

## I FEEL YOUR PAIN: ACQUAINTANCE &amp; THE LIMITS OF EMPATHY

Emad H. Atiq and Matt Duncan

Expressions like “I feel your pain” or “I share your sadness” play an important role in our moral lives. They convey our empathy, which is of crucial moral significance. In fact, some philosophers consider empathy to be, not just morally important, but the key to understanding morality.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not we go that far, empathy is clearly central to how we understand, treat, and hope to be treated by other people.

But the kind of empathy that is communicated through expressions like “I feel your pain” is also peculiar. For it seems to require something perplexing and elusive: sharing another’s experience. It’s not clear how this is possible. We each experience the world from our own point of view, which no one else occupies. My experiences are mine; your experiences are yours. How could we *share* each other’s experiences? This issue is related to, but different from, a long-standing puzzle about knowing other minds. Wittgenstein (1958) writes:

If what I feel is always my pain only, what can the supposition mean that someone else has pain? (pp. 56).

Likewise, Thomas Nagel (1970) observes:

If one only begins with the sole idea of oneself and one’s own experience as a model, one may not have sufficient material to extrapolate to a significant notion of other selves and their experiences” (pp. 106).

Wittgenstein and Nagel wonder how we can know about, or make meaningful claims about, others’ experiences. But expressions like “I feel your pain” raise a further puzzle. They assert, not just that we *know* about others’ experiences, but that we *share* them—that one person’s experience is, in some important sense, had by another. Even if we suppose that we can know about others’ experiences, it remains unclear how we could ever share them.

It’s also unclear exactly why it is so important that we do. If you are in pain, then why should it matter, and be a good thing, that *I* am also in the same pain? Why doesn’t that just compound the

---

<sup>1</sup> Empathy and related attitudes play a central role in the theories of moral motivation advanced by David Hume, Adam Smith, and Arthur Schopenhauer. Empathy’s epistemic significance—its contribution to our knowledge, understanding, and virtue—remains the subject of lively discussion in contemporary moral philosophy (see, e.g., Slote, 2010; Simmons, 2014; Marshall, 2019; Bailey, 2020; Atiq, 2021). These and other views provide a helpful context for raising some puzzles about empathy that we hope to address in this paper.

problem? Perhaps there are some fairly obvious reasons why it has *some* value—for example, it helps us understand what others might be going through—but it’s not entirely clear why *that* is important, and indeed *so* important.

But it is. And our goal is to explore how and why this is so. Specifically, our goal in this paper is to clarify how empathy, in the regimented sense of *sharing another’s pain*, is possible and why it is important. Central to our account is the concept of being acquainted with—that is, directly aware of—pain. When I feel my own pain, and am acquainted with it, I want the pain to stop, and I’m moved—sometimes compelled—to stop it. My acquaintance with the pain is what reveals that it is no good, to be gotten rid of, and to be avoided in the future. Acquaintance also appears implicated in our understanding of, and motivation to relieve, others’ pains. When I say “I feel your pain” I express an awareness of your pain, a direct appreciation of its noxious qualities, and, as with my own pain, an understanding of why it ought to be eased. Explaining how empathy is both possible and important therefore involves clarifying the nature of acquaintance: its limits, epistemic role, and motivational significance.

Here is how we shall proceed. In §1, we’ll point out that there are different ways of understanding what it is to empathetically share another’s pain. §2 explores whether and to what extent it is possible to empathize in the relevant senses—to share, that is, another’s pain. Having settled on what it might take and the fact that most of us have what it takes, we turn to the question of whether one should. In §3, we observe that our taxonomy of different ways of empathizing helps us better understand and evaluate existing accounts of the value of empathy; and, ultimately, points towards a more precise account: agents have both epistemic and moral reasons to share other people’s pain because pain-sharing is the source of a species of character-building knowledge that we have no other way of accessing except through direct acquaintance with pain. §4 concludes by pointing out: (a) that our account is compatible with a broad range of views on how the different forms of empathy (corresponding to our taxonomy) are valuable; (b) that, all else being equal, ideal empathy would involve sharing, as closely as possible, other people’s pain, and (c) that the account does not settle the weight of our reasons to empathize and, relatedly, when those reasons may be overridden by competing values.

## §1 What it Takes to Feel Someone Else’s Pain

Suppose we're dear friends, you're hurting, and I learn about it. Now I'm hurting too. As an expression of heartfelt empathy, I say to you, "I feel your pain." The sentiment is nice, and expressions like this are clearly important. But how could they be true? You feel your pain, I feel mine; we never feel each other's.

Maybe that's a bit fast. If I say, "Hey, I have that shirt too," I don't mean that I co-own *that* specific shirt you're wearing. Or if I say, "I have the same problem," I don't necessarily mean that our problems are *exactly* the same. So my claim that I share your pain, or shirt, or problems, needn't be interpreted so rigidly. In particular, it needn't imply that we share the same *token* thing, or even the exact same type of thing.

Still, one might wonder, how could I feel your pain? Assuming that I mean it more-or-less literally, what would it take? The question that interests us isn't what it would take for this claim to be assertible in ordinary language. Rather, it is: What are the potential ways to satisfy this claim, understood as an expression of empathy, if it is taken more-or-less literally? Ultimately, we aren't interested in capturing all of the potential meanings that speakers or listeners might attach to the claim and related expressions; rather, the goal is to identify a set of possibilities of significant epistemic and moral interest.

So, begin again with two subjects, S1 and S2; the former truly says "I feel your pain" to the latter. At very least, this seems to imply that (i) S1 is in some experiential state (call this condition "Experience"), (ii) S1 is aware of being in that state (call this "Self-Awareness"), (iii) S2 is (or was) also in some related experiential state ("Symmetry"), and (iv) S1 is aware that S2 is (or was) in that state ("Other-Awareness").<sup>2</sup>

Now to refine. Start with (i) and (iii)—that is, *Experience* and *Symmetry*. What experiential states must S1 and S2 be in to satisfy 'I feel your pain'? Well, *pain*. It might be physical pain, emotional pain, or some other kind of pain. Maybe the claim could be true if they were each in some other kind of experiential state, but set that aside for now—assume that it really is pain that we're interested in. So assume that if S1 feels S2's pain, then they both are (or were) in pain.

---

<sup>2</sup> You might think that there is also a causal requirement on "I feel your pain"—that, for it to be both true and an expression of empathy, S1's pain must be caused in some way by S1's awareness of S2's pain. We're inclined to think not. Suppose S1 and S2 are both in pain, their pains were caused in totally independent ways, and S1 comes to learn about S2's pain. We think that, in some such cases, "I feel your pain" can be both an expression of empathy and also true, even though S1's pain was not caused by S1's awareness of S2's pain.

Now the question is: How is S1's pain *related* to S2's? It can't *just* be that they're both in pain. If S2 has a broken heart, and S1 has a cramp in their calf, S1 doesn't thereby feel S2's pain. There's more to it than that.

Maybe a lot more. On one very demanding reading, 'I feel your pain' implies that S1 is experiencing the *very pain* that S2 is experiencing. Not just the same *type* of pain—something qualitatively similar but numerically distinct from S2's pain—but the same *token* pain. One way to get a grip on this possibility (assuming for a moment that it *is* possible) is by imagining craniopagus twins who are distinct subjects but share enough brain matter such that it's reasonable to suppose that they sometimes share token pains. Many philosophers say that this is impossible, even for craniopagus twins—that, given how experiences are individuated, two subjects couldn't share token experiences, so even craniopagus twins who share the neural states underlying their pain would be in two distinct pains.<sup>3</sup> But set that aside for the moment—we'll return to this issue in the next section. For now, just note that sharing token pains is at least one *potential* way for S1 to feel S2's pain.

That's a very demanding reading of 'I feel your pain'. A slightly less demanding reading would only imply that S1 and S2 are *partly* in the same token pain. This could be construed in terms of their partly sharing the neural bases of a pain (as craniopagus twins) or in terms of their co-instantiating some of their phenomenal properties.

Another reading of 'I feel your pain' implies, not that S1 and S2 share any *token* pain, but just that they are in the same pain *type*—where an experience's type is individuated by its purely qualitative, phenomenal properties. As before, this sameness could be full or partial. If S1 and S2 are *fully* in the same pain type, then their pains are qualitatively identical (though they may be numerically distinct). If they are only *partly* in the same pain type, then their pains share some but not all phenomenal properties.

