

# Being Understood

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**Abstract:** Philosophical work in the ethics of thought focuses heavily on the ethics of *belief*, with, in recent years, a particular emphasis on the ways in which we might wrong other people either through our beliefs about them, or our failure to believe what they tell us. Yet in our own lives we often want not merely to be believed, but rather to be *understood* by others. What does it take to understand another person? In this paper, I provide an account of interpersonal understanding that speaks to this widespread human desire to be understood by others. On the view I defend, to be understood by another person is for them to see our motivating reasons as justifying reasons, whether or not they actually take our reasons to have that normative force. I then provide an explanation of why such understanding is valuable in our lives, which emphasizes how being understood by another person is a way of being more fully with them.

## 1. Understanding and the Ethics of Thought

The range of subjects which we might seek to understand is vast: we might want to understand the laws of planetary motion, the differences between pointillism and fauvism, or the causes of some particular historical event. Within this vast range of topics, however, one topic stands out in being the only subject of understanding that is about entities to whom it also matters to *be understood*. These are other people.

In this paper, I want to make progress on two questions about understanding other people. The first is: what does it take to understand another person? Put differently, what is it that we care

about, when we want to be understood by others? The second question I will examine concerns the value of such understanding: why does it matter whether we are understood by others? As I construe the topic, an account of interpersonal understanding and of its value should provide answers that speak to the widespread human desire to be understood by others.

The two questions above are largely absent from recent work in the ethics of thought, by which I mean that part of philosophy which investigates the distinctively ethical dimensions of how we think about the world and the people in it—the ethical dimensions of the intellectual or cognitive part of our agency. The dominant focus in philosophical work in the ethics of thought is the ethics of *belief*, with, in recent years, a particular emphasis on the ways in which we can wrong other people through our beliefs *about* them (Basu 2019; Basu and Schroeder 2019) as well as our failure to believe what they *tell* us (Frick 2007; Marušić & White 2018).

Here is an example that illustrates these two kinds of failures:

### *On the Wagon*

Alfred has been sober for the past eight months, after struggling with an alcohol problem for years. At the departmental reception, Alfred proudly resists the temptation to have a drink. When he arrives home, his spouse, Louis, notices a wine stain that the speaker spilled on Alfred while gesticulating a point, and Alfred notices that Louis thinks that he's fallen off the wagon. Seeing this, Alfred tells Louis that he hasn't had anything to drink, but Louis doesn't believe him.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This example, which I have slightly modified, is from Basu & Schroeder 2019.

A common analysis of such a case is that Louis does something wrong by believing that Alfred has fallen off the wagon. It would be reasonable for Alfred to feel hurt, or aggrieved at Louis, not least because, in his own eyes, resisting the temptation to drink that night was an achievement to be proud of. These hurt feelings, directed at Louis' belief, are taken as evidence that it is the belief itself which wrongs Alfred. And in this version of the case, there is arguably the additional, 'testimonial' wrong that Louis commits when he fails to take Alfred at his word. In addition to feeling hurt by what Louis believes *about* him, Alfred may reasonably be aggrieved that Louis isn't willing to believe what Alfred *tells* him. Or so goes one familiar story.

Of course, these views about the wrongs of beliefs are disputable and the subject of a lively debate.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I will not take a stand on whether beliefs are indeed governed by moral obligations in this way. Rather, what I wish to argue is that, whether or not there are ethical norms governing beliefs, these at most describe only a part of the ethics of thought. There are other, equally important, ways in which we have reason to care about how other people relate to us in thought.

Consider a different kind of case. Suppose Ava has decided to quit her job, a good job where she has formed many strong ties, having worked there for the past twenty years. When Ava arrives home, carrying the weight of that decision on her shoulders, the first thing she does is share her decision with her spouse Mia, along with her reasons. When Ava announces that she plans to leave her job, Mia believes her. She says: 'Noted.' When Ava tries to explain why she wants to quit her job, citing that her work has become dull and repetitive, and she fears she is not making any difference in the world, Mia responds in the same way, saying: 'So that's why you've decided to quit. I believe you.' The same pattern continues when Ava tries to articulate what she finds dull

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<sup>2</sup> For the view that there is no such thing as doxastic wronging, see Enoch & Spectre (forthcoming).

and repetitive about her job, when she concludes that, in light of those reasons, quitting her job was the right thing to do, and so on. In each instance, Mia simply and only defers to what Ava tells her.

