

Seeing oneself from-the-outside: point of view in memory imagery

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Abstract

Zeno Vendler introduces a distinction between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ visual imagery. In subjective imagination one visualises an event from-the-inside, and this involves ‘the representation of the experiences I would have if I were in a certain situation’ (Vendler 1979: 163). In the objective case, one sees oneself from-the-outside, and this consists in ‘the inner representation of one’s body...from a certain perspective’ (Vendler 1979: 161). Vendler first claims that the objective is really just a special case of the subjective: objective imagination can be reduced to subjective imagination. And, even though these two types of visual imagery seem to map onto the distinction between field perspectives (from-the-inside) and observer perspectives (from-the-outside) in personal memory (Nigro & Neisser 1983), Vendler also claims that there is no such ‘objective’ case in memory—there is no possibility of remembering from-the-outside. I suggest that Vendler’s two claims are connected: the way he reduces objective imagination to subjective imagination drives his scepticism about remembering from-the-outside.

Vendler’s proposed reduction involves the idea that the content of visual mental imagery always involves an *experience of seeing*. On this way of thinking, objective imaginings involve an *occupied* point of view within the imaginative project: objective imagination hence involves a three-term relation between 1) the present imagining self (the real-world subject), 2) a self-occupying-a-point-of-view (an ‘implicit observer’), and 3) the imagined self (as ‘observed’). For Vendler, objective imagination involves the experience of seeing, and because this experience of seeing is subjective, the reduction goes through. But it is this understanding of the point of view in objective visual imagery as occupied that is also driving Vendler’s scepticism about remembering from-the-outside.

Vendler observes that ‘one cannot remember seeing oneself from a different perspective simply because it is impossible to *have seen oneself* from an outside perspective’ (1979: 169). And

this conclusion simply follows from the truism that ‘one cannot remember doing something that one has not done’ (Vendler 1979: 170). You cannot, therefore, remember yourself (from-the-outside) walking down the Champs-Élysées, but you can ‘imagine yourself [from-the-outside] walking down the Champs-Élysées...and you can do it from any point of view you prefer’ (Vendler 1979: 169). Vendler seems to be suggesting that in the case of imagination one can *send* the observing self to any location to view the action from that particular point of view. In the case of remembering, during the original episode the observing self would need to be sent to *occupy* a particular point of view in order to see the observed self—an *occupied* point of view that is then preserved in memory. On the face of it, this dissociation required during the original experience is impossible, and this idea seems to be driving Vendler’s scepticism.

To dissolve this scepticism about remembering from the-outside, I outline a way of thinking about objective imagination and memory that does not involve an implicit observer. I show that the content of ‘objective’ visual imagery does not necessarily involve the experience of seeing. Rather, objective visual imagery may involve *unoccupied* points of view. That is, it may involve a two-term relation between 1) the present imagining or remembering self (the real-world subject), and 2) the imagined or remembered self (as ‘observed’). There is no need to posit an onlooker within the imagined or remembered content. Indeed, I suggest that remembering from-the-outside *typically* involves an unoccupied point of view. There is no observer whose experience of seeing is part of the content of memory, and so the term ‘observer memory’ may be somewhat misleading. I also argue that thinking about such memories as involving a two-term relation helps explain the quotidian nature of remembering from-the-outside.

References

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- Vendler, Z. (1979). Vicarious Experience. *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 84(2), 161-173.