There are various dimensions along which experience types might differ phenomenologically. They might differ in their content, including (at least potentially) either their representational or non-representational content (including *de se* content). They might also differ in what some call their "mode" or "state type"—if, e.g., anger that P differs phenomenologically from fear that P, hope that P, etc.<sup>4</sup> Experience types might also differ with respect to how one experiences them in relation to

---

<sup>3</sup> Here are a few prominent examples: Ayer (1940, pp. 138-139), Strawson (1959, pp. 97), and Tye (2007, pp. 24). As we will discuss later, many philosophers are committed to this claim (whether or not they explicitly endorse it) in virtue of their preferred metaphysics of experience.

<sup>4</sup> All pains are of the same general type, 'pain', so their phenomenology will not differ due to differences in this general type. However, if you think that the phenomenal contribution of an experience's "mode" or "state type" is more fine-grained than that—and, in the case of pain, includes phenomenal differences between, say, emotional pain and physical

*oneself*; that is, to whether one experiences oneself as their subject, agent, author, etc. Also, two experience types might differ if they bear distinct relations to other of their subject's mental states. For example, two subjects may experience fear differently because they experience the significance of that fear differently, given their differing memories, beliefs, desires, personality traits, and so on. These differences may affect their responses to the fear, how much it impairs their wellbeing, and more. Whether or not all of these differences between experience types really do exist is controversial. However, at this point we want to be ecumenical about potential differences between experience types.<sup>5</sup>

So here are our options for potential ways that S1's pain might be related to S2's pain if S1 feels S2's pain:

- (1) S1 is fully in the same token pain that S2 is in.
- (2) S1 is partly in the same token pain that S2 is in.
- (3) S1 is fully in the same pain type that S2 is (or was) in.
- (4) S1 is partly in the same pain type that S2 is (or was) in.

That covers (i) and (iii)—*Experience* and *Symmetry*—above. Now (ii)—i.e., *Self-Awareness*. We say that in order for S1 to feel S2's pain in a sense relevant to empathy, S1 must not only be in a certain kind of pain, S1 must also be *aware* of being in it. Many philosophers—both past and present—maintain that, necessarily, if a subject is in a given phenomenal state, then they are aware of being in it. If that's true, then *Self-Awareness* is trivially true. However, some other philosophers want to allow that one could be in a phenomenal state and yet be unaware of it.<sup>6</sup> So this possibility is at least worth recognizing.

---

pain that are not attributable to differences in the pain's content—then this may be one way that two pains could differ, phenomenologically.

<sup>5</sup> You might think it's possible for experiences to be *similar* in some relevant respect without being partly or wholly of the same type. For example, you might think that a visual experience of a green patch is more similar to an experience of a blue patch than to an experience of a red patch, but that this similarity is not grounded in the first two experiences' being partly of the same type. That might be one way to think of it. But given all of the different ways two experiences can be partly of the same type, it's plausible that there will always be an experience type that similar experiences partly share but dissimilar ones don't (e.g., seeing a color in the blue-to-green range). So, moving forward, we will treat all similarities between experiences as a matter of them being of the same type (at least partly). If you maintain that two experiences can be similar but not partly of the same type, and if you think this applies to pain, then just note that another way S1 might feel S2's pain is, not by being in the same experience type, but by being in a relevantly *similar* experience type.

<sup>6</sup> An example may be if one is highly absorbed in some activity and so ignores some peripheral aspect of one's phenomenology (which may be related in various ways to the phenomenon of attentional blindness). See Dretske (1993) for a classic argument along these lines. Also see Janzen (2011) and Stoljar (forthcoming).

However, whether or not all subjects are always aware of all of their conscious states, we take it that a subject (e.g., S1) must be aware of their own pain in order to feel someone else's pain (e.g., S2's) in the relevant sense. For we take it that if S1 is unaware of feeling the pain that corresponds to S2's pain, then S1 can't appreciate it in a sense required for 'I feel your pain' to be the empathetic expression that it is. Hence, we take it that for S1 to feel S2's pain, S1 must be aware of the pain that S1 is experiencing.

Aware in what sense? Not just any sense. Not by, say, getting an MRI, observing behavior, or learning about it in some other third-personal way. Why? Because we take it that when S1 says 'I feel your pain' they mean something more than that they are in pain and know it. They mean that they *feel* it, *appreciate* it, and are *moved* by it—in a way that elicits empathy and is, in some important sense, similar to how S2 feels their own pain.

What is that way? First-personally. S1 must be aware of their pain in the way we typically come to know about our own experiences. There are various accounts of how we come to know about our experiences first-personally. For reasons that will become clear later, we prefer an *acquaintance* account—one whereby S1's first-personal awareness of their pain is achieved via direct awareness of the pain itself.<sup>7</sup> On our view, learning about it third-personally, or through some intermediary, wouldn't be enough; S1 needs to be in direct contact with their pain experience. Again, there are other potential ways to flesh out 'first-personal awareness'; but, as we'll discuss later on, we believe that acquaintance with the experience is the best way to understand the metaphysical, epistemic, and moral landscape in this domain.

To get a better sense of the kind of first-personal awareness we have in mind (whether or not the acquaintance account of it is correct), consider the following contrast case: S1 undergoes pain that is the same as S2's pain in some sense, but S1 is somehow unaware of undergoing it. Nonetheless, S1's pain has its usual functional role—it affects S1's behavior, other mental states, and other traits in all of the relevant ways. Suppose S1 then learns via an MRI that they are in this pain state, and somehow knows that it is similar to S2's pain. Might it be appropriate for them to say to S2, "I feel your pain"? One question about this case is whether it is even possible. Again, many philosophers maintain that, necessarily, a mental state is conscious only if its subject is aware of it (see fn. 5). So they would deny that it's possible for S1 to be in a conscious state like pain and yet be completely unaware of it. We have some sympathy for this position. But set that aside for a moment—suppose

---

<sup>7</sup> As we will discuss later, the notion of acquaintance that we will appeal to derives from Bertrand Russell (1911, 1912). For an overview of the contemporary literature on this notion, see Duncan (2021b).

it's possible to be in pain (with its usual functional role) and yet be completely unaware of it. Would an expression of empathy like "I feel your pain" be apt? On the one hand, if this is possible, then S1 may be shaped by the pain—it may affect their life and choices—in ways that are relevant to empathy. On the other hand, there seems something oddly hollow and (literally) unfeeling about saying "I feel your pain" if S1 is not aware of their pain in the usual way (i.e., first-personally). And this is hard to square with the nature of empathy (perhaps "I am affected by your pain" would seem more apt). Even if it is not quite appropriate to call this attitude "empathy," it is a nearby attitude that is worth remembering as a contrast to the kind of state we have in mind.

Now to (iv)—i.e., *Other-Awareness*: In order for 'I feel your pain' to be true, S1 must be aware, not just of their own pain, but also that S1 is (or was) in some relevantly similar pain. This isn't strictly entailed by 'I feel your pain,' but it is implied by the fact that S1 is asserting it as an expression of empathy. It would be infelicitous for S1 to assert 'I feel your pain' to S2 if they weren't aware, in some sense, of S2's pain.

But here the demands on S1's awareness seem more limited. There are various potential ways for S1 to be aware of S2's pain—via testimony, behavioral observation, other kinds of inference, or, if it is possible for S1 to experience S2's token pain, then they could be aware of that token pain in a maximally direct way—namely, by acquaintance. Maybe some of these sources of knowledge are better or worse in various ways, but, to satisfy 'I feel your pain,' all that seems required is that S1 knows of S2's pain *in some way*. In fact, this may not even require *knowledge*; as far as empathy goes, it may be enough that S1 *believes* that S2 is (or was) in the same pain (in some sense), and that, in fact, S2 is (or was) in that pain.

To summarize, and amend (i)-(iv), if S1 feels S2's pain, then (i) S1 is in pain (*Experience*), (ii) S1 is first-personally aware of that pain (*Self-Awareness*), (iii) S2 is (or was) in the same pain as S1's in one of the senses of (1)-(4) (*Symmetry*), and (iv) S1 is somehow aware of S2's pain (*Other-Awareness*). These conditions are not meant to be an analysis of the ordinary language expression, 'I feel your pain'. Rather, they're necessary conditions on a certain set of possibilities that we're interested in. Specifically, satisfying these conditions is what it would take, at a bare minimum, to empathetically feel someone else's pain in a more-or-less literal sense.

That's what it would take. Now the question is: Do we have what it takes? Does anybody? *Could* anybody?