There is something alienating about the way that Mia responds to Ava. But notice that there is nothing wrong whatsoever with Mia's *beliefs*. Mia certainly doesn't commit any testimonial wrong. On the contrary, she believes everything Ava tells her. Nor does Mia form any beliefs about Ava that Ava would find objectionable. After all, what Mia believes about Ava just is what Ava tells her about herself. Mia is failing to respond to Ava in the right way, but not because of what she believes about Ava, nor because she fails to respect Ava as a source of knowledge. The problem lies somewhere else.

The problem is that what Ava wants from Mia is to be *understood* by her, not merely to be believed. She's sharing her reasons, explaining where her decision is coming from, in the hope that Mia will try to understand her. And yet she isn't getting any such uptake from Mia. Mia may be forming all the correct beliefs about Ava, all the beliefs that Ava might ultimately want her to hold, but there is nevertheless something else that Mia is failing to do: she is not even trying to understand Ava's decision from her perspective.

Thus, one initial lesson we can draw from our example is that our concern for how other people relate to us in thought is not limited to a concern about other people's beliefs about us.

Our example also raises an apparent puzzle. I have observed that, when we want to be understood by someone, being merely deferred to feels *alienating*. It would be perfectly natural for Ava to feel estranged or disconnected from Mia, when Mia responds to her outpouring of thoughts simply by acquiescing to everything Ava tells her. But this is at least in one way surprising. In most cases, it seems, we feel alienated or estranged from people with whom our

views *conflict* (think: citizens on opposite ends of the political spectrum, or ex-spouses disagreeing about who should have custody of their only child). Yet our case is not like that at all. Ava and Mia are in perfect doxastic harmony, given that Mia believes everything Ava says. So, one puzzle the cases raises is how to make sense of this phenomenon. How can it make sense to feel estranged from someone when their beliefs *align* perfectly with our own?

Later I will circle back to this particular puzzle. But first, I want to investigate the underexplored terrain which our example has brought to light. As theorists, we're leaving out something important in our epistemic relations to other people if we focus just on the beliefs of other people. Of course we care about whether other people believe what we say, as well as what beliefs they hold about us. But equally we care to be understood by others, especially in the context of close relationships. And that concern—the concern to be understood by others—simply isn't accounted for in terms of a concern for what other people believe. It's a concern for something else, or something more, than another person's beliefs about us.

But what exactly is the content of this concern? What is it that we care about, when we want to be understood by another person?

In the next two sections, I consider a pair of answers to this question: the Explanatory Model (section 2), and the Taking Account (section 3). I argue that the first view fails by including too much, whereas the second fails by including too little. I then sketch an alternative view, the Perspectival account (section 4). Finally, in section 5, I draw on that account to illuminate what is *valuable* about being understood, and to solve the puzzle of harmonious alienation.

One important clarification: in what follows, I will focus my attention on different accounts of our desire to be understood in what we might call the 'local' sense. That is, I am interested in what we care about what we want other people to understand our *particular* intentions, wishes,

feelings, beliefs, and so on. The example above is of this kind: there is a specific decision that Ava has made and wants Mia to understand. Contrast this concern with the ‘global’ sense in which I might care about another person simply understanding *me*, as a person, full stop. I focus on being understood in the local sense not because I think it is more important, but rather because it seems to me to provide a more tractable entry-point into our topic. That is, it seems to me that an account of what it is for another person to understand me, as a whole, will have to appeal to an account of what it is for another person to understand some of my attitudes. And so the phenomenon of being understood in the local sense seems like the right place to start.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The Explanatory Model

The desire to be understood by others in this local sense is a natural and familiar feature of interpersonal relationships. In the example above, Ava, having made this momentous decision to leave the job where she’s been working for the past twenty years, wants her decision to be understood by her partner Mia. Even the contrast case of Alfred and Louis arguably brings out the importance of such interpersonal understanding. Alfred feels hurt, and let down, that Louis believed he started drinking again. If Louis were eventually to apologize, one thing that Alfred might care about is whether Louis actually *understands* why he felt so hurt and let down by Louis’s earlier lack of faith in him. Examples of our concern to be understood by others simply abound.

