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Empathy and First Personal Imagining

RAE LANGTON

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UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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BIOGRAPHY

Rae Langton is Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge, and a Fellow of Newnham College. Born and raised in India, she studied Philosophy at Sydney and Princeton, and has taught philosophy in Australia, Scotland, the USA and England. She held professorships at Edinburgh 1999-2004 and at MIT 2004-2013. She works in moral and political philosophy, speech act theory, philosophy of law, the history of philosophy, metaphysics, and feminist philosophy. She is the author of *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves* (Oxford University Press, 1998), and *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification* (Oxford University Press, 2009). Her best known articles are 'Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts', 'Duty and Desolation', and 'Defining Intrinsic' (co-authored with David Lewis). She was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2013, to the British Academy in 2014, and to the Academia Europaea in 2017. She is one of five Cambridge faculty on *Prospect Magazine's* voted list of 50 'World Thinkers 2014', chosen for 'engaging most originally and profoundly with the central questions of the world today'. In 2015 she gave the John Locke Lectures, currently being finalised for publication. She plans to give the H.L.A.Hart Lecture in 2019.

EDITORIAL NOTE

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EMPATHY AND FIRST PERSONAL IMAGINING

RAE LANGTON

I. FIRST PERSONAL OTHER-IMAGININGS

‘EMPATHY’ CAN MEAN MANY THINGS, but Adam Smith’s description remains an eloquent starting point. If ‘our brother is upon the rack’,

it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. [...] By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels.¹

In what sense is empathy ‘first personal’? Smith describes a distinctive imagining which has several features which deserve the name. There is a vivid phenomenology, a quasi-perceptual acquaintance with my brother’s suffering. What makes it first personal, in this first sense, is that its content is ‘from the inside’: my brother feels *that* feeling, which I grasp in this qualitative way only from a first personal viewpoint.² To some degree, it enables me to imagine not only that he is suffering, but *what his suffering is like*.

Another aspect involves an imaginary self-projection: we ‘place ourselves in his situation’, so that in imagination, his situation is somehow *my* situation. What makes it first personal in this sense is the location of the indexical ‘I’, shifted somehow into my brother’s situation. In imagination, I self-ascribe the properties of being over there, in agony, on the rack; and this makes it what some philosophers have called a *de se* imagining. To some degree, it enables me to imagine *what I would feel, if I were in his place*.

1 Smith 1759 I.i.i

2 For ‘from-the-inside’ see e.g. Recanati 2007, and Ninan 2008, especially his chapter on ‘Imagination, Inside and Out’; also Ninan 2014, Vendler 1979. For helpful comments I am indebted to Richard Holton, Steve Yablo, Alex Byrne, Marie Guillot, and audiences at MIT, Institut Jean Nicod, and Cambridge, where early drafts of this material were presented.

A third aspect involves something stronger, an imaginary identification, when I not only ‘enter as it were into his body’, but even ‘become in some measure the same person with him’. What makes it first personal in this third sense is, again, the location of the indexical ‘I’, but this time shifted, somehow, into my brother *himself*, not only his situation. I identify with my brother, so that in imagination I become ‘in some measure the same person as him’. The self-ascription makes it a case of imagining *de se*, but what is self-ascribed is something more. And to some degree, this enables me to imagine *what I would feel, if I were he*.

The latter is what was meant all along, says Smith later on. The ‘imaginary change of situation’ was never supposed to be merely change of situation. It is—

not supposed to happen to me in my own person and character, but in that of the person with whom I sympathize. [...] I consider what I should suffer *if I was really you*, and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters.³

We can note that Smith calls this ‘sympathy’, but I follow recent usage in calling it ‘empathy’. And he curiously does not comment on the difference between *if I was to have your character*, and the perhaps more puzzling *if I was you*.

A first question, then, is how empathy is first personal. A second question is what empathy might tell us about the first personal. This too is an important question, which has perhaps received less attention. We’ll be exploring both questions here.

Our initial reflections suggest that empathy is first personal, because empathic imagining has a phenomenological ‘from the inside’ aspect, and an indexical *de se* aspect. There is a large literature on empathy in ethics, aesthetics, and philosophy of mind; and I would not be so foolish as to deny other conceptions of empathy, and other aspects to it. Here, though, our focus will be on these two aspects. Empathy involves a shift in phenomenology, as I take a ‘from the inside’ viewpoint, for example grasping in a vivid and qualitative way what it is like to suffer as my brother is suffering. And it involves a shift in self-location, as the indexical ‘I’ shifts into to my brother’s situation, or perhaps into my brother himself.⁴

³ Smith 1759 VII.iii.i, emphasis added.

