

Imagination and Experience

Philosophical Explorations

Edited by **Íngrid Vendrell Ferran**
and **Christiana Werner**

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Julien Bugnon and Martine Nida-Rümelin

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15.1 Tim and Tom

Tim and Tom are monozygotic twins. In their family, monozygotic twins have been common for generations. For reasons that need not interest us here, the parents of the twins were originally hoping to have only one more child. The mother could have taken a drug that prevents the early agglomeration of cells from splitting and developing into monozygotic twins. She seriously considered that option. Ultimately, she decided against taking the drug – Tim and Tom were born.¹

Decades later, Tim and Tom learn that their mother had been close to taking the anti-twin drug. They now sometimes wonder: who would have been born had their mother decided otherwise? Perhaps Tim would have been born, while Tom would never have come into existence. Perhaps the single child would have been Tom. Or perhaps a different human being, genetically just like Tim and Tom, would have been born instead.

We will not be interested here in the issue as to whether Tim would have been born, or Tom, or none of the two. We will not be interested either in the issue as to whether there is any way to decide who would have come into existence. Nor will we discuss the claim that additional information would be required to form a rational opinion on the matter. Our interest here will solely concern the nature of our *understanding* or *conceiving* of the three possibilities and of the differences between them. We will argue that it is part of human cognitive architecture that we all have, at least upon some reflection, a clear understanding of the differences between the three options at issue:

- P1: Tim is born as the single child.
- P2: Tom is born as the single child.
- P3: The single child is neither Tim nor Tom.

One should not conflate our capacity to understand (conceptualise) these three possibilities and the differences between them with our capacity to imagine them. There are, however, intriguing relations between these two capacities, as well as between one's respective exercises of each capacity. In the present chapter, we investigate both types of relations – we carry out a parallel investigation into the capacities to think in terms of phenomenal concepts and to engage in corresponding acts of imagination in another contribution to this volume.² In Section 15.4, we examine in greater detail the imaginative capacity relevant to cases such as that of Tim and Tom – that is, cases concerning the identity of conscious subjects. The next two sections, Sections 15.2 and 15.3, examine the conceptual capacity involved in understanding what would have to be the case for the three respective options P1, P2, and P3 to be realised.

Thoughts about the identity of conscious subjects by (what we will call) *taking perspective* constitute an instance of a more general kind of thoughts we call *thoughts with for-a-subject content*. Thoughts with for-a-subject content are thoughts that, if they are true, are true in virtue of there being something it is like for some subject to instantiate some experiential property (properties such that there is something it is like to have them).³ However, the suggestion that thoughts about identity belong to that kind will be more controversial and less obvious than in the case of thoughts in terms of phenomenal concepts. To see that such thoughts have for-a-subject content requires some deeper analysis of what is going on when an epistemic subject considers various possibilities concerning her own identity and the identity of others. We shall use the story of Tim and Tom to bring to the surface the relevant conceptual features.

Our pervasive awareness of others as experiencing subjects is manifest in the way we think about and conceive of identity across time and possible worlds concerning ourselves and other human and non-human individuals we take to be conscious. Such thoughts are omnipresent in our everyday life. When you meet an old friend, for instance, you think of that person as being identical to the person you befriended at some point in the past. Or when you think about what could have happened to your friend had she taken other decisions in her professional life, you think about counterfactual circumstances containing an individual who is identical with your friend. If our suggestions concerning how we naturally understand identity of conscious subjects across time and possible worlds are correct, then such familiar everyday thoughts are instances of thoughts with for-a-subject content.⁴

To think in terms of phenomenal concepts about the experiential properties of others and to think by taking perspectives about the identity of conscious subjects across time and possible worlds are ways of thinking in a *subject-presupposing* manner. In having these thoughts, we presuppose

that they are about a genuine other, a conscious subject, an individual with an “inner perspective,” a “centre of their own world” so to speak. Therefore, what follows is a further contribution, together with our other chapter in this volume, to drawing attention to that deeply embedded pre-supposition in the way we think about ourselves and other subjects.

15.2 First-personal counterfactual thought

Anybody who considers the story of Tim and Tom from the outside will be able to understand that the three options P1, P2, and P3 are indeed distinct and will be able to understand the differences between them, or so we suggest. This is the third-personal case, to which we shall come back in a moment. Let us start, however, by considering the first-personal case and by reflecting on the following issue: how does Tim himself understand the difference between the case in which he, Tim, is the single child (P1) and those cases (P2 and P3) in which someone else comes into existence instead?

