

How much of your self do you need to imagine being someone else?

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COLLÈGE
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Plan

The imaginative scenario

On the syntax of imaginative reports

Genuine *de se* vs. quasi-*de se* interpretation

What does it say about the nature of the self?

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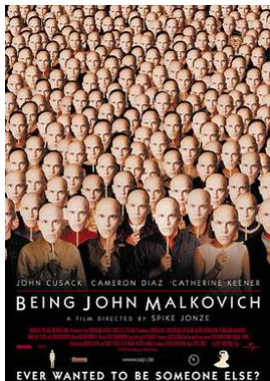
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Being John Malkovitch



Directed by Spike Jonze (1999)

Craig Schwartz, who is an unemployed puppeteer in New York City, takes an office job in a weird building. In his office he finds a hidden trap which leads... inside John Malkovitch: it is “the portal”.

After his first trip into Malkovitch, Craig rightly remarks that “it raises all sorts of philosophical-type questions”!
- “Am I me?”

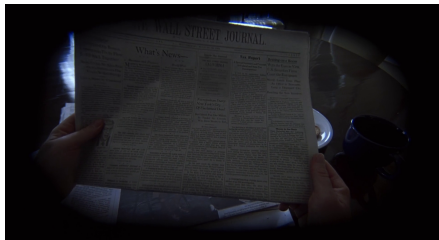
- “Is Malkovitch Malkovitch?”

Here is a philosophical puzzle: what happens should Malkovitch go through the portal?

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└ The imaginative scenario

Inside John Malkovitch, it looks like this:



Being Napoléon

- ▶ Another famous similar imaginative scenario (Williams 1973: 43):

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

- ▶ Williams' reading test (Williams 1973: 44-5):
 - ▶ Who is the imaginer? Bernard Williams.
 - ▶ Who is the imaginee? Napoléon: the point of view is that of Napoléon.
 - ▶ Who else is in the imagined content (IC)? Whoever Napoléon sees and interacts with.

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- ▶ Given the above imaginative scenario, (1) is a true imaginative report:
 - (1) Williams imagines being Napoléon.
- ▶ Such imaginative report is *prima facie* syntactically identical to Vendler's famous example (Vendler 1979):
 - (2) Vendler imagines swimming in the ocean.
- ▶ Which is usually taken to involve a PRO-construction:
 - (3) Vendler_i imagines [PRO_i swimming in the ocean].
- ▶ Which is typically taken to yield a *de se* (vs. *de dicto*) reading of (2);
- ▶ And to force an *inside* (vs. *outside*) perspective on IC. Contrary to:
 - (4) Vendler imagines himself swimming in the ocean.
- ▶ There are alternative terminologies and nice subtleties on the syntax of (2) and (4).¹

¹See in particular (Liefke and Werning 2020) and (D'Ambrosio and Stoljar 2021) for recent work addressing this puzzle directly.

Syntax of imaginative reports


- ▶ **Csq:** this leads to the conclusion that the syntax of (1) is:

(5) Williams_i imagines [PRO_i being Napoléon].

- ▶ It squares well with the *inside* perspective on IC which is intended as the interpretation of (1).
 - ▶ As shown in (D'Ambrosio and Stoljar 2021, §5), PRO is part of the story why (2) require an inside reading.
- ▶ But some have doubted that (1) is *de se*...²
 - ▶ ...and thus that the syntax of (1) be a PRO-construction.
 - ▶ It would rather be paraphrased into:

(6) Williams imagines the desolation at Austerlitz as viewed by Napoléon.

- ▶ *Note:* If that's true, then there is no reason to connect Vendler's puzzle and imagining being someone else.

²We should “do without the imaginee” (Récanati 2007: 21) – following (Williams 1973) 

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De se interpretation (the “pretend view”)

- ▶ (1)’s LF is: A_i imagines $[\text{PRO}_i \phi \text{ing}]$.³
- ▶ *Simple idea*:
 - ▶ to be *X in imagination*⁴ = to pretend to be X, or to play the rôle of X
 - ▶ Just like: “Daniel Craig is James Bond” = Daniel Craig pretends to be / plays the rôle of James Bond
- ▶ (Walton 1990: 34)

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

³Take A = Williams; ϕ = *to be Napoléon*.

⁴As opposed to: to be Malkovitch *as a result of going through a portal*. 