⁴ I shall not adequately address the vast literature. The two kinds of indexical imagining resemble Goldie’s contrast between ‘in his shoes perspective shifting’, as when A imagines *being in B’s situation*; and ‘empathetic perspective shifting’, as when A imagines *being B in that situation*. See Goldie 2011, 305, and for helpful discussion Matravers 2017, 36. A further question is the relation of these to what Richard Wollheim calls ‘central imagining’, in which I imagine being the other person, and experiencing the world from

What, if anything, could empathy tell us about the first personal? In his influential work on attitudes *de se*, David Lewis draws our attention to distinctive ‘first personal’ knowledge that does not fit into ordinary third personal knowledge of the world. At one point he teasingly agrees with ‘mysterious’ philosophers, who say—

there is a kind of personal, subjective knowledge that we have or we seek, and it is altogether different from the impersonal, objective knowledge that science and scholarship can provide.⁵

He says he agrees with these ‘taunts’—at least, he agrees with them ‘in letter if not in spirit’. What is missing in the ‘impersonal, objective knowledge’ is indexical self-location, or knowledge *de se*, he says. A comprehensive grasp of the world which omits knowledge of where *I* fit in, is like a map without a *You Are Here* sign. He goes on to argue that *de se* knowledge can be understood as the self-ascription of a property, and that this can do far more work than anyone had envisaged. There is now a large literature on *de se* attitudes in philosophy of language and epistemology, and I would not be so foolhardy as to deny other conceptions of the *de se*, and other aspects to it. Nevertheless, I am probably not alone in speculating that work on the *de se* still misses something important about the first personal. I wish to add that attention to empathy can help us see this.

Our reflections on empathy already indicate how Lewis may be getting only ‘the letter’ but not ‘the spirit’ of the ‘personal and subjective’. He offers us one aspect of the ‘first personal’, in his account of attitudes *de se*; but he misses the other aspect of the first personal, the phenomenological view ‘from the inside’. I suspect that empathy may teach us something about how to catch the spirit, not just the letter, of the first personal, without being too ‘mysterious’.

Smith described an imaginative feat which can yield knowledge of other minds, shared fellow feeling, and moral concern for others. Is it the knowledge, the fellow feeling, or the moral concern, that belongs to the core of empathy? These questions are much debated, but let us take the epistemic role to be primary. At a first pass, empathy involves using our imagination to ‘adopt a different perspective’, to ‘grasp how things appear or feel from there’, as Derek Matravers puts it.⁶

their perspective. (Wollheim 1984 75-6, see also Abramson and Leite 2018)

⁵ Lewis 1979, 528. For Lewis the first personal ‘what it’s like’ character of experience is to be captured in terms of an ability, as his response to the so-called ‘Knowledge argument’ for qualia illustrates. I do not find this adequate, but that is beyond the scope of this essay.

⁶ Matravers 2017, 1. He speaks of using our imagination ‘as a tool’ to achieve these ends, but I wonder if that phrase is a too calculating and instrumental to fit the phenomenon.

The word ‘perspective’ is often used to describe this shift, but like the word ‘empathy’, it has several senses. One involves simply spatial orientation, whether or not ‘first personal’ in any sense. A certain content can be represented as *from here*, or *from there*, whether by a conscious mind, as in Smith’s example, or by in an inanimate architectural drawing. A shift in spatial perspective can indeed be part of empathy, for example the shift from *here* to *there* on the rack—an imagined shift in Lewis’s *You Are Here* sign, which was about spatial indexicality after all. But spatial perspective is not, I suspect, at the heart of our topic. Other meanings of ‘perspective’ are more clearly first personal, and they include both ideas we have been considering: a phenomenological view ‘from the inside’ with qualitative ‘what it’s like’ content; and also *de se* self-location. When we ‘adopt a different perspective’ to ‘grasp how things appear or feel from there’, we may be shifting ‘perspective’ in all of these ways; but if they are not the same, some terminological caution is advisable.

Empathy is in the first instance a kind of mind-reading, on this way of thinking, and we need not assume that shared feeling, or moral concern, are built into empathy itself. Skilled empathic mind readers may lack shared feeling, or moral concern: the doctor who grasps a patient’s anxiety without sharing it; the sadist who, with relish, grasps the exact contours of his victim’s fear.⁷

To say that ‘empathy’ is not, by definition, a matter of fellow feeling or moral concern is not to deny that it is a significant moral resource. On the contrary, empathy has a major role to play in moral reasoning, just as Smith said—notwithstanding its risks, partiality, fallibility, and limits.

Empathy is a major topic in the philosophy of mind, where a leading view unpacks it in terms of *simulation*.⁸ The basic approach is already there in Smith’s evocative description. To acquire knowledge of other minds, instead of working from a theory, I imaginatively put myself into the shoes of the other, and infer that it is for her how it would be for me, if I were in her shoes. In contemporary ‘simulation’ parlance, I discover how things are for the other person, by using my own cognitive mechanisms ‘off-line’.

7 For the doctor example, and argument that empathy need not involve ‘sharing’, see Abramson and Leite 2018; the sadist example draws on Goldie 2000, 215, and Matravers 2017, 106.

8 See e.g. Gordon 1995, Goldman 1995, Curry 1995, Heal 1998, Matravers 2017. Holton and Langton (1998) draw on simulation theory to interpret the work of R.M. Hare and Peter Singer, and to argue for the inadequacy of empathy for the ethics of non-human animals.

We shall have to neglect empathy as a topic in philosophy of mind, notwithstanding its interest and importance; but we shall return to empathy as a moral resource in Section 3. Our next step, in Section 2, is to look at empathy's closer cousins, since the shifts in perspective which Smith described occur in attitudes that involve, not our brothers, but ourselves.

2. FIRST PERSONAL SELF-IMAGININGS

The different notions of *de se* and 'from the inside' were introduced by philosophers aiming to understand, not empathy, but other 'first personal' and self-involving attitudes that seemed at risk of getting left out. Empathy will turn out, I think, to be a special case.