Here is a way to formulate the answer we would like to propose. Tim succeeds in conceptualising the subcase in which *he* is that boy by thinking of it as involving that *he*, Tim, lives that boy’s life and that hence it is *he*, Tim, who has that boy’s experiential properties. More precisely, Tim thinks of that subcase as follows: for any instantiation of an experiential property by that boy, it is like something *for him*, Tim to be involved in that instantiation. Tim conceptualises that subcase by thinking of it as involving that *he himself*, Tim, lives the boy’s whole life “from the inside.” “If that boy suffers, then it is me who suffers; if that boy enjoys the view of an ocean, then it is me for whom it is like something to enjoy that view.” These are the thoughts involved when Tim conceives of possibility P1, the counterfactual situation in which it is he, Tim, who lives the boy’s life.

When Tim considers in a similar manner P2 and P3, then it will be evident to him that they are different from P1 in an important respect. If these other options were realised, then *he*, Tim, would *not* live that boy’s life from the inside. If the boy suffers, then he would not be the one for whom there is a way it is like to undergo that suffering. That suffering would be, so to speak, like nothing for him. He would have no first-personal access to that event of suffering. The same observation would apply to the boy’s happy moments. “I would not be the one for whom it is like something to see the beauty of the ocean when that boy enjoys seeing it.” This is how Tim can put the point.

Let us introduce a useful term for the way in which Tim conceives of the difference between P1 and the other options. He conceives of the difference *by taking perspectives*. He thinks of P1 by thinking of what its realisation involves *for him*, Tim himself, as opposed to what P2 and P3 involve *for*

him, Tim himself. Metaphorically speaking, we may say that Tim conceptualises P1 as involving that the boy's "perspective" is "*his* perspective," and P2 and P3 as involving that the boy's "perspective" is "not his own perspective."

By thinking of the difference between P1 and the other two options in that manner, Tim has a substantial understanding of the difference between them. He will be under the impression that he understands or cognitively grasps what that difference consists in. Certainly, he would insist, if anyone would put it into doubt, that the difference is genuine and real. In other words, he would insist on the following claim: the descriptions given earlier (as descriptions of P1, P2, and P3) are not just different descriptions of one and the same counterfactual course of events. Rather, they describe distinct possibilities.

This is at least how things appear from the first-person perspective. Our claim is this: when Tim (or anybody else in a similar situation) thinks about the three subcases in the described first-personal manner, that is by taking perspectives, then he cannot help but be under the impression that these three options are genuinely distinct and that – by thinking about them in that manner – he is capable of grasping what the relevant difference amounts to.

The claim that by taking perspectives one has a clear grasp of a genuine difference between the three options under consideration may appear obvious. We hope it does so to the reader; however, the claim is explicitly denied by Parfit and philosophers endorsing his view about personal identity. They will object that the impression of grasping a genuine difference here is a cognitive illusion. They may well concede (and Parfit probably would have conceded) that by taking perspectives one *seems* to grasp a real difference between the subcases under consideration.⁵ But they will add that this seeming is misleading: there is no such difference, they will say. The question about who would be the single child is, in Parfit's sense, an empty question. Empty questions do not have a uniquely determined correct answer; we may answer them arbitrarily without risking getting things wrong.

We shall not be concerned with ontology here, and we mention the Parfitian reply only to put it aside. We shall not argue that the way we conceive of counterfactual situations when we think of them by taking perspectives gives us access to genuine ontological differences (as it appears to be when one engages in such thoughts). Our purpose in this chapter is to describe conceptual tools and their relation to imagination, hence, we need not worry about related issues concerning the ontology of identity across time and possible worlds. (We do in fact believe that the Parfitian reply is wrong and that taking perspectives provides access to genuine differences, but we shall leave that issue aside for the present discussion.⁶)

15.3 Counterfactual thoughts and the relation of belongingness

Let us dig a little deeper and describe in greater detail the structure of Tim's thought when he conceives of himself as being (or not being) the single child in the counterfactual situation. When he conceptualises option P1, he thinks of the single child's experiences as being *his*, he thinks of them as *belonging to him*, Tim. Furthermore, he applies a certain understanding of what it is for experiences to belong to him. Namely, that experiences belong to him is, according to that understanding, that they are such that it is like something for *him*, Tim, to undergo them.

Let us call the relation between a token experience and a subject to whom the experience belongs the relation of *belongingness*. We can now say that in his conception of P1, Tim applies a certain understanding of belongingness. According to that understanding, that an experience belongs to a subject S is for it to be such that there is a way it is like for S to undergo it. Let us call that understanding of belongingness the *conception of belongingness by taking perspectives*.⁷

When the thinker and the one existing in the counterfactual situation considered are identical, then the thinker's conception of the counterfactual situation is a subcase of conceptions by taking perspectives: he or she thinks of all experiences of the subject existing in the circumstances under consideration as belonging to *her* (or *him*), that is as being such that it is like something for her (him) to undergo them.