## §2 The Possibilities for Sharing Pains

We assume that it is possible, and indeed actual, that we satisfy *Experience*, *Self-Awareness*, and *Other-Awareness* (i.e., (i), (ii), and (iv)). That is, we assume that we both possibly and actually feel pain and are first-personally aware of it, and that we sometimes know (however that is) when others are in pain. Thus, the “Do we have what it takes?” question is directed at *Symmetry* (i.e., (iii)). Specifically, it concerns what is possible—for us or anyone—in terms of sharing pains in line with senses (1)-(4) that we discussed earlier.

Recall those senses:

- (1) S1 is fully in the same token pain that S2 is in.
- (2) S1 is partly in the same token pain that S2 is in.
- (3) S1 is fully in the same pain type that S2 is (or was) in.
- (4) S1 is partly in the same pain type that S2 is (or was) in.

One question about (1)-(4) is: In which of these ways is it possible, in the broadest sense, for any subject to feel another’s pain? Another question is: In which of these ways is it possible for *us*—i.e., ordinary human beings—to feel each other’s pains, given how we are constituted, our laws of nature, and our technological limits? Both of these questions are important for reasons that we will discuss in the next sections—namely, because it’s useful to know what a (merely possible) ideal moral agent, who is ideally empathetic, would seek to feel with respect to others’ pains, so that we might better understand what we might strive toward if not for; and it’s also useful to know what some of our moral limits are, especially with respect to empathy, so that we don’t get the wrong ideas about what to expect from ourselves and others. So, in this section, we will consider what’s possible for us, and for any possible being, concerning (1)-(4).

Start with (1). As we said, many philosophers claim that (1) is metaphysically impossible. For they maintain that token experiences are individuated partly by their subject (see fn. 2). On this view, what a token experience *is*—its identity—is determined in part by who is undergoing it. So all experiences have this form: [S experiencing x]. If that’s right, then it’s impossible for two distinct subjects to have the same token experience, because the fact that these subjects are distinct is by itself sufficient to distinguish any experiences they’re having. Even craniopagus twins who share the neural bases of a token pain would be in distinct pains; one experience would be [Twin1 experiencing p], the



other would be [Twin2 experiencing p]. Hence, if this view of how to individuate token experiences is right, then (1) is metaphysically impossible.

One could deny this view. For example, one could say that token experiences are individuated by token neural states. If that's right, then it may be possible for craniopagus twins to feel each other's token pains.<sup>8</sup>

However, even on this view, (1) isn't feasible for most of us. At least not as we are currently constituted. For most of us do not share token neural states with anyone else. Nor do we ever share anything else that could ground—on any view—our being *fully* in the same token pain as someone else.<sup>9</sup> (1) is not for us.

The same may or may not be true of (2). It depends on further details about the metaphysics of experience. On one view, experiences are most fundamentally constituted by neural activity, and so it presumably would be metaphysically possible for some subject to be partly in the same token pain as another. craniopagus twins cases—even if merely possible ones—may be a good example. Perhaps it would also be possible for the non-craniopagus among us, if we were to undergo some “mind-melding” procedure, but this is not something any of us are likely to undergo. In which case (2) may be possible for us, but unlikely.

But the above is hardly the only view of experience. There are other views, like naïve realism, the sense-datum theory, and representationalism.<sup>10</sup> On naïve realism, experience is partly constituted by public objects and properties. On this view, it's impossible to *fully* share a token experience with another subject, because experiences are partly individuated by the brain activity of the subject who is aware of the sensible qualities. On the other hand, it may be quite easy on this view (depending on the version) to *partly* share a token experience with another subject, since experiences are partly individuated by objects and properties that are, at least in many cases, external and publicly observable. So if S1 sees a brown kangaroo, then S2 may be partly (but not fully) in that same token experience by also seeing that very kangaroo at the same time.

---

<sup>8</sup> Even this is tricky. In order for craniopagus twins to *fully* feel each other's pains, they would need to share enough neural processing such that their pains—the character of which may be determined by all sorts of factors, including relations to other mental states—really are token identical, but not enough neural processing that they should be considered a single subject.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps on some radical views of the nature of pain, full token-pain sharing is possible. Assume pain is a simple, basic, and sui generis quality that is not grounded in any physical state; nor are pains individuated by the subject who is aware of them. On this pain-as-free-floating-stuff view, it is at least conceivable that two subjects might experience one and the same pain quality. Again, we have no reason to suppose that this possibility corresponds to anything real.

<sup>10</sup> For a helpful overview of the different views of the metaphysics of experience, see Pautz (2021).

Other views of experience may deliver different results. Some (but not all) versions of representationalism allow for partial token-experience sharing. The same goes for the sense-datum theory. But the main point here is just that whether it's possible to partly share token experiences (in general or for us) depends partly on the metaphysics—specifically, on what constitutes a given token experience.

With that said, focusing on experience *in general* may be misleading in this context, particularly given that the above theories tend to focus on *perceptual* experience. For the kind of state we're interested in—i.e., pain—is, unlike perception, not a matter of observing external objects. We don't crowd around pains, sensing them like we do kangaroos. Even on views on which experiencing pain is a matter of perceiving, say, tissue damage, which is itself publicly observable, the *way* a subject typically perceives their own tissue damage is different in kind from the way others do.<sup>11</sup> So while the possibility or likelihood of sharing token experiences *in general* may depend on the correct metaphysics of experience, the metaphysics shouldn't affect our conclusions so far about pain-sharing. Craniopagus twins aside, we don't share each other's token pains, even partly (at least, not in the sense relevant to (i)-(iv)). Maybe we *could*. And it's plausible that some possible beings partly share token pains. But (2) isn't something we do.<sup>12</sup>

At this point one might worry that by saying that (1) and (2) aren't for us, we are advocating for an objectionable sort of privacy thesis—one that posits a metaphysically suspect realm of objects that only one person is, or could be, privy to. Not so. As we've seen, even those who firmly reject the notion of private objects—such as naïve realists—can accept our conclusions with respect to (1) and (2). These conclusions don't require positing private objects of any sort; they merely identify some plausible constraints—for creatures like us—on sharing token pains.

---

<sup>11</sup> With that said, if experiencing pain is just a matter of perceiving tissue damage (or something else), then it may be metaphysically possible for one subject to be perceptually “hooked up” to another subject's pain in that way. This is not something *we* ever do, but we don't mean to rule out its possibility here.

<sup>12</sup> Is this true of all kinds of pain? Or is it possible that, while we don't ever share token *physical* pains with each other, there are other kinds of pain that we do sometimes partly share tokens of? Take, for example, grief caused by the loss of a loved one. One might say that such grief is partly constituted by a perceived absence of the loved one. So if naïve realism is true of that perception, then it may be that two people can partly share a token grief state in virtue of perceiving the same absence. The same might go for pain involved with jealousy, anger, hate, and so on—if that pain is partly constituted by perceiving public things, and experiences are partly constituted by those public things, then two people may be able to partly share token pains. With that said, this possibility relies on a conjunction of very controversial views about pain and perception. Furthermore, even if that conjunction is true, cases where one subject is in partly the same token grief (or jealousy, anger, hate, etc.) state as another in virtue of perceiving the exact same thing at the exact same time—and in a way that's sufficient to make ‘I feel your pain’ true—will be rare. So we will set this possibility aside.

With that, let's move on to (3) and (4)—to pain *types*. Here the underlying metaphysics recedes into the background. For pain types—at least the sort we are interested in—are individuated by their purely qualitative, phenomenal properties, regardless of what (metaphysically) constitutes them. If S1 sees a kangaroo, smells eucalyptus, and feels a tingle in their toes, then S2 is fully in the same experience type if and only if their experiences are qualitatively—that is, phenomenologically—identical. This is true regardless of what turns out to constitute those experiences—whether its external objects, sense data, representations, etc.<sup>13</sup> So the question is about phenomenology, not constitution. And that question is: Is it possible for two subjects to have pain experiences that are qualitatively the same, either partly or fully?

We think yes—that (3) and (4) are both possible. Start with (4). If S1 and S2 both have a visual experience of a brown kangaroo, then they are partly in the same experience type. Similarly for pain. If S1 and S2 both get sunburned, and feel the burning, then they are partly in the same pain type. In which case they satisfy (4). Such cases are not just possible, but actual. People go to the beach together; they get sunburned together. As a result, they end up partly in the same pain type together. Hence, we think (4) is both possible and actual.

Some deny this. For example, Thomas Raleigh (2017) claims that if (1) and (2) are impossible—as some have argued—then (3) and (4) are too. For he claims that if (1) and (2) are impossible, then any experience's phenomenology is essentially tied to its subjective viewpoint.<sup>14</sup> And, according to Raleigh, this implies that there is no sense in which the phenomenology of one subject's experience is similar or dissimilar, the same or different, as the phenomenology of another's experience; in which case intersubjective phenomenological comparison is impossible. If Raleigh is right, then (3) and (4) may be impossible.