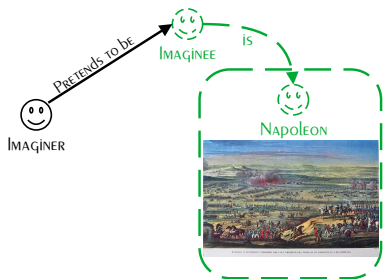
Quasi-*de se* interpretation (the “identity view”)

- ▶ *The rationale*: the imagined experience cannot be *self*-ascribed, since it is Napoléon’s experience.⁵ (Récanati 2016: 6):

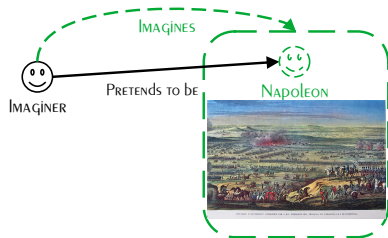
There are [...] only two characters actually involved: the imaginer [Williams], and Napoléon. What is imagined (the content) is what it’s like to be Napoléon on the [Austerlitz] battlefield — various features of Napoléon’s experience which we do our best to imagine. This is similar to Vendler’s example of imagining “the cold, the salty taste, the tug of the current and so forth”. According to Williams, it is to Napoléon himself that the imagined properties and experiences are ascribed. In Vendler’s example, the imagined properties and experiences may well be ascribed to the imagining subject in the counterfactual scenario in which that subject would be among the swimmers. But that’s only one way of understanding the imaginative project at stake. Perhaps what the subject is asked to imagine is only what it’s like to be a swimmer riding those waves; in which case the imagined properties and experiences are implicitly ascribed to those swimmers, or to anybody in their position – not, or not necessarily, to the imagining subject herself.

⁵And Williams cannot be identical with Napoléon. See (Ninan 2016) for interesting comments on this line of thought.

The alternative



Genuine *de se*



Quasi-*de se*

Vindication of the *de se* interpretation

- ▶ (7) and (8) have identical quasi-*de se* readings; yet distinct genuine *de se* reading:

(7) Récanati imagines being Napoléon.

≡ Recanati_i imagines [PRO_i being Napoléon]

(8) Récanati imagines being Williams imagining being Napoléon.

≡ Recanati_i imagines [PRO_i being Williams_j imagining [PRO_j being Napoléon]]

- ▶ And they are intuitively different.

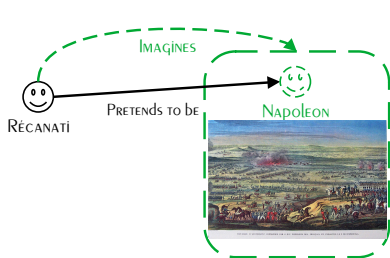
- ▶ **Caveat:** (8) should be sharply distinguished from:

(9) Récanati imagines Williams imagining being Napoléon.⁶

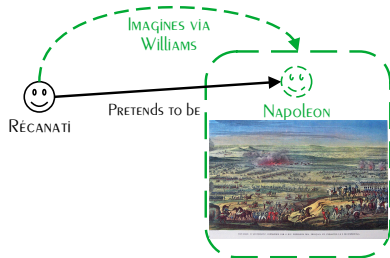
≡ Recanati imagines [Williams_i imagining [PRO_i being Napoléon]]

⁶Récanati imagines Williams at his desk in Cambridge moving his shoulders softly as if confidently riding a horse.

Quasi-*de se*: no contrast

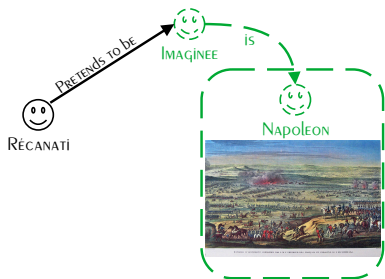


Interpretation of (7)

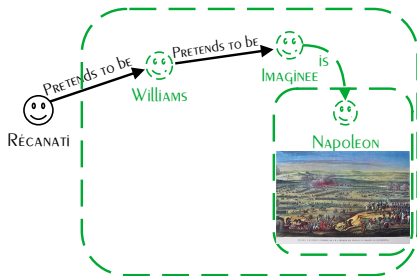


Interpretation of (8)

