Imagining Oneself Being Someone Else

[Early draft]

Sometimes, one can imagine, in virtue of having some experience, that one is someone else having some property. This is puzzling if imagination is a guide to possibility, since it seems impossible for one to be someone else. In this paper, I offer a way of dissolving the puzzle. When one claims that, by having some experience, one imagines that one is someone else having some property, what one imagines, I suggest, is that if that other person had the property in question, then having it would be, for them, like having the relevant experience is for one. I discuss two alternative views about the content of these episodes of imagination, and argue that both of them are too permissive and too demanding. The proposed view avoids the two difficulties while preserving some intuitions about the phenomenology and the epistemology of imagination which are captured by the alternative views.

**1. Introduction**

There is a type of imagination which seems prima facie puzzling. It is the type of imagination that we report when we claim to imagine that we are someone else having some property. Reading about Napoleon, for example, I may visualise the battlefield at Waterloo, and report what I imagine by saying that I imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo. Let us call the kind of imagination reported in cases such as this one, 'transference imagination'.[[1]](#footnote-1) On the one hand, engaging in transference imagination appears to be quite common. We engage in this type of imagination, for example, when we use our capacity for empathy, and we try to determine what it would be like for a person to be in a situation which is somehow remarkable for them. It also seems to be the kind of imagination in which actors engage when they try to identify with a character. On the other hand, it seems that we should not be capable of having these imaginings.[[2]](#footnote-2) After all, when I claim to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo, what I claim to imagine seems impossible. For two different objects, such as Napoleon and myself, seem to be necessarily different. And it seems, furthermore, that we cannot imagine what is impossible. How can I imagine, then, that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo? More generally, how can episodes of transference imagination ever take place? We may refer to this puzzle as the 'puzzle of transference imagination'.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The aim of this paper is to vindicate transference imagination by arguing that, once it is properly understood, the reasons for thinking that transference imagination should not be possible become unpersuasive. Accordingly, the main task in the project will be to offer an account of how transference imagination needs to be understood. I will tackle this task by addressing the question of what exactly we imagine in episodes of transference imagination. My contention will be that what we imagine in such episodes can be formulated counterfactually. When a subject reports an episode of imagination by saying that, in virtue of having some experience, they imagine that they are someone else having some property, what the subject really imagines is that if the other person had the property in question, then having it would be, for them, like having the relevant experience is for the subject. I will refer to this view as 'the counterfactual view'.

The case for the counterfactual view will be built as follows. In section 2, I will specify the scope of the project, by elaborating further on both the type of imagining which will concern us and the type of approach to the puzzle that we will adopt. In sections 3 and 4, I will discuss two accounts of transference imagination which come to mind quite naturally. I will argue that the two accounts include cases of transference imagination which, intuitively, we should exclude, and exclude cases which, intuitively, we should include. Nevertheless, our discussion in sections 3 and 4 will serve to highlight two valuable intuitions behind the two candidate accounts of transference imagination. One of them is an intuition about the phenomenology of it. It is the intuition that, when we imagine that we are someone else perceiving some scene, it feels to us as if we ourselves were involved in the relevant scene. The other one is an intuition about the epistemology of transference imagination. It is the intuition that, when we imagine that we are someone else perceiving some scene, our imagining puts us in a position to form beliefs about what it would be like, for that person, to perceive the relevant scene. In section 5, I will put forward the counterfactual view, and argue that the view successfully handles the kinds of cases which are challenging for the alternative accounts. I will also argue that the counterfactual view captures the two intuitions about transference imagination which seem to motivate those accounts. Accordingly, I will conclude that the counterfactual view is the correct account of transference imagination.

**2. The project**

To characterise transference imaginings more fully, consider, first, the category of sensory imaginings. Sensory imaginings are mental episodes in which we bring to mind perceivable states of affairs. They typically involve having mental images, that is, quasi-perceptual experiences wherein those states of affairs are presented to us.[[4]](#footnote-4) If I have an imagining that I would report by saying that I imagine that I am at the beach on a sunny day, for example, then I have an experience wherein I visualise the sun, the water, a sandy beach, and people sunbathing on their towels or swimming among the waves. I have, in other words, a mental image which allows me to picture a scene with those elements in my mind. Sensory imaginings should be distinguished from two other types of mental states that we usually associate with them. Firstly, if one has an imagining in virtue of forming some mental image, then, typically, there is something that one was trying to imagine by forming that mental image. We may call it, one's 'imaginative project'. If I try to imagine that I am at the beach on a sunny day, for example, and I visualise the scene at the beach as a result, then my imaginative project is that I am at the beach on a sunny day.[[5]](#footnote-5) Secondly, if one has an imagining in virtue of forming some mental image, then, typically, there is some broader purpose that one's imagining was supposed to serve. We may call it, one's 'imaginative exercise'. If the reason why I try to imagine that I am at the beach is, for instance, that I am in the process of deciding whether going to the beach will be more fun than, let us say, going to the movies, then my imaginative exercise is a decision-making exercise, namely, making up my mind on how to spend my leisure time.