In this section the reader will, I hope, indulge me in a fictional melodrama whose point is to illustrate first personal imaginings of *de se* and 'from the inside' variety. You will be able to spot six different imaginings, numbered for your convenience, which have in common that *the imaginer imagines something about the imaginer*. All six could therefore in this loose sense be described as 'self-imaginings'. But they are not all 'first personal' in the senses under consideration. There will be two short chapters, with commentary on each of the imaginings.

Our story's first, and very short, chapter is from Zeno Vendler, who distinguishes two different feats of imagination.

On the Cliff: Chapter 1

Suppose that my friend and I are looking down upon the ocean from a cliff:

The water is rough and cold, yet there are some swimmers riding the waves. (*Case 1*) '*Just imagine swimming in that water*', says my friend, and I know what to do. 'Brr!' I say as I imagine the cold, the salty taste, the tug of the current, and so forth. Had he said (*Case 2*) '*Just imagine yourself swimming in that water*', I could comply in another way too: by picturing myself being tossed about, a scrawny body bobbing up and down in the foamy waste. In this case, I do not have to leave the cliff in imagination: I may see myself, if I so choose, from the very same perspective. Not so in the previous case: if I indeed imagine being in the water, then I may see the cliff above me, but not myself from it.⁹

⁹ Vendler 1979, 161, italics and numerals added. Vendler uses the labels 'subjective' and 'objective' for the contrast he wishes to draw, but this brings in complications I wish to avoid. See also Recanati 2007, 195-6, Ninan 2008 and 2014, McCarroll 2018.

Commentary on Chapter 1

Case 1. From the inside and de se. When I *imagine swimming in that water*, my imagining is first personal in both ways we are considering, I suggest. It is ‘from the inside’ imagining, and it is *de se* imagining.

To take these in turn, it is ‘from the inside’ imagining, because I vividly imagine the experience of swimming. This is what Vendler himself wishes to emphasize. The spatial perspective of the subject is down in the water, perhaps looking up at the cliff, and with this comes a phenomenological richness of content, as I imagine the cold, the salty taste, the tug of the current. Smith’s words for empathic imagining are entirely apt for this rather different case. I ‘enter as it were into his body’, I ‘form some idea of his sensations’, I ‘feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike’ what the subject would feel, and I ‘tremble and shudder at the thought’. The imagining captures, to some degree, what the swimming would be like, presented so vividly that I shiver, ‘Brr!’¹⁰

It is also *de se* imagining because I, in imagination, self-ascribe the property of swimming in the water. I represent myself, in imagination, as the one doing the swimming.

Thus understood, this imagining belongs to a wider genus of *de se* attitudes, initially introduced by philosophers to capture a first personal indexical knowledge otherwise unavailable. The man in the mirror’s pants are on fire—Oh, *my* pants are on fire! Some shopper has been leaking sugar everywhere—Oh, *I* have been leaking sugar everywhere! In John Perry’s story, an amnesiac in Stanford Library has vast knowledge of Rudolph Lingens acquired from a biography, but a discovery still awaits him—‘Oh, *I* am Lingens!’ Indexical *de se* attitudes are irreducible to other attitudes (*de dicto* or *de re*) that happen to be about oneself. When I have a *de se* attitude, I self-ascribe a certain property, said David Lewis.¹¹ Our topic here is *de se imagining*, an attitude Lewis deliberately left aside with the excuse that it is ‘ill-understood’. But I shall not apologize for stepping in where angels fear to tread.

10 See Walton (1990), Vendler (1979), Williams (1973), Recanati (2007), Ninan (2008 and 2014)

11 Kaplan 1989; Perry 1977; Lewis, 1979, ‘ill-understood’, 529. (Lingens was originally an example from Frege.) I shall not attempt to unpack the relevant ‘property’. Lewis’s proposal is usually interpreted in terms of ‘centered worlds’, but this is not necessary; and even if accepted, the self-ascription, and the property, are distinct elements (see Holton 2014 on Lewis’s primitive self-ascription). I also set aside Lewis’s proposal for making *all* attitudes *de se*.

This first example from Vendler is a case of indexical imagining *de se*. I do not ascribe the swimming to my friend, or to a subject who happens to be me, without my knowing it. I am, in imagination, straightforwardly self-ascribing the property of swimming.

Case 2. From the outside and de se. When my friend asks me to *imagine myself swimming in that water*, I can do what I did in the first place, or I can comply a different way, says Vendler. I picture myself being tossed about, a scrawny body bobbing up and down in the foamy waste. My imagining in this case is first personal in just one of the two ways we are considering. It is, once again, *de se* imagining, but it is not ‘from the inside’ imagining.

I imagine that I am swimming in the water, but I am not *imagining swimming* in the water. I am imagining from the outside, not from the inside, because I do not imagine the actual experience of swimming. This is what Vendler himself wishes to emphasize. The imaginer occupies two roles, one looking down at the water, the other as the one seen, swimming below. The phenomenological content is absent, and Smith’s words are not apt at all: I do not ‘enter as it were into his body’, I do not ‘tremble and shudder at the thought’. I do not imagine *what it is like* to be swimming.¹²

All the same, the imagining is first personal in one way: it is an indexical imagining *de se* because I, in imagination, self-ascribe the property of swimming in the water. I represent myself, in imagination, as the one doing the swimming.