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<sup>3</sup> Against this methodological approach, one might argue, first, that we can’t understand other people in the local sense without first understanding them (at least to some degree) in the global sense, and, second, that understanding another person in the global sense is not reducible to understanding any number of particular attitudes or actions of theirs. I have sympathies for both of these ideas, but, as I will try to show in the remainder of this paper, I nevertheless believe that we can make philosophical progress on what it takes to understand another person in the local sense, without giving an account of interpersonal understanding in the global sense.

Moreover, my gloss on the aftermath of the Alfred and Louis case suggests a very natural account of the concern to be understood by others. I said that Alfred would care about whether Louis understood *why* he felt hurt and let down. This suggests the following, more general view: the desire to be understood by others is a desire for others to understand *why* we intend what we intend, feel what we feel, and so on. Call this the *Explanatory Model*, since explanations are answers to why questions. It says that understanding other people is a species of understanding *why* something is the case. When we want to be understood, what we want is for others to understand why we hold the attitudes we do.

Since, on this picture, understanding other people is a species of understanding why, it inherits basic features of understanding why in general. One of these is that understanding why is belief-entailing: if you understand why p, then you believe that p, and there is some proposition q of which you believe that q is why p. Another feature is that understanding why p is factive: if you understand why p, then p, and q is why p. In other words, when you understand why p, you hold certain beliefs about p and its explanation, and those beliefs are correct.

These features, however, are not yet what is most distinctive about understanding why. What truly distinguishes understanding why is the further condition that, when you understand why p, you yourself *grasp* the explanation of why p, in an essentially first-personal way.

For instance, on Alison Hills' account of grasping, what differentiates the person who understands why p (from, say, the person who merely knows why p), is that they have a suite of cognitive abilities with respect to that explanation. Not only can they correctly identify the explanation for why p is true in this particular case, they can also correctly answer a range of questions about what would have happened had things been different (Hills 2016).

Here's an example. When I tried mountain biking for the first time I wiped out on a sharp turn. I surmised that I wiped out because I was going too fast, but I couldn't have said much more than that. By contrast, the biking instructor who was behind me had a much richer sense of where this particular event fit in modal space. If asked, they would have been able to answer a wide range of what-if questions, such as: would I have fallen (i) had I been going slower?; (ii) had I taken the turn wider than I did?; (iii) had I been leaning forward on my bike rather than leaning back?; as well as various permutations of those counterfactuals. The basic idea animating Hills' account is that genuinely understand why something happened requires, at least to some degree, being able to correctly answer what-if questions of this sort. When you have that ability, you have 'cognitive control' over the relationship between a fact and its explanation.

Just as we can understand why events happen in the natural world, so too can we understand why other people hold the attitudes they do. The view under consideration is that the desire to be understood by other people is a desire for such understanding. What we want is for others to understand *why* we acted as we did, feel what we feel, and so on, where understanding why involves having this distinctive kind of cognitive control over a fact and its explanation.

The problem with this view, I will now argue, is that it is overly broad. *Any* correct explanation of a person's actions or attitudes can be, in principle, the basis of my understanding why they hold the attitude they do. Yet some of these explanations will appeal to reasons which the other person could not recognize *as her own*. These explanations may thus provide one with genuine understanding of *why* another person holds the attitudes they do, yet they will fail to make contact with what the that person's concern is in wanting to be understood.