An episode of transference imagination is a kind of sensory imagining. It is the kind of sensory imagining that a subject reports when they claim to imagine that they are having some property while being someone else.[[6]](#footnote-6) In the Napoleon case, for example, the episode of imagination that I am having is a sensory imagining. For I have formed a mental image of the battle of Waterloo; an experience wherein I visualise, let us say, soldiers beating their drums, cannons shooting and Guards charging towards the battlefield through the smoke of gun powder. And, since I report what I imagine, in virtue of having that mental image, by saying that I imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo, my sensory imagining qualifies as an episode of transference imagination as well. The puzzle of transference imagination, with regards to that episode, can now be formulated as an inconsistent triad with the following three claims:

(i) I imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo.

(ii) It is impossible that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo.

(iii) For any proposition p, if I imagine that p, then it is possible that p.

The puzzle arises because, if we take my report literally, then it seems that (i) should be true. But it also seems that claim (ii), which hinges on the modal status of identity, should be true. It is hard to see how, in general, two different objects could possibly be identical.[[7]](#footnote-7) Finally, claim (iii) seems true as well. Claim (iii) is motivated by a view about the epistemology of modality; the view that imagination gives us cognitive access to the realm of possibility. If we deny (iii), then it is difficult to see how imagination could provide us with any knowledge of which states of affairs are possible. And, unfortunately, there seems to be no explanation for how we come to acquire such knowledge, except for our use of the imagination.[[8]](#footnote-8) The puzzle, now, is that (i), (ii) and (iii) cannot be true at the same time: From (i) and (iii), it follows that it is possible that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo, which contradicts (ii).

One approach to dissolving the puzzle of transference imagination consists in accepting (i) on the basis of my verbal report, and putting pressure on either (ii) or (iii). One may choose to challenge (ii), for example, and argue that it is not impossible for me to be Napoleon after all.[[9]](#footnote-9) Alternatively, one may choose to challenge (iii) by qualifying the principle that imagination is a guide to possibility.[[10]](#footnote-10) A different approach to dissolving the puzzle of transference imagination consists in assuming (ii) and (iii) for the sake of the argument, and putting pressure on (i) instead. One may propose that the fact that I report my imagining by claiming to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo does not show that this is indeed what I am imagining. In other words, one may propose that my report should not be taken literally, but as a kind of idiom which needs to be re-interpreted. The main task in this approach, then, is to put forward an alternative content for my imagining. In what follows, I will explore the second approach to the puzzle, and consider several candidate propositions for the content of the imagining that I am reporting when I claim to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo. As we will see, all the propositions are intended to be possibly true. And, for that reason, they are meant to provide us with a reading of the subordinate clause in (i) which evades the puzzle of transference imagination.

**3. The subjective view**

The following thought seems, on the face of it, like a reasonable response to the puzzle of transference imagination. When a subject claims that, by forming some mental image, they imagine that they have some property while being someone else, what the subject really imagines is that they themselves are having that property. What happens is that they also believe that the property in question identifies, or is characteristic of, someone else. That is why they claim to imagine that they are the other person. Suppose, for example, that I visualise the battlefield at Waterloo from a spatial position which, I believe, was only occupied by Napoleon during the battle. As a result, I have an episode of imagination that I report by saying that I imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo. Then, the thought is that, strictly speaking, what I imagine is that I am seeing Waterloo from the relevant position; something that I believe Napoleon (and only Napoleon) to have done in the past. More generally, the view is that imagining that one is Napoleon doing some things is, essentially, imagining that one is doing Napoleonic things. Zeno Vendler, for example, describes what, according to this view, one needs to do in order to imagine that one is Napoleon at Waterloo thus:

All I have to do is observe an individual in its particular circumstances, or reconstrue a historical situation, say Napoleon at Waterloo, and then imagine being in the same situation myself, looking over the battlefield, seeing the Guards in their hopeless charge, hearing the drums beat and the canons roar, and so forth.[[11]](#footnote-11)

On this view, the subject's imagining should be understood as being concerned, not with the person who they claim to imagine being, but with the subject themselves. Accordingly, let us call this view, the 'subjective view' of transference imagination. We may formulate the subjective view more precisely as follows:

Subjective view

For every subject S and S\*, property P, and mental image i:

S imagines, in virtue of having i, that S is S\* having P if and only if

(1) S imagines, in virtue of having i, that S is having P, and

(2) S believes that S\* has P uniquely.

The subjective view helps us dissolve the puzzle of transference imagination. For if what I am imagining, when I claim to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo, is that I am seeing Waterloo, then what I am imagining turns out to be possible. A further virtue of the view is that it captures a certain intuition about the phenomenology of transference imagination; an intuition worth preserving. This is the intuition that, when we imagine that we perceive some scene while being someone else, it seems to us as if were engaged with the imagined scene ourselves. When I imagine, for example, that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo by forming some mental image of the battlefield, it feels to me as if I was seeing the soldiers beating their drums standing around me. It feels to me as if I was seeing the cannons shooting in front of me. It feels to me as if I was seeing the Guards charging towards the battlefield and away from me; and so on. Presumably, this is why I use the first-person pronoun, 'I', when I report my imagining, and I do not merely refer to Napoleon.

The subjective view offers a simple explanation of this feature of transference imagination. The reason why, when I claim to imagine that I am someone else perceiving some scene, I feel involved in the imagined scene is that I actually imagine that I am perceiving the scene. When I claim to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo, for example, I actually imagine that I am seeing Waterloo. It is no wonder, then, that it feels to me as if I was seeing the Guards charging towards the battlefield and away from me, or that it feels to me as if I was seeing the soldiers beating their drums standing around me. I am, after all, the person who is imagined to be seeing all of those elements in the scene from Waterloo.