We are not convinced. Even if phenomenology is essentially tied to a subjective viewpoint, we deny the inference to phenomenal incomparability. To see why we deny this inference, consider an analogy. Suppose we set a toy firetruck on a table and take a picture of it from a side angle. What this picture looks like will be determined in part by the physical viewpoint from which we took the picture.

---

<sup>13</sup> To be clear, we are not saying that S1 and S2's experiences could be the same even if they were constituted differently. We assume that the true metaphysics of experience is true for everyone, so if S1's experience is constituted by, say, sense data, so is S2's. We are also not saying that we can't make sense of experience types if we adopt one of these theories. The point is rather that the status of (3) and (4) don't hang on the metaphysics of experience.

<sup>14</sup> What does it mean for an experience's phenomenology to be essentially tied to subjective viewpoint? For Raleigh (2017), it means that an experience's phenomenology is defined by what it is like *for its subject*—that it couldn't be what it is like *for nobody* (pp. 9). Raleigh then argues that, given this, and given that (1) and (2) are impossible, all intersubjective phenomenal comparisons are ill-defined.

And this is inevitable. There's no way to take a picture of a firetruck from no point of view. In this way, the appearance of the firetruck picture is tied—perhaps essentially—to a viewpoint. But this doesn't mean that its appearance can't be compared to that of other firetruck pictures. It's just that the ways in which the different pictures will be similar or dissimilar will depend in part on the perspective of the camera.

Why not say the same about phenomenology? Yes, we each see, hear, feel, taste, smell, think, emote, and in other ways experience the world from a certain viewpoint. Necessarily so. But that doesn't entail that our experiences are incomparable, phenomenologically. In fact, it doesn't even entail that our experiences couldn't be *exactly* alike, phenomenologically—that is, qualitatively identical. Just as two pictures from two different cameras could in principle be qualitatively identical—if they were taken from the exact same angle, in the exact same light, and so on—so too it may be that two subjects could in principle be in qualitatively identical experiences if they had the exact same makeup, were in the same conditions, etc. At least, this isn't ruled out by phenomenology being essentially tied to a subject's viewpoint.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, we maintain that intersubjective phenomenal comparison *is* possible. And we maintain that (4) is possible and actual—that two subjects can be, and sometime are, in partly the same experience type.

However, the foregoing discussion of Raleigh's argument shows that (3)—i.e., the sense of “I feel your pain” whereby S1 is fully in the same pain type that S2 is (or was) in—is a bit trickier. The

---

<sup>15</sup> Raleigh (2017) argues that, given the impossibility of (1) and (2), interpersonal phenomenal comparison is “ill defined” in the way comparisons of height across Lewisian possible worlds is ill defined or talk of velocity absent a reference frame is ill defined. However, we don't find these analogies persuasive. First, Lewisian worlds are spatiotemporally isolated in a way that conscious subjects are not. Second, things cannot move between Lewisian worlds and compare heights in the way subjects can change the character of their own experiences (e.g., by looking around, thinking different things, changing mood, moving into others' physical locations). So a subject can compare differences in their own experiences in a way that things can't be compared across Lewisian worlds. Third, if it's ill-defined to compare heights across Lewisian worlds, then that must be because there's nothing to height over and above how a thing is spatially related to other things in its world. But phenomenology isn't like that. Even if phenomenology is essentially tied to a subjective viewpoint, we don't see any reason to think *every* aspect of its qualitative character is determined by its subject's identity. Phenomenology may always be what it's like *for a subject*, but that doesn't entail that what it's like for me can't be similar or dissimilar to what it's like for you (or anyone else).

The reference-frame analogy has similar problems. Arguably there is nothing to velocity over and above a thing's spatial relation to other things; but arguably there is something more to be said about the qualitative character of phenomenology than how it is related to its subject. Furthermore, even if we grant the aptness of the reference-frame analogy, we deny that it gives us any reason to think that comparisons are impossible. For velocities across reference frames clearly *are* comparable (how else could we measure velocity in different reference frames and introduce units of velocity?). If x is moving 10 m/s away from y, and v is moving 20 m/s away from w, then we can compare (and quantify) those velocities in various ways. We can say things like, “v is moving away from something faster than x is,” “v is moving away from something twice as fast as x is,” “If v was in y's position, then x would be moving away from it at 10/ms (which is half as fast as v is moving away from w).” So, again, we don't think these analogies give us any reason to think that intersubjective phenomenal comparison is impossible.

issue isn't whether subjective viewpoints affect every aspect of our phenomenology, as Raleigh suggests; it's whether it does at all. If a subjective viewpoint adds *any* essentially unique element to phenomenology, then it may be impossible for two subjects to fully share experience types. In which case (3) is impossible.

Recall the various dimensions that we identified earlier along which experience types might differ phenomenologically: representational or non-representational content (including *de se* content), "mode" or "state type", experienced relations to *oneself*, and experienced relations to other mental states. In which category does a viewpoint's potential contribution to phenomenology belong? One possibility is *de se* content. However, we doubt that *de se* content itself contributes anything unrepeatable to phenomenology. My experience of being in the Stanford library has irreducibly *de se* content, but there's nothing keeping you from having that same *de se* phenomenology by you yourself going into the Stanford library. *De se* phenomenology needn't be thought of as anything but indexical content that is repeatable, at least in principle.

A more plausible characterization of the role of viewpoint in phenomenology is experienced relations to oneself and/or to one's other mental states. To get a better grip on how, try to imagine what it might be like to be someone else. Take, for example, Elijah Wood. To experience the world like Elijah Wood would be to see the world through his eyes, and to hear, smell, taste, and feel the world through his other senses, and to feel what it is like to occupy Elijah Wood's specific body. It would also involve having certain memories—e.g., of playing Frodo in *Lord of the Rings*—as well as various beliefs, desires, intentions, hopes, fears, preferences, and so on. Maybe it would also involve experiencing the world with a certain personality, or character. What's more, experiencing the world from Elijah Wood's perspective would involve experiencing these various mental states *as one's own*. What exactly this self-consciousness amounts to is controversial, and we'll not try to settle the matter here. This sense of ownership may involve explicit self-experiences, or not. It arguably involves a sense of oneself as the subject of one's mental states, but it may also involve a sense of oneself as the agent or author of one's mental states. Or not.<sup>16</sup> However it goes, to occupy Elijah Wood's perspective would be to experience his mind as one's own.

This is not easy to imagine—at least not completely. However, we don't see any reason to think it is strictly *impossible* for two subjects to be in qualitatively identical experiences—that is, to be fully in the same experience type. If God made a qualitative duplicate of Elijah Wood—with all the

---

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of the different views of and issues surrounding self-consciousness, see Smith (2020).

same physical and mental traits, memories and beliefs, desires and preferences—then it’s reasonable to suppose that they could be fully in the same experience type. Of course, they would each experience those traits *as their own*. But this sense of ownership may be qualitatively the same for each of them. It’s not as if each of our sense of ownership has its own, unique person-identifying marker—as if duplicate Elijah Wood’s sense of ownership would feel, qualitatively, different from original Elijah Wood’s. So we think (3) is possible.

Whether it’s possible for us is another question. One thing the above thought experiment illustrates is the difficulties of occupying another subjective perspective. It involves, not just seeing the world through another’s eyes, but experiencing it with their memories, personality traits, beliefs, desires, and so on. And this complicated mesh of perspective may affect how any particular mental state is experienced. Elijah Wood’s fear of spiders may feel different from your fear of spiders. For Elijah Wood has different memories, beliefs, desires, etc., as well as a different physical makeup with (at least slightly) different chemical processing, which may very well affect how he experiences fearing spiders. The same is true of pain. Elijah Wood’s pain may not feel exactly like your pain—even if it has a similar cause (e.g., sunburn). And, for us, there’s no way to replicate the complexities of another person’s perspective so that we could duplicate exactly what it is like to feel pain from their perspective. So, for us, (3) appears out of reach.

With that, let’s summarize. In the last section, we introduced four necessary conditions on S1 feeling S2’s pain: (i) S1 is in pain (*Experience*), (ii) S1 is first-personally aware of that pain (*Self-Awareness*), (iii) S2 is (or was) in the same pain as S1’s in one of the senses of (1)-(4) (*Symmetry*), and (iv) S1 is somehow aware of S2’s pain (*Other-Awareness*). In this section, we delved into (iii) and explored the possibilities of sharing others’ pain in senses (1)-(4). What we’ve suggested is that (1) is likely impossible for anyone; that (2) and (3) may be possible, but not for us; and that (4) is possible and indeed actual, including for us.