Case 2 illustrates how imagination’s being ‘first personal’ in one way—the *de se* way—can go along with its being ‘third personal’ in another way—the ‘from the outside’ way.

Let us proceed now with the next chapter of our fiction, whose philosophical debts will be all too obvious.

On the Cliff: Chapter 2

My friend and I continue to gaze at the ocean from the cliff. Then he turns toward me. ‘You know that book you were reading back there in the library, about Rudolph Lingens?’, he says. ‘Well, guess what. Lingens will be swimming down there in a little while. Imagine that!’

12 The ‘*imagine that—*’ construction is especially open to a ‘from the outside’ reading, says Vendler. See also Velleman (1996), Recanati (2007), Ninan (2008). This kind of case is described by Ninan as ‘impersonal *de se*’ (2008). He admits that ‘*de se* imagining from the outside’ might be more natural, but won’t use that label because of complications involving imaginings that are from the inside, yet impersonal *de se*. I am sticking with the natural label.

(Case 3) ‘*Just imagine Lingens swimming in that water!*’ he says. So I imagine Lingens swimming in that water. I picture him far below, swimming with masterful strokes through the foamy waste. And I realize I can comply with my friend’s instruction a different way.

(Case 4) ‘*Just imagine Lingens swimming in that water!*’ This time I imagine *being in Lingens’ situation*, with his characteristics, swimming in that water: the cold, the salty taste, the tug of the current, my arms powerfully pulling against the waves. I feel admiration. ‘That Lingens! He’s a braver man than me.’ I also feel pity. The cold, the tug of the current. ‘Brr’, I say, ‘poor Lingens’. Then I wonder if I can comply with my friend’s instruction in yet a different way.

(Case 5) ‘*Just imagine Lingens swimming in that water!*’ This time I try to do something stronger. I imagine *being Lingens*, in that situation, with his characteristics, swimming in that water: the cold, the salty taste, the tug of the current, my arms powerfully pulling against the waves. I feel admiration. ‘That Lingens! He’s a braver man than me.’ I also feel pity. The cold, the tug of the current. ‘Brr’, I say, ‘poor Lingens’. I wonder to myself whether this feat of imagination is any different to the one I just performed.

I then turn to my friend and ask, ‘Where is Lingens, anyway?’ ‘Right here’, responds my friend, and I observe a new and strangely disturbing glint in his eye. I stare at him. The fog in my brain begins to lift. This ‘friend’ who so kindly accompanied me from the Stanford library, and invited me for a scenic ocean drive—might he be Leo Peter? —no friend at all, but arch-rival and nemesis of Lingens! And—*perhaps I am Lingens!*

(Case 6) ‘*Just imagine Lingens swimming in that water!*’ I can comply with the instruction a different way again. What if *I* am Lingens, and what if *I* will be swimming down there in a little while! I imagine *being Lingens* swimming in that water, in that situation, with his, that is *my*, characteristics: the cold, the salty taste, the tug of the current, my puny arms pulling feebly against the waves. I feel terror. I know this feat of imagination is wholly different to the one I performed a moment ago.

An evil chuckle from my ‘friend’ is enough to banish the fog entirely. The scales fall completely from my eyes. The truth comes to me in its full horror. The ‘friend’ who accompanied me from the library, and drove me to this cliff-side scene, is indeed Leo Peter! And—*I am Lingens.*

‘Oh no!’ I think. ‘*I* will be swimming down there in a little while. Imagine that!’ I find myself repeating, with a new urgency, my initial feats of imagination, this time in reverse order. (Case 2) *I imagine myself*

swimming in that water. I picture myself far below, being tossed about, a scrawny body bobbing up and down in the foamy waste. Then (*Case 1*) *I imagine swimming in that water.* ‘Brr!’ I say, as I imagine the cold, the salty taste, the tug of the current, my puny arms pulling feebly against the waves.

A brief thought occurs to me. ‘If only I were Lingens! Such a strong swimmer, and a braver man than me!’ Then, ‘Wait a minute—I *am* Lingens.’ I look back again at my ‘friend’—and see him reaching towards me, arms outstretched for the brutal shove that will send me over the brink and into the brine. One last split-second thought. ‘*Poor me!*’

Commentary on Chapter 2

Our story’s starting point was from Vendler, with subsequent melodrama inspired of course by Perry and Lewis, and it offers us six imaginings to think about. It turns out that in all of them, Lingens imagines something about Lingens. The four cases are therefore all ‘self-imaginings’, in a loose sense: they involve Lingens imagining something about someone who is, in fact, himself. But they are not all first personal.

Case 3. Neither from the inside, nor de se. I imagine Lingens swimming in that water. I picture him far below, swimming with masterful strokes through the foamy waste. As with *Case 2*, we have, again, a case of imagining ‘from the outside’, since the subject is looking down at the figure in the water, not experiencing the swimming. Lingens is, in imagination, seen below. He is seen as a strong, vigorous swimmer rather than a scrawny one, because the biography has portrayed him thus. There is minimal sensory vividness. I do not ‘enter as it were into his body’, and so on. The imagining exhibits the ‘from the outside’ phenomenology encountered in *Case 2*.