Notice, however, that the subjective view is not only the view that imagining that one is Napoleon having some properties is imagining that one has those properties. The condition that one must attribute the properties to Napoleon uniquely is part of the view as well. This condition acts as a mechanism through which Napoleon is singled out as the object of my imagining. Unfortunately, such a mechanism also brings up two difficulties for the view. It seems that, due to this mechanism, the subjective view turns out to be, on the one hand, too permissive and, on the other hand, too demanding. Let us consider the two difficulties in order.

Suppose that, when I visualise Waterloo from a certain spatial position, I am trying to put myself in Napoleon's place. I am trying to imagine what it would be like for me to, so to speak, be in his shoes. Such an imaginative project might fit into different imaginative exercises. Perhaps I am trying to put myself in Napoleon's place because I am a military historian trying to decide if he made the best strategic choices during the battle. Or perhaps I am trying to put myself in his place because I am curious about my own strength of character, and I am trying to determine how much (or how little) courage I would have displayed if I had found myself in Napoleon's circumstances. Whatever my specific imaginative exercise happens to be, it seems that, in order to imagine what it would be like for me to see Waterloo from Napoleon's position, I need to, on the one hand, imagine that I am seeing Waterloo from a certain position and, on the other hand, believe that only Napoleon saw Waterloo from that position. But, on the subjective view, this means that, in order to imagine what it would be like for me to see Waterloo from Napoleon's position, I need to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo from that position. And this seems counter-intuitive. After all, I may imagine what it would be like for me to see Waterloo from Napoleon's position without having any views on what it would be like for Napoleon himself to see Waterloo from that position. Suppose, for example, that I remain neutral on the latter issue because I do not have enough information about Napoleon's perceptual capacities at the time, or about the emotions, traits of character and cognitive states which may have influenced his perceptual states during the battle. It seems possible, therefore, for an episode of imagination whereby one imagines that one is seeing Waterloo from Napoleon's position to be different from an episode of imagination whereby one imagines that one is Napoleon seeing Waterloo from that position.[[12]](#footnote-12) And yet, such a dissociation should not be possible if the subjective view is correct.

Conversely, suppose that I am reading a historical novel about the aftermath of Waterloo. The novel is written in the first person, from Napoleon's point of view, and it tells the story of how Napoleon avoids life in British captivity by emigrating to America. Now, suppose that I am reading a passage from the novel in which the character of Napoleon describes being aboard a vessel which is reaching the shores of Louisiana. And, upon reading this passage, I form a mental image of what the character describes seeing, namely, the port of a distant 19th century New Orleans. Since I take the novel to be a work of fiction, I do not believe that Napoleon ever reached the shores of Louisiana. Do I imagine, then, that I am Napoleon seeing New Orleans when I entertain the mental image that I have formed while reading the novel? On the subjective view, I cannot be said to imagine such a thing, which seems counter-intuitive.

One way to think about this issue is the following. Consider a scenario in which I have been persuaded by some conspiracy theorists that Napoleon did not die at Saint Helena, and that what I am reading is a long-lost letter describing Napoleon's actual arrival to New Orleans, written by Napoleon himself. In such a scenario, it intuitively seems that, when I visualise New Orleans, I am indeed imagining that I am Napoleon seeing New Orleans. But now suppose that, in that scenario, I learn that the elaborate conspiracy theory that I had embraced is false, and I come to believe that what I am reading is not an actual letter, but a work of fiction. Would my discovery prevent me from continuing to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing New Orleans? It does not seem that it would. That is, it does not seem that learning the truth about Napoleon would cancel my episode of transference imagination in any way. But if learning the truth about Napoleon does not cancel my episode of transference imagination in the scenario in which I have been initially persuaded that he did see New Orleans, then it is hard to see why, in the scenario in which I am fully aware that I am reading a novel to begin with, my belief that Napoleon saw New Orleans is necessary for me to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing New Orleans.

It seems that the source of the two difficulties for the subjective view lies in the fact that, on this view, the content of an episode of transference imagination only involves the subject of the episode having certain properties. As a result, some of the subject's beliefs need to be invoked in order to single out the person who constitutes the object of the imagining; beliefs about who has those properties uniquely. But the subject's beliefs, conjoined with their imagining that they are having the relevant properties, seem to be neither necessary nor sufficient for transference imagination. At this point, then, it seems reasonable to explore a different approach to the contents of transference imagination; an approach according to which, ultimately, an episode of transference imagination is not about the subject who is doing the imagining, but about the object of the imaginative episode.

**4. The objective view**

Given the difficulties for the subjective view, an alternative view suggests itself quite naturally. This is the view that, when a subject claims that, in virtue of having some mental image, they imagine that they have a property while being someone else, what the subject really imagines is something, not about themselves, but about the person who they claim to imagine being. They imagine that the person in question is having the relevant property. What happens is that they imagine it, as it were, from the inside, and that is why they claim to imagine that they are identical with that person. Suppose, once again, that I visualise the battlefield at Waterloo from a certain spatial position. And, as a result, I have an episode of imagination that I report by saying that I imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo. Then, the thought is that, strictly speaking, what I imagine is that Napoleon is seeing Waterloo from the relevant position. But this is something that I imagine, in some sense, from the inside.