One thing that we haven’t discussed yet—concerning (4) in particular—is *degrees* of sameness or similarity. One subject’s pain type may be the same as another subject’s pain type to a greater or lesser degree. We don’t think there’s any simple answer to the question of how much two experiences must be the same in order for ‘I feel your pain’ to be true. However, this issue is clearly relevant to the epistemic and ethical implications of empathy—*how* much two pains are the same, or *how* similar they are, has the potential to make a big difference with respect to a subject’s capacity to empathize with another. The same goes for various other details mentioned in this section. So it’s to epistemic and ethical import that we’ll turn now.

### §3 The Epistemic and Ethical Significance of Sharing Pains

We have identified several different senses in which a subject might share another's pain. The question we now face is which of these is normatively relevant. E.g., why might it be good or fitting for S1 to feel S2's pain by being acquainted with—that is, directly aware of—the pain, instead of simply learning about it third-personally? Does the normative upshot turn on the kind and degree of similarity between the pains experienced by S1 and S2? Towards answering these questions, it will be helpful to compare attitudes that *resemble* pain-sharing but aren't pain-sharing in line with (1)-(4). E.g., we imagined earlier a subject who is aware that another is in pain, deeply affected by the awareness at some cognitive level (e.g., it influences their choices), but the subject is not occurrently acquainted with pain. In what sense, if any, does such pain-free awareness of and responsiveness to another's experience fall short of the demands of virtue?

Here's our plan. We'll begin by examining a familiar set of answers—both historical and contemporary—that appeal to the connection between pain-sharing, on the one hand, and both knowledge and moral motivation, on the other. This will help us make vivid a basic insight that they arguably share, and it will also help distinguish the available accounts along several key dimensions: the posited connection between sharing pain and virtue (e.g., whether the connection is contingent as opposed to necessary; instrumental or constitutive), the character of the relevant virtues (whether they are moral, epistemic, or of some other normative type), and the ultimate beneficiary (whether it is the empathizer, the person being empathized with, or third persons who might benefit indirectly). Then we will end by highlighting the value(s) of pain-sharing and introducing our own preferred account of how that value derives from feeling pain itself.

Our starting point is the platitude of folk morality that feeling another's pain is in some sense commendable. If I know my friend to be grieving the loss of a loved one, am familiar with the nature of such grief, yet feel no sadness on their behalf, my response will seem defective absent a mitigating explanation for my lack of feeling. The example does not turn on the fact that it is my friend who grieves. Agents who are incapable of responding empathically to the suffering of strangers are often judged unfavorably. And while empathy and compassion—states that arguably involve pain-sharing—have been criticized by some philosophers and psychologists for being cognitively distorting (see, e.g., Bloom, 2016; Prinz, 2011; Manne, 2018), by and large people seem to think that such attitudes are good and fitting, at least in general. So even if there are circumstances where empathy is unwarranted,

say, where the felt pain is morally criticizable (like jealousy), our focus for now is on understanding the positive cases.

One possibility is that pain-sharing enjoys a kind of reflected glory, a positive status by association with more familiar virtues. For example, an influential explanation appeals to the fact that sharing other people's experiences is often a source of insight into their psychologies, insight that can combine with the empathizer's other concerns to motivate other regard. The general idea—that empathy and compassion are well-springs of moral motivation—features prominently in eighteenth-century moral philosophy, as reflected in the work of David Hume (1990 [1740]) and Adam Smith (1982 [1759]). Dick Boyd (1988) articulates the point thusly:

[I]t is extremely plausible that for normal human beings ... the capacity to recognize the extent to which others are well or poorly off ... and the capacity to anticipate correctly the probable effect on others' well-being of various counterfactual circumstances ... depends upon their capacity for sympathy, their capacity to imagine themselves in the situation of others or even to find themselves involuntarily doing so in cases in which others are especially well or badly off (pp. 341).

For Boyd, experiential mirroring—as in empathy—is a morally important source of knowledge about others. However, on his view, that experiential mirroring is a source of knowledge is a contingent fact about us; both actual and possible agents who lack such mirroring capacities can still have knowledge of, for example, the extent to which others are well or poorly off, albeit through means that are not as efficient as empathic simulation (e.g., by reading books on human psychology) (pp. 342). Likewise, the connection between pain-sharing and other-regarding choices is supposed to be contingent since it depends on the character of an agent's general cares and concerns—e.g., whether one is moved by knowledge of others' wellbeing.

Because these are contingent connections, a view like Boyd's does not deliver all that we might want from an account of the value of empathy. The posited connection between pain-sharing and independently valuable ends, like knowledge or other-regarding action, seems too weak to accommodate ordinary moral intuition. For instance, the moral defect in my inability to experience any sadness on behalf of my grieving friend does not seem fully mitigated by my awareness of their grief or the fact that I might have taken steps to mitigate their pain. Moreover, if pain-sharing is a means of discovering practically relevant truths about other agents, we should be able to state more precisely (a) how it is that pain-sharing helps us discover such truths, and (b) the nature of the relevant



truths.<sup>17</sup> We suspect a more precise account of the psychological mechanisms involved might reveal a more robust connection between pain-sharing and virtue.

Consider an account by Olivia Bailey (2021) that captures this. Bailey points out that sharing another’s mental state (in the experiential sense) results in a cognitive re-orientation in the empathizer (e.g., the pain one feels absorbs one’s attention; other matters fall away from one’s view) as well as somatic responses (e.g., a sinking feeling; the welling up of tears) that are richly isomorphic to the other’s experience. This mechanism enables S1 to grasp in considerable detail what is going on in S2’s mental life when S1 feels S2’s pain. Pain-sharing may not be the *only* means of learning the relevant facts about another’s experience. But it appears to be a significant mechanism, nonetheless, one that allows us to inhabit another’s viewpoint much more closely than we normally do.

Moreover, what distinguishes Bailey’s account from Boyd’s is that, on her view, rich experiential mirroring serves another purpose—it is *necessary* for responding to a very basic desire that people have, a desire for what she calls “humane understanding.” She writes:

People have a complex but profound need to be humanely understood. Because we respond to others’ very real need when we pursue this sort of understanding of their emotions, empathy is best understood as itself a way of caring, rather than just a means to promote other caring behavior. This form of care plays a significant role in a variety of relationships central to human flourishing. More specifically, when we empathize with others, we directly understand how their emotions reflect the evaluative properties the objects of those emotions appear to have (pp. 2).

The theoretical background is complex, but the proposal boils down to two core claims: (1) that pain- and emotion-sharing are necessary for understanding a person’s normative or broadly evaluative commitments; and (2) that pain-sharing is good—it contributes to the wellbeing of those with whom we empathize—because it is non-instrumentally desired by others.

Although Bailey presents these claims as related, they can be assessed independently. That being so, it isn’t clear to us why evaluative understanding requires experiencing other people’s feelings or emotions. Appreciating the truth of most ordinary normative beliefs—for instance, that pain is bad or that suffering is worth mitigating—or why a normative proposition might seem true to a subject does not depend, necessarily, on mirroring another’s experience. Consider, again, cases of “pain-free” awareness: S1 is aware that S2 is in pain, and aware that S2’s pain is similar to pain that S1 has

---

<sup>17</sup> A question one might raise about such proposals is whether the sharing of pain conduces to a better appreciation of irreducibly evaluative or normative facts (not just non-normative facts)—e.g., the fact it is *bad* that someone is suffering, or that one *ought* to do something about. The correlation between pain sharing and pro-social moral beliefs calls out for some kind of explanation, even if pain sharing isn’t necessary for securing or sustaining the relevant beliefs.

experienced previously, but S1 does not occurrently experience any pain. Plausibly, this pain-free state of awareness would be sufficient for knowing and understanding S2's evaluative commitments in relation to pain.

On the other hand, pain-free awareness wouldn't necessarily address S2's desire to be humanely understood. For if the desire to be humanely understood *just is* the desire to have one's experiences mirrored to some extent, then pain-sharing is a necessary means of responding to a basic desire of others the satisfaction of which is (often) non-instrumentally good.<sup>18</sup> Bailey seems right on this score. It seems plausible to us that people have such basic desires, even if contingently and non-universally.