For example, imagine that Mia, in our example above, went on to respond to Ava like this: 'I totally get it: you're having a mid-life crisis! People in your age range usually report lower

satisfaction with their life, depending on some other factors, and often feel the need to make a significant change in their life as a result. So, it makes sense that you would want to quit your job!”

Here are two observations about this version of the case. The first is that the explanation to which Mia appeals may very well provide a basis for her to understand why Ava has decided to quit her job.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Mia’s grasp of the relevant psychological and economic explanations may even be very fine grained. Mia might be able to say, to a great degree of accuracy, whether Ava would have decided to quit her job in a wide range of counterfactual circumstances: had Ava been working at her current job for ten years rather than twenty?; had she been single rather than in a relationship; had it been summer instead of winter? That is, we can imagine that Mia has robust cognitive control over the event of Ava’s decision to quit her job and the many psychological and environmental factors that played a role in bringing that event about. She genuinely *understands* why Ava decided to quit her job.

The second observation is that, for all the counterfactual questions that Mia may be able to answer accurately, it nevertheless seems quite reasonable for Ava to feel that Mia is not really trying to understand *her*. From Ava’s perspective, the multi-variable psychological explanation to which Mia is appealing will seem completely foreign. Even if facts about Ava’s situation are instance of a more general tendency among people roughly her age, and even if noting this provides an explanation of why she’s decided to quit her job, it nevertheless remains that such general tendency facts are foreign to her own reasoning. They do not show among *her reasons* for intending to quit her job. Ava’s reasons, the reasons she’s been trying to share with Mia, are that her current job is dull and repetitive, and that it doesn’t make a positive difference in the world.

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<sup>4</sup> See Stone et al. (2010) for an influential study about the influence of age on wellbeing self-reports, which includes the by now notorious wellbeing ‘U-curve’.

Until Mia understands her reasons, Ava may reasonably feel that she, herself, has not been understood.

Here is the same line of argument put in a general form. We can distinguish between two kinds of reasons as they relate to actions and attitudes: explanatory reasons and motivating reasons. Explanatory reasons are a capacious group: they include any fact that is a cause, and so partially explains, why someone holds some attitude. Motivating reasons, or reasons ‘for which’ someone holds an attitude, are a narrower set. Someone’s motivating reasons for holding an attitude are *that person’s* reasons. They are the reasons that, in the agent’s own eyes, count in favour of the attitude they hold. Motivating reasons also have explanatory power: the reasons for which someone holds an attitude explain why they hold that attitude.<sup>5</sup> But the reverse does not hold: many, in fact most, explanatory reasons do not appeal to the agent’s motivating reasons at all.

With this distinction in hand, we are now in a position to appreciate why the explanatory model fails to provide an adequate account of the desire to be understood by others. In its common form, the desire to be understood by others is a desire to be understood on the basis of our motivating reasons, on the basis of the reasons that show up from our own perspective. Yet not every reason that explains our action or attitude is a motivating reason of ours. Thus, there are going to be many ways of genuinely understanding *why* people act or feel as they do, on the basis of explanatory reasons, that nevertheless won’t make contact with another’s desire to be understood. That is why the explanatory model is overly broad.

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<sup>5</sup> Strictly speaking, a motivating reason is a *part* of an explanation for why someone holds an attitude, rather than an explanatory reason in its own right. At least, this is so on the view that motivating reasons are propositions. On this view, motivating reasons can be false propositions. Since false propositions can’t explain anything, this means that what actually explains an agent’s action or attitude is their representation of the consideration they take to be a good reason (cf. Singh 2023: 425).

The argument above also has a more positive upshot. What the distinction between explanatory and motivating reasons helps to bring out is a very basic idea about interpersonal understanding, namely: in order to feel understood by others we must be represented by them in a way we can recognize as our own. Conversely, we don't feel understood by others, or we feel misunderstood, when others represent us in a way that is completely foreign to our experience or reasoning. That is why it matters that another person attends to our motivating reasons. They are the reasons we can recognize as our own.