Steven Reynolds, for example, puts forward a version of this view. According to Reynolds, when one imagines that one is Napoleon seeing Waterloo by forming a mental image of the battlefield, one imagines, from the inside, that Napoleon is seeing Waterloo. And, importantly, one imagines this in virtue of the fact that one's mental image represents one of Napoleon's past visual experiences of Waterloo.[[13]](#footnote-13) Now, one might be concerned that if the reason why one imagines that one is Napoleon seeing Waterloo is, ultimately, that one's mental image represents one of Napoleon's past visual experiences of Waterloo, then, in order to imagine that one is Napoleon seeing Waterloo, one must imagine oneself having the visual experience at issue.[[14]](#footnote-14) In response to this concern, Reynolds spells out what it is for one to imagine, from the inside, that Napoleon is seeing Waterloo:

The objection assumes that to imagine a conscious state 'from the inside' is to imagine oneself having that conscious state. But in imagining Napoleon from the inside I do not imagine that I am experiencing Napoleon's conscious states. I merely imagine Napoleon having those states by representing them to myself in a certain way. The temptation to suppose that I imagine that I am having them arises because I represent them to myself in a way that reproduces Napoleon's point of view on them.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The thought, then, seems to be that, when I try to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo, I may form a mental image of Waterloo which is qualitatively similar to one of Napoleon's past visual experiences of the battlefield; similar in that it reproduces Napoleon's point of view while having that experience. If that is the case, then my mental image of Waterloo represents Napoleon's past visual experience of it, and I have thereby succeeded in imagining that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo. More generally, the idea seems to be that if I have a mental image wherein I visualise some scene, and that mental image is qualitatively similar to another person's perceptual experience of the scene in such a way that it reproduces their point of view while having that experience, then, my mental image of the scene represents their experience of it. And, in that sense, I can be said to imagine that I am that person experiencing the scene. On this view, then, the content of an episode of transference imagination should be understood as involving, not the subject of the imagining, but the person who they imagine being. Accordingly, let us call this view, the 'objective view' of transference imagination. We may formulate it more precisely as follows:

Objective view

For every subject S and S\*, property P, and mental image i:

S imagines, in virtue of having i, that S is S\* having P if and only if, in virtue of having i, S imagines that S\* has P 'from the inside', that is, i reproduces S\*'s point of view while having P.

The objective view helps us dissolve the puzzle of transference imagination. For if what I am imagining, when I claim to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo, is that Napoleon is seeing Waterloo, then what I am imagining does seem to be possible. A further virtue of the view is that it captures a certain intuition about the epistemology of transference imagination; an intuition which is worth preserving. This is the intuition that transference imagination provides us with information about the phenomenal character of other people's experiences. If, by forming some mental image, I imagine that I am perceiving some scene while being someone else, then I am in a position to make judgments about what it would be like for that person to perceive the scene in question. If I, for example, imagine that I see Waterloo while being Napoleon in virtue of forming some mental image, then my imagination is providing me with information about what it would be like for Napoleon to see Waterloo. My imagination is, in other words, putting me in a position from which I can form beliefs about that subject matter.

The objective view offers a straightforward explanation of this feature of transference imagination. The explanation concerns the mechanism through which, when I form my mental image of the battlefield at Waterloo, it is Napoleon, and not someone else, who I imagine to be seeing Waterloo. The reason why Napoleon is singled out as the object of my imagination is that my mental image is sufficiently similar, from a qualitative point of view, to one of Napoleon's past visual experiences of Waterloo; similar enough to reproduce his point of view while having that experience. But if this is the reason, then it is no wonder that, by imagining that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo, I am in a position to form beliefs about what it would be like for Napoleon to see Waterloo. If the mental image that I have formed must be qualitatively similar to one of his past visual experiences of the battlefield, then all I need to do, in order to form such beliefs, is to attend to what it is like for me to visualise Waterloo while I imagine that I am Napoleon. Unfortunately, though, the mechanism through which Napoleon is singled out as the object of my imagining on the objective view brings up, once again, two difficulties. It seems that, due to this mechanism, the objective view is, like the subjective view, too permissive and too demanding at the same time.

Suppose that, when I try to visualise Waterloo, I am trying to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo. This is my imaginative project. However, my mental image does not reproduce the point of view of any of the visual experiences that, in fact, Napoleon had of Waterloo at the time. Instead, my mental image happens to reproduce the point of view of a visual experience that someone else, let us say, Marshal von Blücher, had of the battlefield at some point. On the objective view, this means that, unbeknownst to me, I am imagining that I am Blücher seeing Waterloo. And this seems counter-intuitive. There is a sense in which transference imagination seems to be subject to the will. When I intend to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing something, and I have some mental image as a result, who I imagine myself being seems to be within my control, or up to me. It seems to be up to me in a way in which, for example, when I intend to see something, and I look in some direction as a result, what I see is not up to me.[[16]](#footnote-16) On the objective view, however, who I imagine myself being depends on whose experience happens to reproduce the point of view of the mental image that I am having. And such facts are certainly beyond my control.