But set aside people's desires for now and focus on the general idea that pain-sharing may be a necessary source of insight about others—insight that, in turn, influences how we treat them. It is worth noting that this idea has deep historical roots. Perhaps the most radical proposal is Arthur Schopenhauer's (1915 [1840]), who, drawing on early Buddhist and Hindu ethical traditions, suggests that sharing another's pain—"direct and, as it were, instinctive participation in the sufferings [of others]" (pp. 200)—is necessary for appreciating and appropriately responding to a supposed fact that the empathizer and the person being empathized with are "one and the same entity" (pp. 203-204; pp. 273-274). On Schopenhauer's view, it is only by empathizing and caring about others as we do ourselves that we rationally respond to the sameness of putatively distinct selves. His reasons for thinking that the apparent distinctness of selves is illusory are somewhat opaque, as are his reasons for thinking that only the empathic act in conformity with the truths of personal identity.<sup>19</sup> However, recent attempts to vindicate the general strategy warrant examination.

For example, Marshall (2018) defends a neo-Schopenhauerian explanation of the value of broadly compassionate attitudes predicated on the notion that sharing another's pain delivers a distinctive and "irreplaceable" epistemic good, what he calls "being in touch" with another's pain (pp. 47). He motivates this key epistemic concept based on thought experiments drawn from the philosophy of perception designed to show that sensory experience—seeing, feeling, and hearing—uniquely contribute to the perceiver's overall epistemic situation. A central example is drawn from Johnston (2011, pp. 167). Imagine a subject with "perfectly reliable blindsight" who forms reliably true beliefs about the layout of objects in the environment and their properties but does not visually

---

<sup>18</sup> It is not always morally good to satisfy people's desires. We leave open the possibility that our desires to have our conscious experiences mirrored may be unreasonable (e.g., where there is some defect in the experience).

<sup>19</sup> For a notable recent attempt to make sense of the view, see Albahari (2014).

experience those objects. There seems to be something lacking, epistemically, in the blind-sighted person's situation. In Marshall's terminology, the person is not "in touch" with objects and properties in the room. Analogously, he argues, a person who has 'blind' awareness that another is in pain but doesn't experience pain herself fails to be in touch with the other's pain.

We are, ourselves, highly sympathetic to the point that the blind-sighted person lacks something of non-instrumental epistemic worth that is essentially tied to perception. However, we aren't convinced that Marshall provides a detailed enough account of this epistemic good for us to evaluate his central claim that pain-sharing is a means of "being in touch." For on some accounts of what it is to "be in touch" we are never in touch with other people's pain, and so this cannot be the right way to understand the value of pain-sharing.

Consider, for example, Johnston's own account, which is based on a direct-realist metaphysics of visual perception, according to which perceiving subjects are "directly acquainted" with the objects and properties they perceive (Johnston, 2004). When I see a red chair, the red facing front of the chair is immediately present in my conscious experience. Direct realists employ their own tactile metaphor to explain the positive epistemic status of such awareness: the perceiver has immediate "cognitive contact" with external reality.<sup>20</sup> But if unmediated contact with perceived objects is what grounds the non-instrumental value of perception, then it is no longer clear that ordinary pain-sharing involves "being in touch" with other people's pain. For reasons discussed earlier, it seems unlikely—perhaps even impossible—that when S1 share's S2's pain, S1 is acquainted with S2's token pain. At best, S1 is acquainted with their own pain that is either wholly or partially of the same type as S2's. So, it is far from obvious that empathetic pain-sharing involves being in touch with another's pain.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Coleman (2019): "in acquaintance, awareness achieves metaphysical and epistemic connection with another existent... Had it not enlarged the subject's world in this way, acquaintance's claim to be a kind of [valuable knowledge] would be jeopardized" (pp. 59).

<sup>21</sup> While Marshall aspires to stay neutral on the value of "being in touch," the truth of his claims about pain-sharing clearly depends on offering a precise account. To motivate the point differently, suppose that the value of being in touch can be characterized in terms of representational accuracy or ordinary knowledge of truths. Indeed, Marshall often invokes representational ideas: "Compassionate reactions... significantly resemble pains like the wombat's, and a representation's resembling pain is necessary and sufficient for it to reveal pain, and so for letting the subject know *what the property is like*" (pp. 68). What's puzzling about the explanation, however, is that knowledge of what pain is like does not generally depend on an occurrent experience of pain, even if it does depend on a subject's having previously experienced pain (Lerner, 2019). So, it remains unclear why S1 who is aware, non-experientially, that S2 is in pain cannot lay claim to "being in touch" with the pain, on the assumption that S1 has experienced pain before. If there is more to knowing pain than simply knowing what pain feels like that derives, essentially, from simultaneously experiencing pain, as Marshall seems to think (and we're inclined to agree), it would be helpful to know what that additional knowledge amounts to. We suggest a way of precisifying and defending the claim below.

The above concerns notwithstanding, Marshall's proposal is appealing, and he is clearly not alone in thinking that pain-sharing necessarily enriches the pain-sharer's epistemic situation. Consider an alternative approach defended by Atiq (2021). He argues that the value of empathy can be explained in terms of a species of non-propositional knowledge of objects and properties that requires direct perceptual acquaintance with those objects and properties. The epistemology is most famously associated with Bertrand Russell—in particular, his defense of “knowledge by acquaintance.”<sup>22</sup> The explanation of empathy's value in terms of knowledge by acquaintance proceeds in two steps.

First, Atiq argues that even if no one can be directly acquainted with the token pains and aversions of another's experience, there appears to be a constitutive connection between being so acquainted—and, hence, having acquaintance knowledge of—another's pains and aversions, and being motivated to mitigate their suffering. The constitutive connection derives from the fact that phenomenologically salient desires to mitigate pain are typically included in the sensible content of a person's painful experience. Hence, *if* S1 were directly acquainted with the token pains and desires experienced by S2, then, necessarily, S1 would be moved to stop S2's pain. The failure to care about other people's suffering is thus always explainable in terms of an epistemic defect in our situation: our inability to know, by direct acquaintance, the token pains and desires of others.

Second, he maintains that although no ordinary agent is directly acquainted with the token pains and aversions of another, in the grip of (imaginative) empathy it can seem *as if* we are. That is, sharing pain-*types* simulates the state of being directly acquainted with the token features of another's mental life. Moreover, this simulation builds epistemic character by testing the empathizer's intellectual courage, for the (apparent) acquaintance knowledge of another's mental life who is suffering feels unpleasant and is, thus, “difficult to bear” (pp. 14,055). By acting to alleviate other people's pain (rather than turning away from it), the empathic manifest a core epistemic virtue of being able to resist the temptation to give up on readily available knowledge when what is known is hard to bear. In short, empathy—the state of sharing a similar *type* of pain—phenomenologically seems like token-pain sharing (or an instance of knowledge by acquaintance of another's mental life) and, as a result, is both: (a) epistemically valuable, because it affords an opportunity to cultivate intellectual courage; and (b) morally valuable, because the intellectually courageous are more likely to develop practical virtue by regularly choosing to help others.

---

<sup>22</sup> For recent efforts to revive this view, see, e.g., Conee (1994), Tye (2009), Duncan (2020; 2021a), and Atiq (2021).

The proposal has some salient drawbacks. It is a controversial idea that acquaintance with objects and properties is worth preserving as a form of non-factual knowledge. Additionally, Atiq's view turns on a contestable claim about the phenomenology of empathy—namely, that empathic experience involves not just sharing pain-types in the sense we outlined earlier, but it seeming as if the empathizer's felt pain were identical or constitutively related to the pain felt by the other. It seems possible to share another's pain without being under any such illusion. Nevertheless, it seems right that there are epistemic and moral advantages to imagining the other's pain as one's own, especially in terms of epistemic character building. And there may be ways of relaxing the proposal's more controversial assumptions, while vindicating the neo-Schopenhauerian insight that sharing another's pain is necessary for virtue-enabling knowledge.

Before we suggest a potential refinement, it might be helpful to chart our progress thus far. We learn from Bailey and Marshall that pain-sharing may be a necessary source of insight about others, although the precise epistemic gain turns out to be hard to characterize. Atiq suggests a characterization in terms of knowledge that (a) is tied to acquaintance with pain and (b) affords opportunities to cultivate both epistemic virtue in the form of intellectual courage and moral virtue the form of other-regarding action. However, the account relies on contestable epistemic and phenomenological claims.