What then is the difference between *Cases 2* and *3*? Well, the swimmer is pictured as a strong swimmer rather than a puny one. But most importantly, he is represented as someone who is *not me*. He is Lingens and, so I believe, Lingens is not me. So the difference perhaps lies in the *de se* dimension. *Case 2* is *de se*, and *Case 3* is not.

It is going to turn out that Lingens *is* me. But that does not mean that I am, in Lewis’s sense, *self-ascribing* the properties that I imagine. On the contrary, I do not in imagination self-ascribe the swimming. I am, in imagination, ascribing the properties to Lingens, Lingens is in fact me, but I am not self-ascribing the properties. Despite the identity of the imaginer and the imagined, this is not a case of *de se* imagining.¹³

¹³ It is not *de se*, but I leave open whether it is *de dicto* or *de re*. ‘Lingens’ might,

Case 4. From the inside—but de se or not? I imagine *being in Lingens' situation*, with his characteristics, swimming in that water: the cold, the salty taste, the tug of the current, my arms powerfully pulling against the waves. This imagining is 'first personal', in the 'from the inside' way, with the vivid phenomenology that goes along with that. The imaginer is down there in the water, not on the cliff, and there is phenomenological richness: the cold, the taste of salt, the tug of the current. Smith's words for empathic imagining are entirely apt. I 'enter as it were into his body', I 'form some idea of his sensations', I 'feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike' what the subject would feel, and I 'tremble and shudder at the thought'. The imagining captures, to some degree, what the swimming *would be like* for the swimmer. 'Brr!'

So far, so similar to *Case 1*. So what is the difference between *Case 4* and *Case 1*? Well, *Case 4* involves the strong swimming of the hero of the biography, not the feeble paddling of the scrawny imaginer. But an important difference, as for *Case 3*, is that the swimmer is represented as someone who is *not me*. Does this mean I therefore do not, in imagination, *self-ascribe* these properties?

It is tempting to think *Case 4* is not first personal in the *de se* way. It is tempting to think I am, in imagination, ascribing the swimming to Lingens, not to me, and that I therefore do not, in imagination, self-ascribe it: that *Case 4* is from the inside, but not *de se*. To succumb to this temptation would also give us a certain taxonomic satisfaction. *Cases 1-4* would give us an array of all four distinct combinatorial possibilities. In each case, Lingens imagines Lingens swimming in the water. But in *Case 1*, the feat of imagination is *de se*, from the inside; in *Case 2* it is *de se*, from the outside; in *Case 3* it is not *de se*, and from the outside; and *Case 4* would be not *de se*, but from the inside. It would be nice to have all four combinatorial possibilities thus displayed.

But it would be wrong. Let us observe that, from the imaginer's viewpoint, *Case 4* is a case of *empathy*—precisely because the imaginer is representing the experience of *someone else* (so he thinks). The fact that Smith's words are entirely apt is no coincidence. *Case 4* is exactly what Smith is describing, or at least one of the things he is describing. In imagination, I place myself 'in his situation', I 'enter as it were into

depending on context, provide a *de re* connection. The example would then resemble Kaplan's mirror story. In that case we'd say that I, in imagination, ascribe to myself, via the name 'Lingens', the property of swimming in that water. I imagine *de re* of Lingens—that is, in fact, myself—that he is swimming. But I do not in imagination self-ascribe the property of swimming in that water (cf. Lewis 1979, 543) See Recanati for a different classification of cases like (3) as 'accidental *de se*'. These caveats will apply to case (4) also.

his body’, I ‘form some idea of his sensations’, I ‘feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike’ what the subject would feel, and I ‘tremble and shudder at the thought’. It enables me to imagine, to a degree, what I would feel in his place, and therefore what he feels in his place.

Empathy involves the self-ascription, in imagination, of certain properties. That is part of empathy’s point: to represent the experience of someone else via one’s own imaginative self-ascription of that experience, to the best of one’s knowledge and ability. It is not correct to say that I am, in imagination, ascribing the swimming to Lingens, and therefore *not* to myself. *Case 4* is a case of imagining *de se*. I know that I am not on the rack, and I am not swimming; but I use my *de se* imagining of the situation and characteristics of the man on the rack, or of the swimmer, to learn how things are for them. *Case 4*, I conclude, is an imagining that is both ‘from the inside’, and also *de se*.

Case 5. From the inside—and de se? This time I imagine *being Lingens*, in that situation, with his characteristics, swimming in that water: the cold, the salty taste, the tug of the current, my arms powerfully pulling against the waves. This again is an imagining ‘from the inside’, with all the phenomenological richness this brings.

Is it also a case of *de se* imagining? We can observe that it is again a case of empathy, this time Smith’s idea of empathy as imaginary identification. I not only ‘enter as it were into his body’, but even ‘become in some measure the same person with him’—or, as Smith puts it later on, I ‘consider what I should suffer if I was really you’. The location of the indexical ‘I’ is shifted, somehow, into my brother *himself*, not only his situation.

I shall suggest that in this imagining, I self-ascribe the property of being Lingens, as well as self-ascribing his situation and characteristics: the properties of swimming in the cold water, feeling the tug of the current, pulling against the waves with the powerful strokes of a strong swimmer. I imagine *de se* that I am Lingens, as well as imagining *de se* that I am swimming in the cold water, and so on. This kind of imagining has been dismissed as incoherent, but I don’t think it is, even if something very like it may be.