Conversely, suppose that, when I visualise the battlefield at Waterloo, I am trying to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo. And, once more, it turns out that my mental image does not reproduce the point of view of any of the visual experiences that, in fact, Napoleon had of Waterloo at the time. However, my mental image does reproduce the point of view of a visual experience that Napoleon could have easily had, if he had behaved slightly differently at Waterloo. Suppose that, on a nearby possible world, Napoleon steers his horse through the battlefield at Waterloo on a somewhat different path from the path that he actually took and, as it happens, things at Waterloo visually appear to him just like I visualise them to be.[[17]](#footnote-17) According to the objective view, in this situation, I am not imagining that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo, which seems counter-intuitive. Why should the fact that Napoleon did not actually see Waterloo as I visualise it prevent me from imagining that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo? If we assume that imagination gives us cognitive access to the realm of possibility, and it is possible for Napoleon to have seen Waterloo in just the way I visualise it to be, then it is hard to understand why the fact that Napoleon did not, in fact, have a visual experience which reproduces the point of view of my mental image should be an obstacle to my imagining that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo.

The upshot of our discussion in the last two sections seems to be the following. It appears that there are two desiderata that any theory of transference imagination should try to satisfy. One desideratum is to explain the fact that, when a subject imagines that they are someone else perceiving some scene, the subject feels involved in, or engaged with, the imagined scene. Another desideratum is to explain the fact that, when a subject imagines that they are someone else perceiving some scene, the subject is in a position to form beliefs about what it would be like for that other person to perceive the relevant scene. We have seen that the subjective view is able to satisfy the former desideratum by building the subject of an episode of transference imagination into the content of that episode. And the objective view is able to satisfy the latter desideratum by building the object of an episode of transference imagination into the content of that episode. It seems reasonable, at this point, to try to learn from the benefits of each view, and attempt to pursue both of their strategies at once.

**5. The counterfactual view**

The main proposal that I wish to put forward is that, when a subject tries to imagine that they are some other person having some property, and they have a mental image as a result, the subject's imagining has a content which can be formulated counterfactually. The content of the subject's imagining is that if the other person had the relevant property, then that person would have an experience of a certain phenomenological kind; an experience phenomenologically similar to the very mental image that the subject is actually having. Accordingly, we may call this view, the 'counterfactual view':

Counterfactual view

For every subject S and S\*, property P, and mental image i;

S imagines, in virtue of having i, that S is S\* having P if and only if, in virtue of having i, S imagines that if S\* had P, then having P would be, for S\*, like having i is actually for S.

A certain feature of the counterfactual view is worth elaborating on. The view attributes to subject S's imagining a counterfactual content which needs to be read in a particular way. The relevant reading can be spelled out, in the terminology from the possible-worlds framework, thus: There is a possible world W, in which both S\* has P and S\*'s experience while having P is phenomenologically similar to S's actual experience while having i, and any world in which S\* has P which is as close or closer to the actual world than W is also a world in which S\*'s experience while having P is phenomenologically similar to S's actual experience while having i.[[18]](#footnote-18) Notice that this reading of the counterfactual content of S's imagining is strong, in that it makes the counterfactual false in the situation in which S\* having P is impossible. This is a deliberate feature of the view. Suppose that I try to imagine, for example, that I am Napoleon discovering that 2+2=5, and I form some mental image as a result. Intuitively enough, it seems that my imagining is incorrect. And it seems that it is incorrect irrespective of which mental image I have formed to carry out my imaginative project. The counterfactual view delivers this outcome. On the counterfactual view, what I imagine, by having my mental image, is that if Napoleon discovered that 2+2=5, then his experience would be phenomenologically similar to the experience that I am having when I entertain my mental image. On the strong reading of this counterfactual, the counterfactual turns out to be false, since there is no possible world in which both Napoleon discovers that 2+2=5, and his experience is phenomenologically similar to the experience that I am having when I entertain my mental image. This squares with the intuition that, regardless of what mental image I have formed as a result of trying to imagine that I am Napoleon discovering that 2+2=5, my imagining is bound to be incorrect.

How does the counterfactual view work in the Waterloo case? The proposal is that, when I visualise the battlefield at Waterloo, and I claim to thereby imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo, the content of my imagining is the following: If Napoleon saw Waterloo, then seeing Waterloo would be, for him, like having *this* mental image (attending to my mental image of Waterloo) is for me. The view helps us dissolve the puzzle of transference imagination. For if what I am imagining, when I claim to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo, is the just-mentioned counterfactual, then what I imagine certainly seems possible. Perhaps I got it wrong, and Napoleon's experience while seeing Waterloo was, in fact, nothing like the experience of having my mental image. But surely the two experiences could have been similar, which is all we need in order to avoid the puzzle. What else can be said, then, in favour of the counterfactual view? Two considerations can be offered in its support. The first one is that the view seems to satisfy the two desiderata that we established for any theory of transference imagination. The second one is that the counterfactual view seems to be, unlike alternative views, neither too permissive nor too demanding. Let us take the two considerations in order.

The counterfactual view can explain the fact that, when a subject imagines that they are perceiving some scene while being someone else, the subject feels involved in the imagined scene. Why, for example, does it feel to me, when I imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo, as if I was seeing the soldiers beating their drums standing around me, as if I was seeing the cannons shooting in front of me, as if I was seeing the Guards charging towards the battlefield and away from me, and so on? On the counterfactual view, what I imagine, by forming my mental image of Waterloo, is that if Napoleon saw Waterloo, then seeing Waterloo would be, for him, like having that mental image is for me. In other words, the mental image that I have formed is itself part of what I am imagining. But the mental image in question is not merely a mental image wherein a visualise soldiers beating their drums, cannons shooting, and Guards charging. It is a mental image wherein I visualise the soldiers beating their drums around me, the cannons shooting in front of me, the Guards moving away from me, and so on. It is no wonder, then, that, when I imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo by having that mental image, I feel involved in the scene from Waterloo.