However, it is important to note that conceptions by taking perspectives of counterfactual situations as containing a conscious subject S and conceptions of experiences as belonging to a given subject S are not restricted to the special case where the thinker is the subject S concerned. This is why it would be to some extent misleading to call such conceptions "first-personal." Conceptions by taking perspectives are applicable in thoughts about oneself *and* in thoughts about others. We understand how the world would have to be for it to be the case that *another* subject (picked out in the real world) exists or, which amounts to the same, we understand how a considered counterfactual situation would have to be for it to be the case that *another* subject (picked out in the real world) is identical to a conscious subject assumed to exist in the counterfactual situation at issue. Such understanding by taking perspectives does not involve thinking of oneself as being the subject concerned. It involves, as it should, thinking of *someone else* as being the subject concerned.

The story of Tim and Tom may be used again to illustrate the point just made. Tim conceives of P2 by thinking of it as being such that there is a way it is like *for Tom* to have the single child's experiences. He has no trouble understanding in that manner what makes the counterfactual situation one in which that single child is Tom. Note that it does not appear to

be more difficult for Tim to conceive of P2 than it is for him to conceive of P1. A parallel observation applies to any human thinker, or so we suggest.

To summarise, the picture we propose then is this: we all (implicitly) have a conception by taking perspectives of belongingness – of the relation between a token experience and a subject *S* when the former belongs to the latter – that we are capable to apply to any subject *S* independently of who it is. In any application of that concept of belongingness, we pick out a certain subject *S* in the real world and think of *it*, *that* real subject, as being such that it is like something for it to have the experience considered. The subject *S* can be picked out in different manners, in an act of reference to someone one knows (to a friend, for instance, one is acquainted with) or by an act of self-reference. The first-person case and the third-person case are different *only* with respect to that act of reference. They do not differ with respect to the other conceptual ingredient: the thinker's understanding of what it is for an experience to belong to a subject.

15.4 Imagining counterfactual situations by taking perspectives

When Tim and Tom talk about who would have been the single child had their mother taken the drug, then they think about P1, P2, and P3. Thinking requires concepts. They use, or so we assume, in their thought and in their communication about P1, P2, and P3 the conception by taking perspectives of these options (the conception characterised in the previous sections). They might at some point stop wondering about which possibility would have occurred. Perhaps they then continue to simply *imagine* the three options one after the other from time to time.

In a calm moment, Tim might find himself imagining the counterfactual situation in which he would have been the single child. That imaginative enterprise will perhaps create gratitude for his brother's existence. Tim might switch, in imagination, to the other situation, the one where Tom is the single child and he, Tim, never discovered the world. That imaginative enterprise will perhaps create a feeling of absurdity related to his own actual existence. Similar feelings might be created in Tim or in Tom when they imagine the third counterfactual situation where the single child is neither of them.⁸

We assume that such imaginative activities are indeed possible. Switching between P1 and P2, Tim first imagines undergoing all the experiences of the single child and then imagines a situation where he, Tim, does not undergo any of them. Switching between P1 and P2 in imagination, Tim may become acutely aware of the difference between leading a rich life and leading none at all. In his imagination of P1, Tim imagines the situation as being such that it is like something for him, Tim, to instantiate the single child's experiential properties. In his imagination of P2, Tim imagines the

situation as being such that it is like nothing at all for him, Tim, to have those properties (since it is not him, but someone else, who instantiates them). Let us call imaginations which include imagining that there is a way it is like for a given subject S to have experiential properties (to undergo token experiences) *imaginations by taking perspectives*.

The example involving Tim and Tom will make it clear that imagination by taking perspectives is not restricted at all to cases where the subject concerned is the imagining person herself. Tim can switch in imagination between P2 and P3 as well. When Tim switches in imagination between P1 and P2, then he will be clearly aware of them as being distinct. The same applies to Tim's imaginative switch between P2 and P3. Imagining P2, Tim imagines the situation as being such that for any instantiation of an experiential property the single child has in the counterfactual situation it is indeed Tom for whom it is like something to be involved in that instantiation. And he imagines P3 as being such that Tom does not exist, at least not as that single child. In that situation (as imagined by Tim), Tom has no first-personal access at all to the single child's experiential life, it is nothing at all for Tom to undergo that child's experiences since these experiences belong to someone else. Switching in imagination between P2 and P3, Tim will of course have the impression of a crucial difference between the two. He will be under the impression of imagining situations that are genuinely distinct.

An interesting point about imagination by taking perspectives is that it gives access (or at least seems to give access) to non-qualitative or non-descriptive differences. Look again at P1, P2, and P3. No difference exists in the single child's properties between them, or so we assume. The only difference between them concerns the issue of who that child is (with whom, in the real world, that child is identical if with anyone at all). By taking perspectives we can easily imagine P1, P2, and P3 in turn and thereby realise that they are genuinely distinct.

Again, we must recall that the present chapter is not about ontology. We would like to limit our discussion to features of thought and imagination. Hence, we should put the point more cautiously: by taking perspectives we can easily imagine P1, P2, and P3 and, in that imaginative act, we will be *under the impression* that the three are genuinely distinct. It is, after all, a genuine difference between possible courses of events if they are distinct with respect to *who* experiences what.