This observation suggests a different approach. One natural way of thinking about an agent's motivating reasons is that they are the reasons that the agent in some way *takes* to justify the action they are performing or the attitude they hold. Thus, if the desire to be understood by others involves a desire to be represented by others in a way we can recognize as our own, and if our motivating reasons are just the reasons that justify our actions or attitudes in our own eyes, then perhaps the desire to be understood by others is a desire for others to recognize our reasons as good ones: as reasons that *justify*.

I turn to such an account next.

### 3. The Taking Account

Stephen Grimm has defended a view on which understanding another person's action is matter of regarding their goal as in some way *good* or choiceworthy. Grimm calls this view 'understanding-as-taking-to-be-good.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Grimm 2016: 219 ff.

Grimm's account is primarily an account of understanding the *actions* of others, hence its emphasis on taking the goals of others to be good. But the basic idea animating Grimm's account generalizes easily beyond the case of action. If I must take your action to be aimed at good ends in order to understand it, then what we are saying is that I must take your action to be *well motivated*. After all, the goal of an action can be redescribed as the reason for which one acts.<sup>7</sup> If my goal in giving you this surprise gift is to make you happy, it must also be true that the reason for which I give you this gift is that it will make you happy. And if the goal at which I thereby aim is a good one, my action is well-motivated: the reason for which I act is also a normative reason. It justifies or provides normative support for the action in question.

Formulated in these terms, Grimm's taking-to-be-good account generalizes far beyond the case of action. We can now say: understanding another person's action or attitude is a matter of taking their action or attitude to be well-motivated, of taking that person's motivating reasons to justify the action or attitude which is based upon them.

Call this the *Taking Account*. In its most general form, it says that the desire to be understood by others is a desire for others to take our motivating reasons to justify that which is based upon them.

Here are two observations about the 'taking' in the Taking Account. First, taking is belief-entailing. If I take you to be justified in feeling angry, I believe that you are justified in feeling angry. Second, although taking is belief-entailing, mere belief is not sufficient for it. There is more to taking your reasons to justify your anger than merely believing that they do. I might defer to

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Skow 2016: ch. 6.

you that your anger is justified for these reasons, thereby coming to believe *you*, without *myself* taking those reasons to justify your anger.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas the Explanatory Model was too broad, the Taking Account strikes me as too narrow. On the Taking Account, we can understand others only on the condition that we take their motivating reasons to be good ones. Yet the requirement that others take our actions or attitudes to be *well*-motivated seems to rule out the possibility of interpersonal understanding in situations where such understanding is intuitively not only possible, but desirable.

Here is a broad-brush version of that worry. The Taking Account rules out the possibility of understanding other people with whom we have deep normative disagreements. In order to understand you, on the present account, I must take your motivating reasons to genuinely count in favour of your actions or attitudes. In other words, interpersonal understanding is possible only if we *agree* about what our normative reasons are. The Taking Account thus excludes, almost as a matter of definition, what one might have thought was a central role of interpersonal understanding in moral and political life. The importance of understanding other people, far from being ruled out by persistent normative disagreement, seems on the contrary to take on a special urgency in precisely those cases. In political life, we might have thought, we can understand one another without necessarily agreeing about what reasons there are, and this mutual understanding is part of what enables us to navigate our normative disagreements with respect, i.e., without simply trying to overpower those with whom we disagree. On the Taking Account, interpersonal understanding simply cannot play this function, for it is impossible to understand those with whom we disagree about what reasons there are.

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<sup>8</sup> At least, this is how I think we need to interpret Grimm's notion of 'taking.' See also Hlobil (2019: 706), who argues that the notion of 'taking' involved in inference (taking the premises to entail the conclusion) is likewise not transmissible via testimony.

That is one kind of concern about the Taking Account, one that concerns the role of interpersonal understanding in political life. Of course, a proponent of the Taking Account might simply embrace the implication I have highlighted, accepting that we cannot understand the political views of those with whom we disagree in a fundamental way. I mention this implication simply to illustrate a general worry about the Taking Account: that it rules out the possibility of interpersonal understanding where we might reasonably hope find it.