The counterfactual view can also explain the fact that, when a subject imagines that they are perceiving some scene while being someone else, the subject is in a position to form beliefs about what it would be like for that other person to perceive the relevant scene. Why is it the case, for example, that if I imagine that I see Waterloo while being Napoleon by forming a mental image of the battlefield, then my imagining puts me in a position to form beliefs about what it would be like for Napoleon to see Waterloo? On the counterfactual view, what I imagine, by forming my mental image, is that if Napoleon saw Waterloo, then seeing Waterloo would be, for him, like having that mental image is for me. This means that my episode of imagination is informing me of what it would be like for Napoleon to see Waterloo. That is, information concerning the issue is included in the content of my imagining. It does not seem surprising, then, that, by imagining that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo, I am thereby in a position to form beliefs about what it would be like for Napoleon to see Waterloo. All I need to do, in order to form such beliefs, is to take the content of my imagining at face value.

Furthermore, the counterfactual view seems to be able to accommodate the kinds of cases which suggested that the alternative views were too permissive. Suppose that, when I visualise the scene at Waterloo, I am trying to imagine what it would be like for me to see Waterloo from Napoleon's spatial position during the battle. Intuitively enough, I could succeed in imagining this and, at the same time, fail to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo, because I do not have enough information about Napoleon's state of mind during the battle. It seems that the counterfactual view can accommodate this intuition. On the counterfactual view, if I imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo by forming a mental image of the battle, what I imagine is that if Napoleon saw Waterloo, seeing it would be, for him, like having that mental image is for me. But notice that this is somewhat demanding. Suppose that I do not have any information about Napoleon's state of mind at Waterloo, and I do not wish to make any assumptions on the matter. Then, I may not be in a position to form a mental image of the requisite kind, that is, a mental image that I take to be similar to one of Napoleon's visual experiences in a nearby possible world in which he is seeing Waterloo. On the counterfactual view, this means that, in such a scenario, I am not able to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo. But this is consistent with the possibility that, in the same scenario, I do have enough information about the spatial position that Napoleon occupied at Waterloo, and enough information about what was going on in the battle at the time, which allows me to visualise Waterloo from that position. In other words, it is consistent with the possibility that, in that scenario, I am capable of imagining what it would be like for me to see Waterloo from Napoleon's position.

Similarly, suppose that, when I visualise the scene at Waterloo, I am trying to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo, and my mental image happens to reproduce the point of view of a visual experience that Marshal von Blücher actually had of the battlefield at the time. Does this entail that, by having that mental image, I am imagining that I am Blücher seeing Waterloo? On the counterfactual view, it does not. If the counterfactual view is correct, then, in order to imagine that I am Blücher seeing Waterloo by having the mental image at issue, I need to imagine that if Blücher saw Waterloo, then seeing it would be, for him, like having that mental image is for me. The crucial question, then, is whether, given that my mental image reproduces the point of view of a visual experience that Blücher actually had of Waterloo, the content of my imagining must be, not a counterfactual involving Napoleon, but the just-mentioned counterfactual involving Blücher. And there seems to be no aspect of the counterfactual view which requires us to answer this question in the affirmative. The counterfactual view is neutral on the issue of how a particular person gets selected to be included in the content of my imagining when I can be said to imagine, in virtue of having some mental image, that I am someone else having some property. It is only a view about how we should understand the nature of that content.

The counterfactual view is therefore not committed to any particular view about what determines the contents of our episodes of transference imagination. There is, however, a certain proposal about this issue which fits quite well with the counterfactual view. This is the proposal that, when I form a mental image as a result of trying to imagine something, the content of my imagining is not purely a function of the intrinsic properties of my mental image.[[19]](#footnote-19) Instead, it is partly determined by what I am trying to imagine, and partly determined by the mental image that I am entertaining. This proposal meshes well with the counterfactual view because, if the counterfactual view is correct, then there is a place in the counterfactual content of my imagining within which my imaginative project can make a contribution (namely, the antecedent of the counterfactual), and a place within which my mental image can make a contribution as well (namely, the consequent of the counterfactual). Thus, in the Blücher case, the idea is that, when I visualise the scene at Waterloo, I have formed my mental image as a result of trying to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo. And, for that reason, the counterfactual content of my imagining, when I entertain that mental image, has an antecedent which concerns Napoleon, and not Blücher.[[20]](#footnote-20)

This proposal makes room for the possibility of imagining being different people by having the same mental image. For example, by having the very mental image that I am actually having, I could have imagined that I am Blücher, and not Napoleon, seeing Waterloo. I could have done this if, instead of having my mental image as a result of trying to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo, I had had my mental image as a result of trying to imagine that I am Blücher seeing Waterloo. In that scenario, the counterfactual content of my imagining would have involved Blücher. But the reason why it would have involved Blücher does not concern the intrinsic properties of my mental image. And, in particular, it does not concern the fact that my mental image reproduces Blücher's point of view when he saw Waterloo. Instead, the reason is that, in the scenario in question, my imaginative project would have been about Blücher, and not about Napoleon. Allowing for the possibility that one may imagine being different people by having the very same mental image is meant to capture the intuition, raised during our discussion of the objective view, that there is a sense in which imagination is subject to the will. The suggestion is that it is subject to the will in the sense that our imaginative projects make a contribution to the contents of our imaginings.