We are not making here the controversial assumption that there are indeed genuinely distinct possibilities that differ *only* with respect to the identity of a subject picked out by description (in a way leaving its identity open). Our capacity to imagine or to apparently imagine such possibilities does not suffice to justify that controversial claim. Our claim about imagination, however, should be less controversial and phenomenologically

quite evident: we have the capacity to imagine P1, P2, and P3 as genuinely distinct *without* thereby introducing, *in our imagination of them*, any qualitative or descriptive difference between them. For instance, Tim can imagine P1 and P2 and be aware, in that imagination, of them as being genuinely distinct, without assuming that in P1 the single child resembles Tim more than it resembles Tom (while in P2 the opposite is the case). No such difference in resemblance enters the imaginative content. And yet, without any such difference, Tim is aware (or apparently aware) of P1 and P2 as distinct courses of events. In general, by taking perspectives in one's imagination one appears to have access to non-descriptive differences concerning only the identity of subjects involved in the imagined situations.

Moreover, imagination by taking perspectives concerning the identity of a subject in a counterfactual situation is also non-qualitative. In order to imagine P1 as being such that he, Tim, is the one for whom it is like something to instantiate the single child's experiential properties, Tim need not imagine any concrete experiential property as instantiated by that child. No qualitative imagination in the sense of imagining having an experiential property in terms of what it is like to have it is required.⁹ Tim need not imagine that child as suffering a particular pain or as undergoing a specific joy in order to be able to imagine P1. Tim can imagine P1 by imagining the single child's experiences as belonging to him, Tim, that is as being such that there is a way it is like for him to undergo them, *without thereby imagining any particular way it is like to have them*. The same observation applies to Tim's imagination of P2. The imaginative content is thus, in a sense, surprisingly abstract. P2, for instance, is imagined by Tim by imagining it being such that any instantiation of any experiential property by the single child (no matter which experiential property it is) is such that there is a way it is like *for Tom* to be involved in it.

Earlier we observed that thoughts by taking perspectives about a subject's existence in counterfactual circumstances involve (a) an act of reference to a real subject, which can be the thinker or someone else, and (b) an application of one's general understanding of the relation of belongingness between experiences and subjects. The first-personal and the third-personal cases, we said, are distinct only with respect to (a). A similar observation, or so we suggest, applies to imagination. When Tim imagines P1 by taking perspectives, he (a) refers to himself and (b) uses his imaginative capacities to imagine the subject so referred to to be the one undergoing the single child's experiences. When Tim imagines P2 by taking perspectives then he (a) refers to his brother Tom and (b) uses his imaginative capacities to imagine the subject so referred to to be the one undergoing the single child's experiences.

The difference lies in the respective imaginative ingredient (a). It does not lie in the respective imaginative ingredient (b). The first ingredient is a

manifestation of the thinker's capacity to pick out the individual concerned by the imagined situation in the act of imagination. The second ingredient is a manifestation of the thinker's capacity to imagine experiences as belonging to a given subject (the one picked out, whoever it is) in the first ingredient. The thinker's way of imagining belongingness in (b) does not change, or so we claim, with a change in the subject picked out in (a). The imagined content, however, changes with changes with respect to (a). Which situation Tim imagines depends on who is imaginatively picked out in (a). P1 is the content if in step (a) Tim engages in an act of self-reference and P2 is the content of the imaginative act if in step (a) Tim refers to his brother.¹⁰

15.5 Conceiving and imagining by taking perspectives

In order to be able to imagine P2 (as opposed to P1 and P3) Tim must have understood what distinguishes P2 from the other two options. The parallel remark applies to P2 and to P3. To understand what is distinctive for each of these three possibilities (as opposed to the others), Tim must conceive of them by taking perspectives. It follows that Tim's *capacity to imagine* the three counterfactual situations at issue depends on his *conceptual capacity* to conceive of counterfactual cases by taking perspectives. We conclude that the capacity to imagine a counterfactual situation as containing a real conscious individual (as being such that one of the subjects existing in the counterfactual situation is *identical* to a subject existing in the real world) presupposes and relies on the capacity to conceive of such counterfactual situations by taking perspectives. When Tim engages in that imaginative activity, he uses his corresponding *understanding* of the imagined situations, he uses the specific conception of these situations which he has previously acquired, the conception by taking perspectives.

To simplify exposition, we will – in this section – use the terms “imagining” or “imagination” and “conceiving” or “conception” with the specification “by taking perspectives” only for the kind of content presently under consideration and illustrated by the case of Tim and Tom: imagining or conceiving counterfactual situations as containing (or not containing) a given conscious subject existing in the real world. We have argued so far that (a) the capacity to *imagine* by taking perspectives presupposes the capacity to *conceive* by taking perspectives and that (b) any exercise of the former capacity requires or involves exercising the latter. The second observation is justified by the insight that Tim's imagining by taking perspectives requires that he uses, in that mental activity, his understanding of what characterises the counterfactual situation at issue. The first claim, (a), follows from (b).