Bernard Williams said that when I imagine being someone else, say Napoleon, that has something in common with the tempting thought that *I could have been* someone else, say, Napoleon. The idea I could have been Napoleon is not the idea that someone with my empirical properties (philosopher, born in India, speaking in London) could have been Napoleon; nor that someone with my essential properties (DNA structure,

parentage) could have been Napoleon. But it is somehow the idea that 'I' could have been located elsewhere in the modal space of actual and possible beings: that *this* window on the world could have been looking out through Napoleon's eyes, that *this* locus of consciousness and agency could have been commanding the battle. But if the 'I' that is projected into Napoleon is devoid of its empirical and essential properties, what is it? Williams says it must be some kind of 'attenuated' self, a 'Cartesian' self, nothing more than a bare, but somehow modally mobile, self or point of view on the world.¹⁴

Lewis gives voice to something like this thought:

Here am I, there goes poor Fred; there but for the grace of God go I; how lucky I am to be me, not him. Where there is luck, there must be contingency. I am contemplating the possibility of my being poor Fred, and rejoicing that it is unrealized.¹⁵

The apparent contingency between the association of 'I' with the person is what enables imaginary feats of 'auto-alienation', as Mark Johnston has called the phenomenon. If only I were Britney Spears! If only I were the King of France! I could have been Napoleon! How lucky I am not to be Fred! My brother is there on the rack, and there but for the grace of God go I! Auto-alienation depends on a modal illusion of contingency, where there is none.

If the self I 'take with me' in the act of imagining is an 'attenuated' self, then there are, so to speak, three personae, says Williams: my ordinary self, complete with empirical and essential properties; an attenuated, Cartesian 'self' projected into Napoleon; and Napoleon. That makes no sense, according to Williams.

What could be the difference between the actual Napoleon and the imagined one? All I have to take to him in the imagined world is a Cartesian centre of consciousness; and that, the real Napoleon had already. Leibniz, perhaps, made something like this point when he said to one who expressed the wish that he were the King of China, that all he wanted was that he should cease to exist and there should be a King in China.¹⁶

Williams evicts the attenuated Cartesian self. There is just me, and Napoleon. When I imagine being Napoleon, there will be images of 'the desolation at Austerlitz as viewed by me vaguely aware of my cockaded hat, my hand in my tunic'.

14 Williams 1973, Johnston 2010.

15 Lewis 1983, 395

16 Williams, 1973, 42

What I am doing, in fantasy, is something like playing the rôle of Napoleon... In the description of this activity, only two people need figure: the real me and Napoleon. There is no place for a third item, the Cartesian ‘I’, regarding which I imagine that it might have belonged to Napoleon.¹⁷

There are only two personae. I do not somehow self-ascribe the properties of being Napoleon, being at Austerlitz, wearing a cockaded hat, and so on. This would suggest that when I imagine being Napoleon, or my brother, or Lingens, this is not a *de se* imagining after all.

François Recanati agrees, and calls such imaginings ‘quasi *de se*’, regarding them as a new, hitherto unrecognized class of attitudes. The imagined Napoleon, not the imaginer, is the one to whom the properties are ascribed. On this way of thinking, such imaginings have in common with *Case 1* that they are imaginings ‘from the inside’; but the properties are not in the ordinary way *de se*, since they are not self-ascribed. I do not, even in imagination, self-ascribe them. Recanati compares this to ‘quasi-memory’:

The properties that are imaginatively represented are not implicitly ascribed to the subject who imagines them, but to the person whose point of view she espouses. [...] The imaginer ‘sees’ the world vicariously, through the eyes of his imaginative target, just as the quasi-rememberer vicariously ‘remembers’ the experiences of another.¹⁸

In *Case 5* we are considering a form of empathy that involves imaginary self-identification. Does this involve some kind of ‘auto-alienation’, to use Johnston’s term? Does it depend on some kind of modal illusion? Perhaps—but I doubt it. I wish to pursue the idea the properties that represented *are* self-ascribed in imagination, contrary, it appears, to Recanati; *and* that this requires no modal illusion. *Case 5* is a case of *de se* imagining, just like *Case 4*, except that I also self-ascribe the property of *being Lingens*, as well as the properties of swimming strongly in the cold water, and the rest.

At issue here, perhaps, is our understanding of the notion of ‘self-ascription’ involved in *de se* attitudes. For Recanati, properties imaginatively self-ascribed are properties ‘ascribed to the subject who imagines them’; but perhaps, as Richard Holton says, there is a difference between these two.¹⁹ [This remains unfinished business.]

17 Williams, 1973, 44-45; see also Velleman 1996, Ninan 2014.

18 Recanati 2007: 21

19 Holton 2014 argues that ‘self-ascription’ is for Lewis a primitive notion, with peculiar consequences.

Case 6. From the inside, and de se. Now the imaginer complies with the instruction to imagine Lingens swimming in that water a wholly different way. He is entertaining the thought: what if *I* am Lingens, and what if *I* will be swimming down there in a little while!

I imagine *being Lingens* swimming in that water, in that situation, with his, that is *my*, characteristics: the cold, the salty taste, the tug of the current, my puny arms pulling feebly against the waves.