Finally, the counterfactual view seems to be able to accommodate the kinds of cases which suggested that the alternative views were too demanding. Suppose that I am reading the novel in which the character of Napoleon is arriving to Louisiana, and I visualise New Orleans. I take the novel to be a work of fiction, so I do not believe that Napoleon ever saw New Orleans. Does my lack of this belief prevent me from imagining that I am Napoleon seeing New Orleans? Intuitively, it does not. The counterfactual view can account for this intuition. For, if the view is correct, then imagining that I am Napoleon seeing New Orleans by having some mental image is imagining that if Napoleon saw New Orleans, then seeing it would be, for him, like having that mental image is for me. And it seems that, in order to imagine that, I do not need to believe that Napoleon actually saw New Orleans. I do not need to believe this any more than, in order to imagine, let us say, what I would look like if I saw myself in a mirror, I need to believe that I am actually seeing myself in a mirror. Holding a belief in the antecedent of a counterfactual does not seem to be a necessary condition for having an imagining with that counterfactual as its content.

Likewise, suppose that, when I visualise the battlefield at Waterloo, I am trying to imagine that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo. And my mental image reproduces the point of view of a visual experience that Napoleon did not have, but could have easily had, during Waterloo. Does the fact that Napoleon did not have that visual experience prevent me from imagining that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo? Intuitively, it does not. The counterfactual view can account for this intuition. For, if the view is correct, then imagining that I am Napoleon seeing Waterloo by having some mental image is imagining that if Napoleon saw Waterloo, then seeing it would be, for him, like having that mental image is for me. And it does not seem that, in order for me to imagine that, it needs to be the case that, when Napoleon actually saw Waterloo, seeing it was, for him, like having my mental image is for me. The situation is analogous to that in which I visit, for instance, a furniture shop, and I form a mental image of one of their sofas fitting nicely into my living room. But, as it happens, the sofa is too large to fit into the room. It does not seem that, in order for me to imagine that if I saw the sofa placed inside my living room, then seeing it would be like having the mental image that I am having, it needs to be the case that, indeed, if I saw the sofa placed inside my living room, the sofa would look like it fits nicely into the room.[[21]](#footnote-21) More generally, the truth of a counterfactual does not seem to be a necessary condition for having an imagining with that counterfactual as its content.

**7. Conclusion**

We have seen that two accounts of the content of transference imaginings can avoid the outcome that, in such episodes, what the subject imagines is impossible. They can, for that reason, sidestep the puzzle of transference imagination. Furthermore, one of those accounts captures an intuition about the phenomenology of transference imagination which seems worth preserving, whereas the other one captures an intuition about the epistemology of it which also seems worth preserving. Unfortunately, though, the two accounts share a weakness. They are too permissive and too demanding at the same time. The view that the content of transference imaginings is counterfactual, like the alternative accounts, sidesteps the puzzle of transference imagination by avoiding the outcome that, in episodes of transference imagination, what the subject imagines is impossible. Furthermore, the counterfactual view captures the two intuitions which seemed to motivate the two alternative accounts. And, unlike those accounts, the counterfactual view seems to be neither too permissive nor too demanding. I conclude, therefore, that the counterfactual view is the correct account of transference imagination.