What about the opposite direction? Does the capacity to conceive by taking perspectives presuppose the capacity to imagine by taking perspectives?

And does every act of conceiving by taking perspectives require or involve an act of imagining by taking perspectives?

We propose a negative reply to the second question. When Tim considers the issue about whether he would have been born or rather his brother Tom had the mother taken the drug then he uses his capacity to conceive of these different situations by taking perspectives. But there seems no reason to suppose that whenever he entertains such thoughts he must also engage in imagining the relevant situations. Having understood their specificity suffices for the capacity to think about them. No additional imaginative engagement is required for the capacity to reason about which of these situations, if any, would have occurred. The case is analogous to the one of phenomenal concepts. One can use a phenomenal concept of pain in one's thoughts about another subject without using one's capacity to imagine being in pain.

We propose a positive reply or something close to a positive reply to the first question. Perhaps talking of "presupposition" is not quite right here. Rather one should say that having the capacity to conceive by taking perspectives *requires* having the capacity to imagine by taking perspectives. Indeed, what would it be for someone to have the capacity to conceive by taking perspectives without the capacity to imagine by taking perspectives? Can we make sense of the assumption that Tim is able to conceive of P2 by taking perspective (the option that Tom is the single child) if he cannot, even if he tries, *imagine* that situation as being such that there is something it is like for Tom to undergo that child's experiences? We suggest that one cannot quite make sense of that supposed mental condition. For that reason, one should, or so we suggest, require for the attribution of the former (the conceptual) capacity that the latter (the imaginative) capacity is present as well. The idea is that the conceptual capacity by taking perspectives manifests itself in the imaginative capacity by taking perspectives – and that this is not only normally or typically the case, but necessarily so. That is to say that the situation here is disanalogous to the situation of imagination and thoughts in terms of phenomenal concepts we examine in our other contribution to this volume.¹¹ There we argue that possessing a phenomenal concept of a given experiential property EP only normally or typically implies having the capacity to imagine what it is like to have EP, but not necessarily so, as there are exceptions.

At this point, a worry may arise. If it is true that the two capacities – conceiving and imagining by taking perspectives – presuppose each other, then how could a thinker ever acquire any of them? It may seem to follow from what we said that in order to acquire the capacity to imagine the counterfactual situations at issue by taking perspectives the thinker already needs the capacity to conceive of them and that, on the other hand, the thinker cannot have that conceptual capacity without already having the

imaginative capacity. But if the acquisition of each of the two capacities requires or necessitates having acquired the other of the two then no formation of any of them can get off the ground.

We suggest the following reply to that worry. It follows from what we said that having one of the two capacities requires or necessitates having the other. It does not follow, however, that in the process of forming one of them, the other must already be established. Rather, or so we suggest, the formation of the two capacities should be thought of as going hand in hand. They develop together and their acquisition is accomplished simultaneously.

Here is the picture we propose. One forms one's understanding (by taking perspectives) of what it is for a conscious subject to exist in counterfactual circumstances by imagining counterfactual circumstances in which there is a way it is like for the real conscious subject under consideration to undergo experiences; and one forms one's capacity to imagine counterfactual situations as containing a given real conscious subject by forming one's understanding of what these situations characterises: that there is a way it is like for the subject concerned to undergo experiences. There is no vicious circle involved in the assumption that conceptual clarity and imaginative salience – both until the point of having acquired the relevant capacity – develop in parallel and support each other.

A more fundamental worry concerning the connections we propose between conceptualising by taking perspectives and imagining by taking perspectives consists in casting doubt on the difference between them. When Tim conceives of a situation in which the mother gives birth to only one child as being such that the single child is identical to Tom, then what he does is simply imagine the situation as being such that there is a way it is like for Tom to undergo that child's experiences. In general, so the worry may be put, with respect to one and the same counterfactual situation, to conceive of it as containing a given real subject by taking perspectives and to imagine it as containing that subject by taking perspectives is one and the same mental activity.

We concede that the difference is subtle and easy to overlook. But we insist that the two mental activities are not the same. A starting point for justifying the claim that we are dealing with two distinct mental phenomena is to observe that imagination by taking perspectives typically occurs in isolation while conceiving by taking perspectives is typically embedded in some act of thinking such as wondering, reasoning, doubting, or considering. Tim conceives of P2 when he wonders if P2 might have occurred had the mother taken the drug. His wondering requires that conception but, or so we would like to insist, it does not require that while wondering about whether P2 is a genuine possibility Tim also (and necessarily so) engages in imagining what that possibility would involve for Tom.