The imagining has vivid ‘from the inside’ phenomenology. And it is the most straightforward case of *de se* imagining in the whole series, so far. I in imagination self-ascribe the properties of being Lingens, and swimming in the water. *And* I in imagination ascribe to *my actual self* the properties of *being Lingens* and *swimming in that water*.

This latter feature, I suggest, is what sets it apart from *Case 5*. In that case of empathic self-identification, I likewise imagine being Lingens swimming in that water: that is to say, I self-ascribe the properties of being Lingens and swimming in the water. But in *Case 5* I do not, in imagination, ascribe to my actual self the properties of being Lingens and swimming in that water. This distinction again depends on how we unpack self-ascription.²⁰

In *Case 6*, there may be an interaction between the nature of the *de se* imagining, and the details of the ‘from the inside’ phenomenology. The urgency of the practical prospect makes the phenomenology of the imagining more shocking and vivid than before. Why is that? In *Surviving Death* Johnston describes the special jolt that hits me when I find out that *I*, and not just any Mark Johnston or Rae Langton, am about to be ambushed by thugs—or, as in this case, am about to be pushed over a cliff. (No doubt it would hit me with a similar jolt when I realise that *I*, and not the man in the mirror, am wearing the pants that are on fire.) *Case 6* is not empathy. But I wonder whether a fully empathic imaginer would be able to simulate that existential jolt, on behalf of his brother.

This completes our consideration of the six imaginings. All can be loosely described as ‘self-imaginings’, given that in each case the imaginer imagines something about the imaginer. Many, but not all, are first personal in the ‘from the inside’ way. Many, but not all, are first personal in the *de se* way. And some turn out to be empathic other-imaginings, of the kinds that Smith described.

Smith made empathy the foundation for his ethics, and it is time to turn, now, to the question of how empathy, thus understood, can be a moral resource.

20 Holton 2014.

3. EMPATHY IN ETHICS

How important is empathy to ethics? Many moral philosophers have followed Adam Smith in ascribing to it a vital role. R. M. Hare says that

a certain power of imagination and a readiness to use it is a...necessary ingredient in moral arguments.

The difficulty of fully representing to ourselves absent states of experience (our own or other people's) is one of the main obstacles to good moral thinking.²¹

A primary role for empathy is *epistemological*. Empathy is a kind of mind reading, and mind-reading is something that moral reasoning requires. Empathy has been thought to help us discover who is in the domain of moral salience in the first place.²² Having discovered that, empathy helps us learn how things are for others, so that we see better what matters to them, and are able to take their preferences, interests, or choices, into account. There is also, as Smith emphasized, a vital *motivational* role for empathy. Once we find out how things are for others, once it is made sufficiently vivid to us by first personal imagining, we may be better motivated to do something about it. For some, empathy also has a theoretical and *justificatory* role, and Hare has particularly grand ambitions in this regard:

I cannot know the extent and quality of others' sufferings and, in general, motivations and preferences without having equal motivations with regard to what should happen to me, were I in their places, with their motivations and preferences.²³

First personal imaginings provide, he thinks, a vital bridge to what he called 'actual-for-possible' desires, whose fulfillment is supposed to at once honour Kantian universalizability, and at the same time provide just what utilitarians hope for.

We should not oversell these roles. Empathy is indeed a moral resource, but as has been observed by many, including Smith himself, empathy is partial and subject to many pathologies. The bounds of ethics far outstrip the bounds of empathy, since they far outstrip the bounds of what we can first personally imagine.

21 Hare 1963, 94, 1998, 217. See also Bernard Williams, Peter Singer, Michael Smith, for whom imagination is crucial and full rationality includes 'full imaginative acquaintance' with relevant facts.

22 Hare 1963, 1981, and see for criticism Holton and Langton 1998.

23 Hare 1981, 99

Our first question was about how empathy is itself may be first personal. We can refine that question to ask: which aspects of ‘first personal’ imagining enable empathy to do its job in ethics?

One answer is that the phenomenological, ‘from the inside’, perspective is helpful, even if not essential. Over and over again, Hare demands that we imagine *what it is like* for the other individual:

We can utter the words ‘I shall be desiring not to be whipped’; but we shall not really be *thinking what it would be like* unless there is a desire of equal intensity in our present experience, namely the desire not to be being whipped if we are in that situation.²⁴

Hare invokes Smith’s first kind of empathy. Putting yourself in the place of the other requires vivid imaginative acquaintance with ‘that situation’, what that place is like. In *Moral Thinking* Hare asks, ‘What exactly is it that we have to know?’ He answers, ‘*What it is like* to be [that person] in that situation’. He contrasts this with a more theoretical knowledge that is insufficient:

I have to know what it will be *like* for [the person]. We shall have to keep carefully in mind the distinction between knowing that something is happening to someone, and knowing *what it is like for him*. It is the latter kind of knowledge which, I am proposing, we should treat as relevant, and as required for the full information which rationality in making moral judgements demands.²⁵

Imagination must convey ‘what it is like’ for the other in a stronger sense which seems to invoke Smith’s second kind of empathy: what it is like to be *the other person*, in that situation.