Genuine *de se*: structural contrast

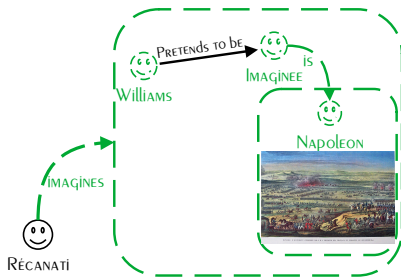


Interpretation of (7)



Interpretation of (8)

A very different imaginative scenario



Interpretation of (9)

A plausible semantics

- ▶ Formalizing *de se* content standardly involves *centered worlds* (Lewis 1979).
- ▶ I think “imagining being” should be interpreted as changing the *center* only:
 - ▶ Technically, that means that such construction allows lambda-abstraction over center only.
 - ▶ *Note*: “X imagine being Y” means “X imagine being Y *in X’s world*” (by default).⁷
- ▶ That gives:⁸
 - (1) Williams imagines being Napoléon at Austerlitz
 - ≡ Williams_i imagines [PRO_i being Napoléon at Austerlitz]
 - ≡ Williams imagines in @ [$\lambda\langle @, y \rangle$. y is at Austerlitz]

⁷I think this is in keeping with intuition. Note that this is crucial for the “coherence” of *Being John Malkovitch*.

⁸I follow (Liefke and Werning 2020: §3.1) for notations.

Applications

► Embedded imaginings:

(7) Recanati_i imagines [PRO_i being Napoléon]

≡ Récanati imagines [Napoléon][$\lambda\langle @, y \rangle$. y is at Austerlitz]

(8) Recanati_i imagines [PRO_i being Williams_j imagining [PRO_j being Napoléon at Austerlitz]]

≡ Récanati imagines [Williams][$\lambda\langle @, x \rangle$. x imagining [Napoléon][$\lambda\langle @, y \rangle$. y is at Austerlitz]]

► One can also shift the world with the center, and that gives a more complex imaginative scenario (in terms of computation).

► **csq**: “X imagines being Y” is *simpler* than “X imagines ϕ ing”

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From one self to another

- ▶ This semantics of “X imagines being Y” does not tell us anything about the underlying psychological/computational processes of *how* we manage to *de-center* ourselves?
 - ▶ It merely says that the imaginer’s self is not lost in the process,
 - ▶ for it is “significantly linked” with the imaginer’s self, i.e. the imaginer’s self *pretends to be* the imagined self.
 - ▶ In other words the imaginer’s self projects itself in imagination:
 - ▶ The trace is called the imaginee (what is it?)
 - ▶ The projection is the psychological/computational process corresponding to the semantic lambda-abstraction over the center.
- ▶ *Pretence* helps answering, because there is a strict analogy with physical *impersonations*:
 - ▶ Just like an actor projects their *body* into the fictional world...
 - ▶ ... one projects one’s cognitive capacities into the IC when one imagine being someone else.
 - ▶ Cognitive capacities are just as physically real as the actor’s body.

“But I, that am not made for sportive tricks”



Kenneth Branagh is Richard III.



Ian McKellen is Richard III.

Left: [source](#) (no credit); Right: © Alex Bailey (“Richard, Coronation Scene”)

Failed imaginings and the nature of the self

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

(10) Nagel tried and failed to imagine being Betty.

- ▶ Actual failures of imagination means that failing to imagine is possible; hence, de-centering is not done by mere stipulation.¹⁰
- ▶ Moreover, this example presupposes that one should project *one's cognitive capacities* into the imagined content.
 - ▶ In Nagel's paper, the failure to imagine a representation of space based on eco-location is meant to give us information about the comparative nature of both Nagel's and Betty's cognitive capacities, viz. that they are incommensurable.
 - ▶ *Nagel's point*: this failure indicates the limits of Nagel's consciousness (the "what-it's-like-ness").

¹⁰I.e. the lambda-abstraction *corresponds* to a psychological process. And plausibly that "imagination is a skill" (Kind 2020).






Conclusive remark

- ▶ Failed imaginings are *understudied* in the contemporary philosophy of imagination.¹¹ Yet, these are promising cases:
 - ▶ Impossibility to de-center is crucial to the study of consciousness...
 - ▶ ... just like impossible change of coordinates is crucial the study of movement.¹²




¹¹Though it plays an important rôle in (Vendler 1979).

¹²Such considerations paved the way for Galileo's principle of relativity.

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