Understanding what characterises P2 suffices for acts such as wondering about P2. Such understanding surely involves the capacity to imagine but it does not require *occurrent* imagination, or so we suggest. It is not required that at any moment when a thinker uses that understanding in an act of thinking, the thinker simultaneously exercises the corresponding imaginative capacity. We would like to propose that the case is parallel to the case of phenomenal concepts: conceiving of someone as being in pain in one's wondering about whether she is in pain does not require imagining being in pain, or imagining what it is like to be in pain. Analogously, wondering about whether a given subject S exists in counterfactual circumstances requires understanding what S's existence in those circumstances amounts to (by taking perspectives) but it does not require imagining those circumstances as containing S (by taking perspectives).

The observation that conceiving, contrary to imagining, usually occurs within other mental acts does not yet exclude the opponent's claim that – in the case at hand – conceiving and imagining coincide. Perhaps the best rejoinder is to appeal to phenomenological reflection. One may discover, via phenomenological reflection, that wondering if Tom could be the single child had the mother taken the drug does not involve any act of imagining the situation and yet does involve thinking of it by taking perspectives. Here again, the parallel to the pain case may help to reinforce the phenomenological insight.

15.6 The conception of belongingness by taking perspectives and imagination

Tim's understanding of the three options P1, P2, and P3 and of the differences between them relies on his understanding (his conception by taking perspectives) of what it is for an experience to belong to a subject. How is the conception of belongingness by taking perspectives related to imagination?

Suppose you apply your conception of belongingness by taking perspectives to a concrete case. You hear an animal crying out without even seeing it and conclude that a sharp pain has occurred. Some animal is now suffering pain. You then see your neighbour's cat Serafina and realise that it has been hurt. The sharp pain, you conclude, belongs to Serafina. It is like something *for her* to undergo that pain. You can have that thought without engaging in an act of imagination. When you conceive of the perceived situation as being such that the token experience at issue belongs to Serafina, then you need not, in addition, engage in imagining that situation as being that way. We conclude that exercising one's capacity to conceive of belongingness by taking perspectives does not require exercising one's capacity to imagine belongingness by taking perspectives.

What about the relation between the corresponding capacities? Consider first the case where the nature of the token experience at issue is known to the thinker, as is the case in the example involving Serafina. The token experience E at issue is a pain and the thinker, or so we suppose, knows – under the phenomenal concept of pain – that this is so. Now let us suppose that the thinker conceives of E as belonging to Serafina by taking perspectives. If the thinker has the capacity to imagine the way it is like to be in pain (which is typically so if she has the phenomenal concept of pain), then the thinker surely must also be able to imagine the situation from Serafina's perspective: the thinker must be able to imagine the situation as being such that it is like something for Serafina, as opposed to some other subject, to undergo that pain. In that case, the thinker's imaginative capacity is even more concrete. Not only can she imagine that the situation is such that it is like something for Serafina to undergo E; rather she can even imagine the way it is like for Serafina to undergo it.

It is not easy to find a natural example of a case where a thinker can refer to a token experience and yet ignore the nature of the experience. The following example is rather unnatural but perhaps it is useful nonetheless to illustrate the point we are going to suggest. Suppose Anton knows that in a sleep research laboratory subjects are treated in a manner that involves that, when waking up after a period of dreamless sleep, they undergo either a visual experience or an acoustic experience or a sudden emotion or a conscious thought. Anton knows that some subject will undergo a concrete experience E at some specific moment but he does not know the nature of E. Anton knows as well that his sister Antonia is planned to be one of the subjects sleeping in the lab. He does not know when she will be there. Anton can conceive of E as belonging to Antonia by taking perspectives. Does it follow that he also has the capacity to imagine by taking perspectives that E belongs to Antonia?

Here we suggest a reply that parallels the claim about capacities proposed in the previous section. What would it be for Anton to have the capacity to think of E as belonging to Antonia (by taking perspectives) and yet not to be able to imagine by taking perspectives the situation to be such that E belongs to Antonia? Once again, it is not quite clear what it would be for Anton to be in such a mental condition. We propose that it cannot be adequate to attribute to Anton the capacity to conceive by taking perspectives of E as belonging to Antonia unless that capacity comes along with the corresponding imaginative capacity. Here again, we propose the following thesis: the capacity to conceive of belongingness by taking perspectives not only typically and normally but also necessarily manifests itself in the capacity to imagine belongingness by taking perspectives.

15.7 Concluding summary

Thought and imagination are different mental phenomena. Thinking through concepts is not the same activity as imagining under concepts. Having the capacity to conceptualise a situation is not the same thing as having the capacity to imagine that very same situation, even if the concepts involved in both cases are the same.

However, in the case of thought with for-a-subject content and imagination with for-a-subject content, the relation between the two is particularly close. The relation is different for different kinds of thought and imagination with for-a-subject content, as should be obvious when comparing our results here with the results of our other contribution to this volume. We explored two kinds of thought and imagination: thought and imagination by taking perspectives concerning the existence and identity of conscious subjects in counterfactual situations, on the one hand (in the present chapter), and thought involving phenomenal concepts and imagination concerning the distribution among subjects of experiential properties, on the other (in our other contribution). We discovered one analogy and two disanalogies between these two cases.