He [individual *B*] must be prepared to give weight to *A*’s inclinations as if they were his own. This is what turns selfish prudential reasoning into moral reasoning. It is much easier, psychologically, for *B* to do this if he is actually placed in a situation like *A*’s *vis-à-vis* somebody else; but this is not necessary provided that he has sufficient imagination to envisage *what it is like to be A*.²⁶

We need not go as far as Hare in his ambitions about first personal imagining as a route to utilitarianism. But we can agree that what is helpful, even if not always needed, is imagining from the inside, with full phenomenological vividness. Imagining ‘from the outside’ may do some good, insofar as it simulates perception of the other, but ‘from the inside’

24 Hare 1988, 216-7

25 Hare 1981, 91-2

26 Hare 1963, 94

will often do better. First personal empathic imagining ‘from the inside’, when successful, can bring to awareness the distinctive perspective of the imagined person, and the distinctive phenomenology of their experience.²⁷

Empathic imagining is also first personal in a different sense, or so I have argued. It is a *de se* attitude, which involves the imaginative self-ascription of the situations, characteristics, and perhaps even identities of others. Does empathy’s *de se* aspect, too, help empathy with its job-description in ethics? I think it does.

Adam Smith saw that it is when I self-ascribe, in imagination, the situation, the characteristics, and perhaps even the identity of my brother on the rack, this sometimes enables me to know something about what it is like for my brother I would not be able to know otherwise.

Our fictional melodrama showed that first personal *de se* imaginings do not always achieve this. Not all *de se* imaginings are accompanied by ‘from the inside’ representation of what it’s like, either for myself or for others. I can imagine *de se* and *from the outside* what is going on, either for myself or others: I can insert myself into the imaginings without representing what the experiences are like. Such imaginings *de se* but *from the outside* are unlikely to be so helpful to ethics, at any rate on Smith’s assumptions. But on the other hand, every case of imagining ‘from the inside’ turns out—or so I have argued—to be also a case of *de se* imagining. This suggests that empathy’s *de se* aspect is important to its role in ethics.

Two further observations may bear on this question, which I mention in speculative spirit. First, according to Hare, when I am imagining what it is like for another being, in their situation, there is a connection between what I attribute to them, and what I attribute to myself. Imagining what it is like for the horse involves imagining what the horse would desire in that situation, namely not to be whipped. And I am not adequately doing this, he says, unless I have an actual desire of my own: an actual-for-possible desire not to be whipped if I were in that situation.²⁸ How this relates to Smith’s picture of empathy is a question that deserves attention; but I wonder if Hare assumes here an imaginative *de se* self-ascription of the horse’s situation.

Second, the very permeability between what I imagine, and what I go on to feel and do, may itself be a sign of *de se* self-ascription, in

27 This, perhaps, is one reason why first-personal narratives can have such moral and political significance; and why the cultural exclusion or absence of such narratives involve a kind of objectification, which fails to do justice to the experience of the other.

28 Or, if I were the horse! For discussion of Hare’s examples, which include empathizing with fish and rocks, see Holton and Langton 1998.

imagination, of the properties in question. This permeability has its good side, and is part of empathy's point. When I self-ascribe, in imagination, the properties of my brother on the rack, I 'bring them home', as Smith says, in a way that helps motivate me to do something about it. In this case there is a good leakage from the, in imagination self-ascribed, property to my actual self, in the transformation of motivation. This permeability has disadvantages too: bad leakage from the, in imagination self-ascribed, properties back to my real self. Vicious properties of a character imagined *de se*, in a first personal way, may leak back into the imaginer. Susan Hurley discusses the dangers of imaginative imitation: 'We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be'.²⁹ There can be bad leakage in the other direction, from the real self to an imagined one: I arrogantly self-ascribe too many properties of my own, in trying to self-ascribe the situation and characteristics of my brother. Such pseudo-empathy, an over-ready projection of one's own properties, can be epistemically and morally disastrous.³⁰ But the permeability itself, whether for good or ill, may be a sign of *de se* empathic imagination.

Turning, in conclusion, to the second question we raised at the outset: what can empathy tell us about the first personal more generally? In Section 3 we have seen that empathy has a particular job-description in ethics. Part of its job is to tell us first personal, 'from the inside', facts about other people, to help us understand how things are for them, and what we should do about it. This part of its job-description is neglected in a major province of philosophy of language and epistemology, whose whole purpose is, supposedly, to account for certain first personal attitudes.

Does that matter? I think it does. Some philosophical accounts of our attitudes give no space for the 'from the inside' dimension to our first personal imaginings. This is illustrated by Lewis himself, notwithstanding his brilliant account of a 'personal, subjective knowledge that...is altogether different from the impersonal, objective knowledge that science and scholarship can provide'. The knowledge he describes may be *de se* knowledge, which is indeed a kind of first personal knowledge. It is not, however, knowledge 'from the inside', with the phenomenological richness and colour that enables me to see what it is like for my brother.

If these concluding reflections are on the right track, it is the latter that empathy needs most of all, to fulfil its job-description in ethics. And if that is so, then no matter what other 'first personal' attitudes are pinned down and captured with formal precision, there is something still left out: the very 'first personal' imaginings, from the inside, that are vital for

29 Hurley 2004, cf. Currie 1995.

30 See Langton 2004, 2010 for more on pseudo-empathy.

knowledge of our fellow creatures, and of what we owe them. More is needed than is dreamt of in that philosophy, if we are to ‘bring home’ to ourselves what matters in the lives of others.

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