Here is a sharper version of that worry, with an implication that is more difficult to embrace. The sharper version of the problem is that we *ourselves* need not, and sometimes do not, take our motivating reasons to actually justify that which is based upon them. When we don't, we may nevertheless want to be understood by others. But in these cases that won't be a desire that others *take* our motivating reasons to actually justify. We don't even believe this ourselves.

Here's an example of what I have in mind. Suppose Young Scholar is making summer plans. After careful deliberation, they come to conclusion that they ought to spend the month of June with their family. And yet they can't help thinking of all the work they could get done in June if they stayed in residence instead, with the result that, against their better judgment, it's now May and Young Scholar is still undecided about their June plans.

As I'm imagining the case, Young Scholar is undecided in part because of all the work they could get done in June, where this is the 'because' of motivating reasons. And yet, by their own lights, they don't take the work-related reasons to justify being undecided. Young Scholar's considered judgment may even be that all the work they could get done in June provides *no reason at all* against spending time with family, given that there is nothing they would do in June which

they couldn't just do later in the summer instead. They are simply finding it hard to bring their intentions in line with what they take their normative reasons to be.<sup>9</sup>

Young Scholar might well want to be understood by another person. But since they don't take their motivating reasons to justify the state they are in (namely: their indecision), the form that this desire will take will not be a desire that another person *take* their indecision to be justified. After all, they don't even believe that themselves.

More generally, we can formulate the problem for the Taking Account as follows. The desire to be understood, we noted earlier, involves a desire to be represented by others in a way we can recognize as our own. The Taking Account tries to accommodate this feature by saying that understanding others requires taking their motivating reasons to be good ones. Yet we sometimes do not take our own motivating reasons to be good ones. In such cases, it seems possible to be understood by someone who, like us, does not take our motivating reasons to justify. To that extent, the Taking Account is too narrow. The desire to be represented in a way we can recognize as our own cannot require another to take our motivating reasons to justify the attitude which is based on them, when we ourselves do not take them to do so.

#### 4. The Perspectival Account

Who can understand Young Scholar, and how would they represent Young Scholar's reasons? It seems to me that what we need is, schematically speaking, something like 'taking' minus the doxastic commitment that it essentially involves. The most natural candidate for this role, I will

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<sup>9</sup> For a defense of the possibility of 'akrasia' so understood, see Davidson (1970), and Tappolet (2016).

now suggest, is the mental state of seeing, or being able to see, someone's motivating reasons *as* justifying that which is based upon them.<sup>10</sup> To see someone's motivating reasons as justifying reasons is to represent their reasons in such a way that, from the vantage point of that representation state, those reasons appear as being good reasons.

Like taking something to be *x*, seeing something as *x* is a mental state that goes beyond propositional belief. It is one thing to be told (and so to believe) that a painting represents the horrors of war; it is another to actually see the painting *as* representing the horrors of war. Similarly, it is one thing to be told (and so to believe) that an argument is valid; it is another to actually see the conclusion as being entailed by its premises, that is, to represent the argument in such a way that the conclusion appears to follow from the premises.

Unlike taking something to be *x*, crucially, seeing something as *x* does *not* entail that one believes it to be so. You might see a stick that is partially submerged in water as being bent, while knowing full well that the stick is perfectly straight. You have some reflective distance from the contents of that perceptual experience. Similarly, you might represent another person's reasons as having the appearance of being good ones, while knowing full well that they are not. You have some reflective distance when you entertain how things appear to other people.