Let us start with the disanalogies. Firstly, we argued that one cannot have the capacity to conceive of a counterfactual situation by taking perspectives as containing a real conscious subject *S* without having the capacity to imagine that counterfactual situation by taking perspectives. If Tim understands by taking perspectives what makes a counterfactual situation one which contains Tom as the mother's single child, then it cannot be that he is unable to imagine that counterfactual case by taking perspectives. One should rather stipulate that, in this case, the imaginative capacity is part of the possession conditions of the conceptual capacity. In contrast, a subject may well have acquired a phenomenal concept of a given experiential property and yet not be able to imagine the way it is like to have it (see Section 14.6 in our other contribution).

Secondly, imagination by taking perspectives of a counterfactual situation as containing a given real subject *S* requires understanding by taking perspectives of what turns a counterfactual situation into one containing *S*. Tim must understand that a world in which the single child is Tom is one in which there is a way it is like for Tom to undergo that child's experiences in order to be able to imagine a counterfactual situation as one in which Tom is the subject for whom there is a way it is like to have those experiences. In that case, we concluded, the relevant capacity to imagine requires the corresponding conceptual capacity. This is not so for imagining the way it is like to have a given experiential property and the capacity to use a corresponding phenomenal concept (see Section 14.5 in our other contribution).

Finally, a thinker may use her conception by taking perspectives in thoughts about counterfactual cases containing a real conscious subject and yet not imagine these counterfactual cases. This is so even though having the conceptual capacity requires having the imaginative capacity. Analogously, one may conceive of another subject in terms of a pure and maximally specific phenomenal concept as being in pain and yet not engage, in that act of thinking, in imagining the way it is like to be in pain (see Section 14.9 in our other contribution). However, in that case, the dissociation is more radical than in the case of thinking about the identity of conscious subjects, for the conceptual capacity to think in terms of phenomenal concepts may remain intact in the absence of the corresponding imaginative capacity.

We intended the present chapter and our other contribution to this volume to complement each other in providing support for the view that thoughts and imaginations about ourselves *as well as others* typically involve taking perspectives in a parallel manner. Whenever we engage in these mental activities, we fully appreciate the fact that the individual our thinking or imagining is about is an experiencing subject, a “centre of its own world” so to speak. The usual distinction between first-person and third-person thoughts is therefore misleading insofar as it obscures the fact that both types of thought involve conceptual tools which incorporate our awareness that an experiencing subject is the object of our thought. Similarly, such an intimate connection between the first-person and the third-person case is also manifest in imagination. When we engage in imaginings about identity through time and possible worlds, we are aware of taking the perspective of an experiencing subject, be it our own or the perspective of others. But this diagnosis of a deep closeness between the first-person and third-person case is not limited to thinking and imagining, in our view. It extends to a number of other mental phenomena, including emotions and perceptions, and would certainly deserve further investigation.¹²

Notes

- 1 A version of this story is presented in Nida-Rümelin (forthcoming), Chapter 9.
- 2 See our “Imagination and Phenomenal Concepts,” this volume.
- 3 A property P is an experiential property if and only if (in virtue of what it is to have P) whenever P is instantiated there is a subject S such that there is something it is like for S to have P in that instantiation. See our “Imagination and Phenomenal Concepts,” Section 14,2, in this volume for definitions of different types of experiential properties.
- 4 We limit our discussion here to thoughts about identity between real subjects and subjects existing in counterfactual circumstances. It will be clear enough to the reader how the analysis proposed carries over to thoughts about identity across time.

- 5 In his published work, Parfit focuses on transtemporal personal identity and does not, as far as we know, explicitly comment on identity across possible worlds (as exemplified by the story of Tim and Tom). Our remark about Parfit, therefore, must remain a mere hypothesis. However, it would be in the spirit of the reductionist view he proposes to make the concession mentioned. It is a crucial consequence of Parfit's view that there are possible cases where it is an *empty question* (a question having no reply determined by how things actually are) if a person A is identical to a person B. Parfit stresses in various places (see, for instance, Parfit 1984: Ch. 10, first section, last paragraph) that this consequence of his view is hard to believe. According to Parfit (or so we suggest interpreting his claim), we are under the *cognitive illusion* that our own identity across time must be determined (i.e., that the consequence mentioned is mistaken). One may put it this way: in cases where the identity between persons A and B existing at different moments is an empty question, we still *seem* to grasp a genuine difference (between A being identical to B and A being non-identical to B) where in fact there is none. The claim that we *seem* to grasp such a difference between P1, P2, and P3 is only an application of this idea to identity across possible worlds and, therefore, a natural complement to the Parfitian view.
- 6 For an elaboration of our view, and a defence of the claim that issues about phenomenal consciousness lie at the root of such disagreements about personal identity, see Bugnon and Nida-Rümelin 2019.
- 7 The expression “taking perspectives” is used in the literature on empathy and related topics in a different sense. It is used there as designating the attempt at imagining *the way it is like to be in the situation of another person*. Two kinds of that imaginative activity have been distinguished: (1) A imagines the way it would be like for her, A, to be in the situation of another person B (self-oriented perspective-taking); (2) A imagines the way it is like for B to be in her (B's) situation (for that distinction, see, e.g., Coplan 2011: 9).