What we propose is to avoid assuming distinctive epistemic goods like “non-propositional knowledge,” “being in touch,” or “humane understanding,” and instead rely on the fact that there are excellent reasons—from both cognitive science and ordinary introspection—to think that first-personal awareness of a phenomenal quality puts the subject in a position to know many ordinary, fine-grained truths about the nature of the quality that are not, and perhaps cannot be, preserved fully in the absence of experience (Duncan, 2021a). Not only does some knowledge require acquaintance, some of that knowledge decays very quickly, and possibly immediately, once one stops being acquainted. This is why revisiting an experience—e.g., re-experiencing an exotic fruit that one hasn't tasted in a while—can feel like being reminded of what one once knew but forgot between experiences (cf. Atiq, 2021, pp. 14045).

*Why* does acquaintance-dependent knowledge decay very quickly once one stops being acquainted? One potential explanation is just that, as a matter of contingent fact, not all of experience's rich content is stored in short- or long-term memory.<sup>23</sup> Another potential explanation, which we

---

<sup>23</sup> Most of the relevant cognitive science research on this issue focuses on visual experience. The current evidence suggests that, after a very short period of “visual persistence” (Coltheart, 1980), some (but not all) information from

endorsed above and has the potential to provide a deeper, non-contingent explanation of the experience-dependence of some knowledge, is that there is a basic difference in form between the knowledge gained through acquaintance and ordinary propositional knowledge, such that the former simply cannot be fully translated into the latter (see Duncan, 2021a; Atiq, 2021).

However the explanation goes, the main point here is just that there is plenty of reason to think that not all that we know in the grip of an experience is preserved in memory or is communicable. If this weren't true, then perhaps the epistemic value of pain-sharing could be retained over time even in the absence of experience. But, given that it *is* true, much of this value disappears quickly or immediately after the pain-sharing ceases and can only be regained by becoming reacquainted with the pain. This provides some reason to empathetically share others' pains, not just once, but repeatedly.

Put differently, even if knowing, generally, what pain is like does not require *re*experiencing pain, experience is necessary for *full* and *detailed* knowledge of pain's character and the ways in which pain reorients a subject's viewpoint. If that's right, then we can explain why pain-sharing is always epistemically valuable for ordinary agents. It puts S1 in a position to know about S2's pain more fully than S1 could know in the absence of the experience. Our account secures a more robust connection between pain-sharing and knowledge than, e.g., Boyd's view, since experience turns out to be either metaphysically necessary for knowledge or, at a minimum, psychologically necessary—i.e., necessary given the natural limitations of ordinary agents.

Moreover, we can harness the points about empathic knowledge being virtue-enabling without having to make contestable phenomenological assumptions. Insofar as S1 is both rational and motivated to preserve ordinary knowledge gained through empathy—perhaps S1 is intellectually courageous along the lines suggested above—S1 can be expected to act in recognizably other-regarding ways, such as by mitigating S2's pain. It is tempting to suppose, further, that acting well entails not just making morally correct choices but acting based on the right motivating reasons. When S1 is acquainted with pain and thereby motivated to stop S2's pain, S1's reason for acting is in part a

---

visual experience is stored in “iconic memory” for a couple of hundred milliseconds (Sperling, 1960; Pratte, 2018). After this much more of the information in visual experience is lost. Some argue that there is also “fragile visual short-term memory” (e.g., Landman, Spekreijse, and Lamme, 2003; Block, 2022), but this remains controversial. Aside from this, there is “working memory,” which Ned Block (2022) describes as “a kind of cognitive scratch pad that can be used to manipulate information for cognitive purposes” (pp. 250). Block also notes that “Presence of a representation in working memory is not ‘storage’ but rather active maintenance” (ibid.) and argues that working memory typically has a different format than perception (pp. 251-252). The important point for our purposes is just that much of the content represented in experience decays rather quickly and is not stored in memory for very long (and perhaps not even in the same format). This may partly explain why, as a matter of contingent fact, acquaintance knowledge is not preserved fully or for very long in the absence of experience.

rich understanding of what pain is like and why it is to be avoided. The choice is thus highly intelligible partly due to the knowledge that empathy provides. By contrast, it is doubtful that helping others based on non-experiential knowledge of their suffering involves acting for (all) the right reasons, even if such empathy-free actions remain commendable. One explanation for the superior quality of an agent's will who acts for the reasons that empathy makes available is epistemic: experience provides normatively relevant information and acting for the right reasons involves some degree of awareness of the relevant reasons. But there might be other, non-epistemic explanations.

If we're right that pain-sharing makes a distinctive contribution to our epistemic and ethical lives and precisely because it involves experience/acquaintance with pain, then further questions arise about the importance of pain-sharing and the significance of not having what it takes. Moreover, the view's normative implications warrant elaboration. For example, the value of pain-sharing appears entirely neutral with respect to the identity and characteristics of the sufferer. If there are epistemic and moral reasons to share in the pains of others of the sort discussed above, then the other's gender, skin-color, creed, and species do not seem to matter, at least in principle. The reasons to share in the pains of others are, in a clear enough sense, impartial in nature.<sup>24</sup> We consider some of these questions and implications in the next and concluding section.

#### §4 Open Questions

In the previous section, we identified several ways in which empathetic pain-sharing seems valuable:

*Epistemic Value:* Empathetic pain-sharing is epistemically valuable for its own sake.

*Humane Understanding:* Empathetic pain-sharing contributes to a humane understanding of others (which is valuable because it is desired by others and contributes to their wellbeing).

*Motivation:* Empathetic pain-sharing motivates one to mitigate others' suffering.

---

<sup>24</sup> In fact, the reasons may be radically impartial; they seem to vindicate an observation of Bailey's (2020)—that there might be reasons to empathize with the desires of even vicious agents, at least insofar as the unsated desires of the vicious amount to a form of suffering.

*Character:* Empathetic pain-sharing builds epistemic character.

Our preferred account of why, or how, pain-sharing yields these values is that acquaintance with pain gives us fine-grained knowledge of the nature of pain and its impact on a subject's overall viewpoint that can't be gained in other, non-experiential ways, and acquaintance necessarily motivates us to act in light of our experiences—including pains—in ways that other sources of motivation don't (at least not always).

The above values of pain-sharing are connected to the different forms that pain-sharing can take. As a reminder, we identified in our earlier discussion the following forms of pain-sharing:

- (1) S1 is fully in the same token pain that S2 is in.
- (2) S1 is partly in the same token pain that S2 is in.
- (3) S1 is fully in the same pain type that S2 is (or was) in.
- (4) S1 is partly in the same pain type that S2 is (or was) in.

We can now see clearly whether and to what extent each of the above values depends on (1) through (4).

Start with *Epistemic Value*—i.e., the fact that empathetic pain-sharing seems epistemically valuable for its own sake. On our account, pain-sharing of any form—any of (1)-(4)—will (at least typically) involve acquaintance with *some* pain, which is the source of fine-grained acquaintance-dependent knowledge. But what (or how much) is known will vary depending on whether S1 is partly or wholly acquainted with S2's pain and whether that pain is of the same token or type of S2's pain. For example, if it takes being acquainted with a specific form of grief (say, the grief involved in the death of a family member) to know its character fully, then feeling some sadness in response to such grief will not necessarily secure all of the knowledge there is to gain through pain-sharing. More broadly, there may be epistemic value in S1 gaining each of these instances of knowledge, (1) through (4), whether or not we—that is, human beings as we are currently constituted—can actually obtain them all.

As for *Humane Understanding*, it's plausible that, all else being equal, the more S1's pain is like S2's pain qualitatively the more humane understanding S1 will have of S2. So there may be reason for S1 to *strive* for (3)—being wholly in the same pain type as S2—even if (4) (being partly in the same pain type) is all that *we* are likely to attain. However, in terms of humane understanding, we see no



obvious advantage in S1 being in the same *token* pain as S2 (as per (1) or (2)). Being in the same pain type as S2 seems sufficient for S1 to respond to S2's desire to have their experiences mirrored and, thus, is sufficient for humane understanding of S2.

The same is arguably true of *Character*. Epistemic character involves resilience in the face of threats to one's epistemic well-being, threats which include temptations to believe what is convenient and to ignore knowledge that's hard to bear. Sharing another's pain builds epistemic character. But being in a certain *type* of pain seems sufficient for exercising the relevant virtues. We don't see any additional value in terms of building epistemic character in being in any particular pain token.

