previous paragraph; another is that Lewis's account of *de re* attitudes faces independent problems when extended to the imagination (cf. Ninan 2012, 2013).

¹⁹ Chalmers (2002: n. 27) suggests that the 'epistemic content' of certain desires or wishes ("I wish I were two inches taller than I am") should be identified with a similar sort of two-dimensional intension.

when I imagine being Napoleon, my imagining will usually involve ‘looking’ at the imaginary scenario through Napoleon’s eyes:

“Images of myself being Napoleon can scarcely merely be images of the physical figure of Napoleon... They will rather be imagines of, for instance, the desolation of Austerlitz as viewed by me vaguely aware of my short stature and my cockaded hat, my hand in my tunic.” (Williams 1973: 43)

Of course, as Williams hints, *some* of the imagery may be ‘from the outside.’ For example, suppose I imagine being the race-car driver Danica Patrick. I imagine feeling tense, my body jolted around, hands clasped tightly around the steering wheel; then I picture a car -- my car -- zooming across the finish line; and then my garlanded neck and beaming face on *ESPN*. I am imagining being Patrick even though not *all* of the associated imagery is from Patrick’s visual point of view.

There are further subtleties concerning the precise connection between imagery and imagining oneself to be another. I can imagine being Napoleon, sitting in a pitch-black and completely quiet room, and I can do this by visualizing a featureless black expanse; I can also imagine that the universe contains nothing by visualizing a featureless black expanse. Obviously, in the former case I imagine myself to be another, while in the latter I am not, even though the imagery associated with both imaginings is exactly the same.²⁰

Our discussion has focused, of course, on certain imaginings that the imaginer could report using the indexical “I.” But other indexicals appear to raise similar issues: just as I can imagine being someone else, I can imagine it being a different time. For example, I can imagine that it is now 2065, perhaps by imagining self-driving cars and the like. We can also produce Lakoff-style examples for the temporal case. Suppose I have no idea what year it is; I can nevertheless imagine that it is now fifty years from now. The first occurrence of “now” in that imagination report indicates the time of the imagined scenario; the second indicates the time at which the imagining occurs. These cases would appear to raise similar issues for theories of imaginative content.²¹

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²⁰ For further discussion of distinct imaginings with identical imagery, see Kind (2001) and Gregory, “Imagination and Mental Imagery,” this volume.

²¹ See Moss (2012) for a discussion of related issues.

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