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1. Episodes of transference imagination target, then, a person. Hereafter, for any episode of transference imagination, I will refer to the person who the subject claims to imagine being as the 'object' of the episode. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In what follows, I will speak of 'imaginings' and 'episodes of imagination' indistinctly. Likewise for specific types of imaginings, such as transference imaginings. Hopefully this will cause no confusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Versions of this puzzle can be found, for example, in (Williams 1973: 44-45) and (Vendler 1984: 35-36). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For the sake of simplicity, I will concentrate on states of affairs which can be perceived through vision. Thus, the quasi-perceptual experiences which will concern us in this discussion will be experiences which allow us to visualise some states of affairs or, equivalently, to picture them in our minds. We can think of those experiences, then, as mental images. For the purposes of our discussion here, the view that sensory imaginings involve mental images will be taken as an assumption. See (Kind 2001) for a defence of this view. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This characterisation leaves open the question of whether, when we have an imaginative project and we imagine something as a result, what we imagine must be the same as our imaginative project or not. Not all views of sensory imagination agree on this question. See, for example, (Williams 1973: 33) for an affirmative answer, and (Munro and Strohminger 2021) for a negative answer. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. There are episodes of non-sensory imagination in which we pretend, or suppose, that we are someone else having some property without entertaining any particular mental image in the process. In this discussion, however, we will not be counting such episodes as transference imaginings. The stipulation is harmless since, as we are about to see, it is the sensory type of imagination that we report when we claim to imagine that we are someone else having some property which turns out to be puzzling. (See note 8 on this point.) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. An influential case for the necessity of identity is made in (Kripke 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Stephen Yablo, for example, adopts this position in (Yablo 1993). Notice that the relevant kind of imagination, for the purposes of guiding us towards possibility, is sensory imagination. Non-sensory imagination, by contrast, does not seem to be a guide to possibility. If I, for instance, imagine that I have different parents, by pretending that they are different in a game of make-believe, or while acting in a play, then, in a non-sensory sense, I am imagining something impossible. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The framework of Counterpart Theory, proposed by David Lewis in (1986), seems to accommodate contingent identity. On this framework, two objects which are, in fact, different are, nevertheless, possibly identical if both objects share a counterpart (Lewis 1986: 263). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Peter Kung, for example, distinguishes between two kinds of content in a subject's episode of sensory imagination. There is content which only concerns the distribution of objects and their perceivable properties in three-dimensional space, and there is content which is constituted by conceptual labels that the subject attributes to those objects, as well as several stipulations that the subject makes about them, when the subject has their imaginative episode (Kung 2010: 623-624). Kung then argues that principle (iii) can be accepted with regards to the former kind of content, but should be rejected with regards to the latter one. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In (Vendler 1984: 34). Vendler himself does not endorse the view to which he is alluding in this passage. Instead, he suggests that, in the case which concerns us, the content of one's imagining is the property of being Napoleon or, more precisely, the conjunctive property of being Napoleon and seeing Waterloo (Vendler 1984: 40). Vendler's suggestion that the content of an episode of transference imagination can be construed, not as a proposition, but as a property, has been taken up and explored in depth by others. See, for example, (Recanati 2007: 203-210) and (Ninan 2016) for developments of this idea. For reasons of space, I will not be able to discuss this approach to the puzzle of transference imagination here. It is worth mentioning, however, that the approach requires some substantial commitments about the intentionality of imagination and, more broadly, the intentionality of mental states. For that reason, it seems preferable to focus, in the first instance, on less revisionary responses to the puzzle; responses which assume the content of our transference imaginings to be propositional. As we will see in section 5, it is possible to dissolve the puzzle of transference imagination without incurring the cost of revising this assumption. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Peter Goldie draws this distinction, and refers to the first type of imagining as an episode of 'in-his-shoes perspective-shifting', and to the second type of imagining as an episode of 'empathetic perspective-shifting' (Goldie 2011: 302). Goldie agrees that having the first type of imagining does not require having the second one. It is not clear, however, whether he accepts the reality of episodes of empathetic perspective-shifting. For discussion of Goldie's position, see (Langkau 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In (Reynolds 1989: 626). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Reynolds is concerned about this objection because he believes that it is impossible for one to have any of Napoleon's past visual experiences of Waterloo. And, as a result, the current proposal will not avoid the puzzle of transference imagination. But one may be concerned about this objection for a different reason. Suppose that imagining that one is Napoleon seeing Waterloo by having a mental image of the battlefield consists in imagining, from the inside, that Napoleon is seeing Waterloo. And suppose that, by having one's mental image of the battlefield, one imagines, from the inside, that Napoleon is seeing Waterloo because one's mental image represents one of Napoleon's past visual experiences of the battlefield. If this representation relation requires that one imagines oneself having that visual experience, then, whether or not it is possible for one to have the experience in question, the current proposal will collapse into the subjective view discussed in section 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In (Reynolds 1989: 627). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the correctness of my imagining is up to me. I am only suggesting that its content is up to me. Thus, I agree with Ludwig Wittgenstein's claim (1958: 39) that, when a person asserts that they imagine King's College on fire, it is not possible to question whether it is King's College, and not some other building, which they are really imagining. This includes a situation in which the person is completely wrong about what King's College looks like. However, in such a situation, I would argue that, even though the person imagines King's College on fire, they imagine it incorrectly. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For the purposes of this discussion, I will assume a possible-worlds conception of modality (Lewis 1986). Even though this conception of modality is not essential to the proposal about transference imagination to be put forward in section 5, it is helpful for framing that proposal. For an idea which is essential to that proposal is that the content of transference imaginings is counterfactual. And the possible-worlds framework offers a semantics for counterfactuals as well (Lewis 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It is tempting to read the counterfactual content that the view attributes to S, more simply, as follows: In the closest possible world in which S\* has P, S\*'s experience while having P is phenomenologically similar to S's actual experience while having i. One reason for avoiding this reading is that there could be scenarios in which the closest possible world in which S\* has P does not exist, and we may want to, nevertheless, accept the counterfactual 'If S\* had P, then having P would be, for S\*, like having i is actually for S' as true. It could turn out, for example, that there is an infinite series of worlds in which S\* has P, each one of which is closer to the actual world than the one before. As long as, in each of the worlds in the series, S\*'s experience while having P is phenomenologically similar to S's actual experience while having i, there seems to be no reason for rejecting the counterfactual. Likewise, it may turn out that all of the possible worlds in which S\* has P are equally close to the actual world. Provided that, in all of those worlds, S\*'s experience while having P is phenomenologically similar to S's actual experience while having i, there seems to be no reason for rejecting the counterfactual either. For discussion, see (Lewis 1973: 20). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. One reason for rejecting this thought is that it seems possible for a subject to imagine two different things by having, at different times and in conjunction with different imaginative projects, the very same mental image. Intuitively enough, one may imagine, for example, a suitcase by having some mental image, and one may also imagine a cat hiding behind a suitcase by having the very same mental image (Peacocke 1985: 19). There is a general agreement about this possibility in the literature (Kind 2001: 104), (Martin 2002: 403), (Kung 2010: 624). See, however, (Wiltsher 2016) for a dissenting view. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For a defence of this proposal about the sources of imaginative content, see [deleted]. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For discussion of how our imaginings can be incorrect in this type of scenario, see (Kind 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)