For instance, here is one person who might understand Young Scholar: Wise Mentor, who has been in Young Scholar's situation before. Wise Mentor can remember being in the grips of the desire for professional success, and seeing the world through that lens. They no longer take professional success to be of fundamental importance, but they can still remember feeling the force

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<sup>10</sup> Notably, Grimm himself sometimes uses the formulation of being able to regard or "see" another's end *as* good. But even then it seems to me that Grimm has a committal attitude in mind. He writes, for instance, "It might not be clear to me how some of your goals might be worth caring about, until I can come to "see" them as an instance of a more basic goal that I *do* take to be *worth* caring about" (2016: 221, emphasis mine). Put differently, his notion of seeing another's ends as good seems to rely on, and so presuppose, one's already taking that end to *be* good. By contrast, on the construal I will defend, which seems to me closer to ordinary usage, the state of seeing or being able to see an end *as* good is independent from one's actually taking or believing it to be good.

of those reasons on their will. That is, they can remember seeing those reasons as good ones. In being able to remember that experience, Wise Mentor thus has access to a representational state in which reasons of professional success appear as good reasons. They are thus able to represent Young Scholar's motivating reasons as having the kind of importance that Young Scholar cannot help but treat them as having. They are able to see Young Scholar's motivating reasons as justifying reasons.

The basic idea, then, is that understanding another person is a matter of seeing their motivating reasons *as* having normative force, whether or not one actually takes their reasons to be good ones. More precisely, to understand another person's attitude or action is to understand why they performed that action, or hold that attitude, in virtue of seeing their motivating reasons as justifying reasons. Call this the *Perspectival Account* of interpersonal understanding.

One way to think of this view is as a kind of middle-ground between the Explanatory Model and the Taking Account. The problem with the Explanatory picture was that it included too much: there are lots of ways of genuinely understanding why another person feels what they feel, for instance, that completely bypass their reasons, and so fail to make contact with that person's desire to be understood. On the Perspectival Account, by contrast, understanding another person's attitude is a matter of seeing *their reasons*, the reasons for which they hold that attitude, as justifying that attitude.

At the same time, the Perspectival Account does not make interpersonal understanding conditional on believing that another person's action or attitude is based on what are in fact normative reasons. This was the problem encountered by the Taking Account. One version of this problem concerned the possibility of understanding the views of people with whom we have deep normative disagreements. The other, sharper version of this problem concerned the possibility of

understanding the attitudes of people who are moved by considerations against their better judgment.

The Perspectival Account avoids both versions of this problem. It leaves it open, at least in principle, that we might genuinely understand the views of those with whom we disagree. We may be able to see their motivating reasons as justifying reasons, even if we do not agree that those considerations actually have the normative force that our opponents take them to have.<sup>11</sup> More importantly, the Perspectival Account also allows akratic agents to be understood. On this view, Wise Mentor can understand Young Scholar's decision. In remembering what it was like to take professional success to be of paramount importance, Wise Mentor can see Young Scholar's motivating reasons as normative reasons. They can represent the normative landscape as from Young Scholar's perspective, even while knowing that this perspective is not accurate.

In short, the Perspectival Account steers the right course between the Explanatory Model, which includes too much, and the Taking Account, which includes too little. It accommodates the idea that the concern to be understood by others is a desire to be represented in a way we can recognize as our own. But it does so without collapsing the normative views of the person wanting to be understood and the person trying to understand them. On this picture, we can still hope to understand those with whom we disagree, as well as those who are, in some sense, in conflict with themselves.

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<sup>11</sup> See Kind 2021 for an explanation of how the imagination can enable us to represent things as from a different perspective.

## 5. The Value of Being Understood

I have provided a working characterization of what it is to be understood by another person. That was in answer to my first question: what is it that we care about, when we want to be understood by others? Our second question was about the *value* of that relation to others. Why does it matter whether we're understood by others? What makes that worth caring about?

Here is, in its most general form, the answer I wish to explore here. Being understood by another person is valuable because it is a way of being (more fully, or more robustly) *with* another person. Being understood by another person establishes a genuine form of human connection. That's the basic idea I want to defend. Right now, this is a just first pass at an answer. It's imprecise and not very informative. What I want to do is to try to make it more precise, by explaining how exactly being understood by another person is a way of being (more fully) with that person.

As a way into making that idea more precise, let us circle back to the example I began with, and the distinction between being believed and being understood. Ava shares with Mia her reasons for wanting to quit her job, in the hope of being understood by Mia. But instead of trying to understand Ava's reasons, Mia merely defers to Ava about what her reasons are. She believes everything Ava says, but goes no further. Ava is believed by Mia, but not understood by her.