That leaves *Motivation*, which is trickiest. S1's being in the same pain type (partly or wholly) as S2 is valuable because it may motivate S1 to respond to S2's pain in certain other-regarding ways, especially insofar as S1 is intellectually courageous. But is there additional value, just in terms of being motivated by the right reasons, in S1's being *wholly* in the same pain type as S2? Will that somehow make the motivation more powerful, nuanced, or better in some other way? And would there be extra motivational value in S1's being in the same *token* pain as S2? Perhaps being in the same token pain as S2 would *necessarily* motivate S1 to stop S2's pain even in the absence of intellectual courage for reasons discussed earlier.<sup>25</sup> We consider these open questions that deserve further attention.

There are other, important questions raised by our account that cannot be resolved in a single paper. Below, we highlight some of what remains unsettled in part to underscore the ecumenical nature of our present conclusions.

First, our account does not aim to *fully* characterize the value of empathy. There may be other reasons for empathizing that we haven't considered—for instance, irreducibly moral reasons to empathize for its own sake. Whether or not such reasons are compatible with our account invites further analysis. The reasons we have identified are perfectly general. If it turns out that there are stronger moral reasons to empathize with, for example, those who are closest to us, our account will not necessarily explain such variation, though we see no reason why it would be inconsistent with reasons of varying strength. On the other hand, if there are positive and overriding moral reasons *not* to empathize with some category of suffering agents (e.g., vicious agents), such reasons may well be in tension with our conclusions.

---

<sup>25</sup> Though this may affect whether we should consider the motive *morally* valuable. For if my motivation is to get rid of *this* token pain because it's *my* pain—I'm feeling it—then my motivation might seem egocentric and not sufficiently other-regarding. In which case this motivation, while still valuable insofar as it motivates me to get rid of the pain, may not be morally praiseworthy.

Second, our account does not settle the weight of our reasons to empathize, or whether and when those reasons might be overridden by competing considerations. Consider, first, the question of normative weight. Even if there is *some* reason to know *P* regardless of the content of the proposition *P*, no one thinks all instances of knowledge have equal value. We have little reason to know, or bother trying to figure out, the precise number of stars in the sky or blades of grass in one's garden. Likewise, reasons to have full and detailed knowledge of the nature of pain and its impact on another's psychology might seem trivial. However, one salient difference between the cases of trivial knowledge and that of the knowledge involved in pain-sharing is that the latter is character-building, and there are reasons to seek out character-building knowledge. Additionally, the knowledge also affects our choices in substantial ways, and thus seems relevant to acting objectively. Our choices are evaluated positively when they are made in the light of knowledge that is difference-making. So, there are several reasons for taking the knowledge that empathy delivers to be quite significant. Moreover, many of us find ourselves involuntarily empathizing. And while our reasons to seek out trivial knowledge might seem weak, there are plausibly reasons of a weighty sort to avoid giving up on readily available knowledge, even if what is known is trivial. So, the reasons not to turn away from another's pain when we find ourselves in the grip of empathy—and more fully attuned to the nature of another's suffering—might be quite strong indeed.

But how strong? Couldn't such reasons be outweighed by reasons not to empathize given the way in which pain-sharing can interfere with knowledge-acquisition elsewhere? After all, it is hard to attend to one's intellectual projects when grieving in sympathy with others. And what about sharing other peoples' joy so that one can know, fully, what their joy is like? Are there intelligible balances to be struck between such competing demands? On such questions of comparative weight, we provisionally suspend judgment. For what it is worth, the concepts of normative importance and priority—in epistemology as well as in ethics—are undertheorized; and so, we are hardly alone in finding ourselves uncertain about such matters. Discerning the role that empathy should play in a well-ordered life is no easy task. But establishing rigorously that we ought to make some room for empathy in our lives, that objectivity itself gives us reasons to empathize regularly given the robust connection between acquaintance and phenomenal knowledge, and that epistemically and ethically significant forms of empathy remain within reach of agents constituted as we are, alone in our suffering, seems like a step in the right direction.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Thanks to Uriah Kriegel, Thomas Raleigh, Rachel Schutz, and Daniel Stoljar for very helpful comments on this paper. Thanks also to Earl Conee, Olivia Bailey, Julia Markovits, Andrei Marmor, Colin Marshall, Jeff Rachlinski, Libby Southgate, Bill Watson, the participants at the 2022 Cornell Workshop on Mind and Value, and Beverly, a barber in Melbourne, for helpful discussion of the issues in this paper.

## References

- Albahari, Miri. 2013. "Insight Knowledge of No Self in Buddhism: An Epistemic Analysis." *Philosophers Imprint* 14:1-33.
- Atiq, Emad H. 2021. "Acquaintance, Knowledge, and Value." *Synthese* 199: pp. 14,035-14,062.
- Ayer, Alfred Jules. 1940. *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*. New York: Macmillan.
- Bailey, Olivia. 2016. "Empathy, Care, and Understanding in Adam Smith's The Theory of Moral Sentiments." *The Adam Smith Review* 9: 273-292.
- Bailey, Olivia. 2020. "Empathy and the Value of Humane Understanding." *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research* 104 (1): pp. 50-65.
- Boyd, Richard. 1988. "How to be a Moral Realist." In *Essays on Moral Realism*, edited by G. Sayre-McCord, pp. 181-228. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Block, Ned. 2022. *The Border Between Seeing and Thinking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bloom, P. 2016. *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. New York: Harper-Collins.
- Coleman, S. 2019. "Natural acquaintance." In *Acquaintance: New essays*, edited by J. Knowles & T. Raleigh, pp. 49–74. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Coltheart, M. 1980. "Iconic Memory and Visible Persistence." *Perception and Psychophysics* 27 (3): pp. 183-228.
- Conee, Earl. 1994. "Phenomenal knowledge." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 72: pp. 136–150.
- Dretske, Fred. 1993. "Conscious Experience." *Mind*, 102 (406): pp. 263-283.
- Duncan, Matt. 2020. "Knowledge of Things." *Synthese* 197 (8): pp. 3,559-3,592.
- Duncan, Matt. 2021a. "Experience is Knowledge." *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Mind* 1: pp. 106-129.
- Duncan, Matt. 2021b. "Acquaintance." *Philosophy Compass* 16: pp. 1-19.
- Hume, David. 1738 [1896]. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Reprinted, L.A. Selby-Bigge (ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Jackson, Frank. 1982. "Epiphenomenal Qualia." *Philosophical Quarterly* 32: pp. 127–136.

- Janzen, Greg. 2011. "In Defense of the What-It-Is-Likeness of Experience." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 49: pp. 271-293.
- Johnston, Mark. 2011. "On a Neglected Epistemic Virtue." *Philosophical Issues* 21 (1): pp. 165-218.
- Landman, R., Spekreijse, H., and Lamme, V. A. F. 2003. "Large Capacity Storage of Integrated Objects Before Change Blindness." *Vision Research* 43: pp. 149-164.
- Lerner, A. 2019. "Review of 'Compassionate Moral Realism,' by Colin Marshall." *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*.
- Manne, K. 2018. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marshall, Colin. 2019. *Compassionate Moral Realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1970. *The Possibility of Altruism*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Pautz, Adam. 2021. *Perception*. New York: Routledge.
- Pratte, M. S. 2018. "Iconic Memories Die a Sudden Death." *Psychological Science* 29 (6): pp. 877-887.
- Prinz, Jesse. 2011. "Against Empathy." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 49: pp. 214-233.
- Raleigh, Thomas. 2017. "Phenomenal Privacy, Similarity, and Communicability." *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 4 (22): 637-667.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1911. "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 11: pp. 108-128.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1912. *The Problems of Philosophy*. London: Thornton Butterworth Limited.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. 1915 [1840]. *The Basis of Morality*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London: G. Allen and Unwin.
- Simmons, A. 2014. "In Defense of the Moral Significance of Empathy." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 17: pp. 97-111.
- Slote, M. 2010. *Moral Sentimentalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam. 1982 [1759]. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, edited by D. D. Raphael, & A. L. Macfie. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics.
- Smith, Joel. 2020. "Self-Consciousness." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition), E. N. Zalta (ed.) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/self-consciousness/>>.
- Sperling, G. 1960. "The Information Available in Brief Visual Presentations." *Psychological Monographs* 74 (498): pp. 1-29.
- Stoljar, Daniel. Forthcoming. "Is There a Persuasive Argument for an Inner Awareness Theory of Consciousness?" *Erkenntnis*.

Strawson, Peter. 1959. *Individuals*. London: Methuen.

Tye, Michael. 2007. "Philosophical Problems of Consciousness." In *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness*, edited by Max Velmans and Susan Schneider, pp. 23-35. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Tye, Michael. 2009. *Consciousness Revisited: Materialism without Phenomenal Concepts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1958. *The Blue and Brown Books*. Oxford: Blackwell.