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Simulation trouble and gender trouble

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ABSTRACT
Is it impossible to imaginatively simulate what it's like to be someone with a different gender experience – to understand them empathically? Or is it simply difficult, a challenge requiring effort and dedication? I first distinguish three different sorts of obstacle to empathic understanding that are sometimes discussed: Missing Ingredient problems, Awkward Combination Problems, and Inappropriate Background Problems. I then argue that, although all three should be taken seriously, there is no clear reason to think that any of them are both genuinely intractable and also significant impediments to the kind of empathic understanding we might want. To that extent, the challenge to interpersonal understanding here may be more a matter of skill and work than a hard boundary.

KEYWORDS
Empathy; simulation; imagination; gender; philosophy of mind

It's often thought that a key tool for understanding other people is empathic imagination: trying to imaginatively simulate, recreate, inhabit, or 'take on' another person's perspective.[1] H ow ever, it is also often thought that the more another person differs from US, the harder it will be to empathise accurately. Indeed, some differences, particularly differences of life experience or social position, might be deep enough that successful empathy is basically impossible, even though this is often where we feel most in need of improved understanding. Recent philosophy of imagination has seen much discussion of these difficulties and of whether we should be 'optimists' about empathic understanding across differences or 'pessimists', who think that people of different social groups or life experiences may be simply unable to meaningfully simulate each other's experience (see; e.g. Bailey 2022; Clavel Vázquez and Clavel-Vázquez 2023; Goldie 2011; Kind 2020a; 2021; Mackenzie and Scully 2007; Ngo 2017; Wiltsher 2021).

This paper's primary claim is that there are three importantly different bases for pessimism: three sorts of obstacle to understanding differently-situated others by means of empathic simulation:

1. Missing Ingredient Problems, where the imaginer lacks experience of a particular element of the other's perspective, and thus cannot imagine it.
2. Awkward Combination Problems, where the imaginer has access to the relevant elements but cannot put them together in the right way.

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3. Inappropriate Background Problems, where the imaginer can imagine the right bits, in the right combination, but still goes wrong because these bits reflect the wrong experiential background.

Although this plurality of different obstacles might seem like bad news for optimists, my secondary claim is that once we distinguish the obstacles more clearly, it becomes harder to motivate a strongly pessimistic position, because (I will argue) the obstacles that are most plausibly intractable (Missing Ingredient Problems) are the least significant in practice, while those that tend to be most significant in practice (Inappropriate Background Problems) are the most amenable to (slow and gradual) rectification. Thus there is no clear reason to think that our troubles with simulation are both significant and intractable.

Alongside these three types of specific obstacles, we can also recognise metacognitive obstacles, where even if we could in principle imagine the right thing we don't know whether or how we can do so. And of course all of these obstacles to empathy contrast with what I'll call *failures* of empathy – cases where we could understand, with enough effort and skill, but simply don't. The reference to effort and skill here is important. I assume that the interesting question is not whether it is possible, or even easy, to get things wrong. Obviously we can misunderstand each other, through ignorance, inexperience, laziness, or obstinacy, and just deciding to imagine being someone else will not magically remove those misunderstandings. The interesting question is whether it's possible – with enough information, practice, effort, and good faith – to get things right. This might require developing what Kind calls 'the skill of imagination' (Kind 2020a), and might involve a greater or lesser degree of 'imaginative scaffolding' (Kind 2020b, 137), the process of extracting elements of one's own experience and reassembling them into something that matches an experience one has never had. The obstacles I want to clarify are obstacles to this skilful effort succeeding.

For the sake of concreteness I'll focus my attention on a particular dimension of social difference: gender. More precisely, I'll explore obstacles to empathy across differences in 'gender experience', where this deliberately open-ended term is meant to include not only differences between men, women, and nonbinary people, but also between trans and cis people of the same gender, between people with adjacent but distinct gender identities (like butch and femme, or agender and genderfluid), differences between people's gender-based attractions (e.g. bisexuals and people attracted to a specific gender), and potentially any other differences that people experience as integrally connected to their sense of gender.

My cautious conclusion is all three types of obstacles to understanding apply here, and it's often hard to know which sort is involved in a particular case, but there are also many different sorts of remedy to pursue, and it's often hard to know which ones will work best in a particular case. Moreover, the opacity that impedes empathic understanding between people of different groups is also often present within each group, and even within an individual: sometimes the difficulty of understanding others can ramify into difficulty in understanding oneself.