Now on the hypothesis that being understood realizes a valuable (as-of-yet unspecified) form of human connection, that form of human connection, whatever it is, would be missing in our case. And this seems to be on the right track. If Ava felt lonely, or isolated, in her decision before sharing her reasons with Mia, she may feel just as lonely now. From Ava's perspective,

being merely believed is alienating. It leaves her without the kind of connection to another person that she's trying to establish.<sup>12</sup>

But *why* is it alienating for Ava to be merely believed? How *could* it be alienating, given that she and Mia now agree over everything there is to agree about? This is the puzzle I noted earlier in this paper, about how it can make sense to feel alienated from someone even as you are in perfect doxastic harmony with that person.

Here's what I think is going on. When you believe what I say, your beliefs depend on my own. I'm the source of your beliefs. So, when Mia believes everything Ava says, all that Ava gets from Mia are her *own* beliefs, reflected back at her. That's why it makes perfect sense for Ava to feel lonely in her predicament, even though Mia believes everything she says. Having your own beliefs reflected back at you is just a roundabout way of being by yourself again. What's alienating about being merely believed, when you want to be understood, is that you end up by yourself precisely when you want another person to be present to you.

This gives us a first clue into making our basic idea more precise, the clue being that being understood by another person essentially involves their representing us in a way that *doesn't* bottom out in our own beliefs about ourselves. This follows from the first-personal nature of understanding. What we know about another person we may simply borrow from them, but what we understand about them we must in some sense understand for ourselves. More specifically, understanding another person requires *seeing* their reasons in a certain light, as having justificatory force. Thus, when an another person understands me, they do so in virtue of their *own* representation of my reasons. Their thoughts about me aren't a mere shadow of my own. The first-personal nature of understanding guarantees that.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Bailey 2022:11.

That is the first half of the answer. The other feature of understanding that we need in order to bring our basic idea into focus is that understanding is factive. Understanding something (in general) entails that you represent *accurately* that which you understand. When we're understood by others, we're represented by others in a way that we can recognize as our own. Those who understand us get us right.

The value of being understood by others lies in the particular combination of these two features. The first-personal nature of understanding means that, when you understand me, you're contributing your own representations, rather than mirroring my own. The factivity of understanding means that, when you understand me, you're getting me right. Putting these two ideas together, we get the following: to be understood by another person is to figure (as we truly are) in the thoughts of another person (which are truly theirs). When another person understands me, they are present to me *by* their own thoughts (their own grasp of my reasons), and *in* those thoughts I am present to them (in a way I can recognize as my own). That's the sense in which being understood by another person is a way of being *with* another person. And it's the reason, or at least an important reason, why being understood by others matters for its own sake.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I've tried to do three things. First, I argued that the ethics of thought is not exhausted by the ethics of belief. We care about the beliefs of others, to be sure, but another, underexplored, way in which we care about how we figure in the thoughts of others is by wanting to be understood by them. Second, I provided an account of the content of that desire—of what it is that we care

about, when we want to be understood by others. Finally, I briefly explain the value that is realized when we are understood by others.

In closing, I want to briefly note an important difference between the kind of value I've highlighted and the kind of value usually associated with understanding in epistemology and ethics. The kind of value usually associated with understanding is the value of a higher epistemic achievement. Understanding in science (but also, in ethics and aesthetics) is presented as the ideal form of making cognitive contact with the structure of the world, and valuable for that reason, as an achievement that reflects well on its possessor. Understanding rocks, quarks and tidal waves doesn't change our relation to them. Those entities don't care whether they are understood or not. (They don't care about anything.) By contrast, we human beings care about whether others understand us. This makes an important difference to its value. Being understood is valuable, not only or primarily because it constitutes an achievement on the part of the person doing the understanding, but rather, more importantly, because it changes the relation between us, by making us more fully present to one another.

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