We use the expression “taking perspectives” in a quite different manner. First, it should be noted that, contrary to the use of that expression in the relevant literature, we do not use the term to designate a kind of mental activity. We only use the term contextually in “conceiving something by taking perspectives” or “imagining something by taking perspectives” with the intention to thereby specify a sub-kind of the relevant mental activity of conceiving and imagining, respectively. Furthermore, *conceiving* of something by taking perspectives as introduced in the text (of belongingness as introduced in the present section and of identity of conscious subjects as introduced in Section 15.4) includes no act of imagination. The supplement “by taking perspectives” in that context rather specifies the conceptual tools used in the relevant conceptualisation. Second, even when we use the expression to talk of a specific sub-kind of *imagination*, the sub-kind at issue is distinct from the kind of imaginings designated in the literature by the term “taking perspectives.”

When Tim imagines P1 by taking perspectives in our sense, he is engaged in neither of the two kinds of activities (1) and (2) mentioned earlier. Tim then imagines the counterfactual world to be such that – *whatever* experiential property E the single child in the counterfactual situation instantiates – *there is a way it is like* for him, Tim, to be involved in that instantiation. He does not thereby imagine the way it is like for the single child in the counterfactual world to live in that world (no other-directed perspective-taking). And he does not thereby imagine the way it would be like for him, Tim, to live in the counterfactual

situation considered either. He need not introduce *any* assumption about the fate of the single child in the counterfactual situation to be able to engage in the relevant imaginative project. No qualitative imagination (in the sense of imagining having an experiential property in terms of what it is like to have it) plays any role. Tim does not imagine a certain situation in which the unique child finds itself in the considered counterfactual world and then imagine what it is like for that unique child (or what it would be like for him, Tim) to be in that situation. Rather, he *imagines* that counterfactual situation as satisfying a very general constraint which we may put as follows: *if* that counterfactual situation were realised, then any experience of the single child (whatever that experience might be) would be *mine*. We admit that this is an unusual imaginative act. It is in an astonishing way “non-qualitative.” And yet, we suggest, it is an act of imagination, not a mere thought or a mere act of conceiving a possibility. We ask the reader to submit that claim to intuitive test.

- 8 A reviewer raised doubts about Tim’s capacity to *experientially* imagine a counterfactual situation in which he does not exist. We would like to suggest that experientially imagining a situation could be understood in two ways. It can be understood as imagining having an experience of that situation or as experientially presenting the situation to oneself in one’s imagination. In the former sense, the imagining subject is herself included in what she imagines as having a certain experience. In the latter sense, as we propose to understand it, she is not. Tim cannot experientially imagine in the first sense the counterfactual situation in which he does not exist (the imagined content would be contradictory). However, Tim can, or so we suggest, experientially present to himself that counterfactual situation in the second sense. He can imagine that situation as one would experience it from some point of view without imagining himself as part of that situation. To take another example: if you visually imagine your family coming together after your death, then you most likely cannot avoid imagining seeing your family from some point of view. But this should not be conflated with imagining *yourself* as still being there, as contained *in* the situation. You can imagine the situation by presenting it to you as it *would be experientially given to a subject with a certain “point of view”* without imagining that there is a subject with that “point of view” *in* the imagined situation (let alone that this subject is yourself). To maintain the contrary would be to assume that one can only visually imagine one’s family coming together after one’s death by imagining a situation somehow containing oneself looking at one’s family (presumably as some kind of ghost).
- 9 A subject S is qualitatively imagining having a given experiential property EP if S imagines having EP in terms of what it is like to have EP. See our “Imagination and Phenomenal Concepts,” Section 14.4, in this volume for our discussion of qualitative imagination.
- 10 We are assuming here that acts of reference can and often are embedded in acts of imagination. You may imagine your mother as being sad. You can imagine your father as being sad. Each of these acts of imagination concerns (or are about) a specific person. What makes it the case that the former is about your mother and the latter about your father? The response we endorse and would like to suggest: they are about a specific person in virtue of the act of reference which is part of your respective acts of imagination.
- 11 See our “Imagination and Phenomenal Concepts,” this volume, Section 14.6.
- 12 We would like to thank Íngrid Vendrell Ferran and Christiana Werner for their very helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter. Our gratitude

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