Missing ingredients

The simplest kind of imaginative obstacle is what I'll call a 'missing ingredient' problem: the imaginer has never undergone a specific experience that is crucial to understanding their target. Colours provide a convenient analogy: Mary, the hypothetical vision scientist who has never seen colours beyond black and white, supposedly cannot imagine them, and to that extent cannot fully understand other people who do see them (discussions of transformative experience often appeal to this point, e.g. Kind 2020a; Langkau 2021; Paul 2014). But the analogy with colours also suggests that this sort of impediment is not absolute: Hume famously granted, even in the teeth of his own theory, that someone who had seen every shade of blue except one might be able to imagine the missing shade. So even if the gulf between colour experience and its complete absence is too big to cross with imaginative scaffolding, the gap between two shades of the same colour may not be.

Does imagining across gender experiences involve missing ingredient problems? And if it does, are they unbridgeable gulfs, like (perhaps) the gap between those who see colour and those who don't? Or small adjustments, like (perhaps) that from one shade of blue to another?[2]

There are of course bodily experiences tied to particular sorts of sexed anatomy. Someone who has never had a uterus won't have the experiences of menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth.[3] Different arrangements of sexual organs provide different arrays of sensations. Medical transition involves all sorts of physical changes and experiences that most people don't experience. All of these might be held up as obstacles to accurate empathic simulation across gender boundaries.

But note two things about this sort of obstacle. First, no specific physical sensation is universal to any gender category – many women haven't gestated or delivered babies, and many don't intend to or can't; the physical experiences associated with sex, menstruation, breastfeeding, and so on are famously hugely variable. This doesn't mean that there is no obstacle to understanding here; it just means that there is at least as much of an obstacle from false universalisation.

Second, it's unclear how qualitatively these various gender-linked sensations differ from other physical sensations, and thus whether lacking experience of them is closer to Hume's missing shade of blue or Mary's complete inexperience with colour. For example, empathic understanding of someone breastfeeding is impeded by not knowing that breastfeeding can often be painful, but it's not clear how far it requires imaginatively grasping the specific quality of that pain, or whether doing so is possible by scaffolding from other experiences of bodily pain. So while there may be an obstacle here, it is not clear whether to view it as an impassable barrier, or as a challenge to scaffold better.

Are there missing ingredients outside physical sensations? It's hard to know; the subjectivity of experience makes it hard to establish that a certain feeling is both 1) shared by people in one group and 2) not shared by people in another group.[4] One interesting candidate is the experience of gender dysphoria: the deep-seated discomfort with one's assigned gender that is often involved in motivating trans people to transition. This experience often seems to be one which cis people have a hard time understanding, and this lack of understanding may contribute to the prevalence of hostile or demeaning

readings of what motivates transition: a sexual fetish, a delusion, an investment in gender roles, or a cynical desire to exploit or mislead (cf. Bettcher 2007; Roelofs 2019).

But it's actually very unclear how far cis misunderstandings here reflect a missing ingredient problem. Trans advocates sometimes ask cis people to imagine scenarios like waking up one morning in the body of the opposite sex. Reactions vary, but sometimes the reaction is visceral unease and powerful desire to get back to one's 'correct' body; this might be taken to suggest that (at least some) cis people do have experiential access to dysphoria.[5] If so, difficulty understanding trans people's motivations would reflect more a failure of empathy than an obstacle to empathy. But more broadly, the general difficulty of comparing any two individuals' experiences makes it hard to judge whether any qualitatively distinctive ingredient is or is not limited to a particular population. To what extent does a trans man's experience of living in a body with typically female traits match what a cis man would experience, if they were suddenly living in that sort of body? To what extent do different trans men's experiences, or different cis men's experiences, match each other's? Indeed, many trans people describe, retrospectively, a period of ignorance in which, due to the impossibility of knowing directly how other people feel about their gender, they didn't realise their dysphoria was unusual: they interpreted it as depression, or a symptom of some other disorder, or 'just part of the background radiation of life' (LaBelle 2020).[6]

The main conclusion I draw from the foregoing is that it is very hard to say with any confidence when, if ever, empathic simulation across different gender experiences faces an intractable missing ingredient problem. Gender dysphoria might be a missing ingredient or it might not; particular bodily experiences probably constitute missing ingredients but they might be more like Mary's inability to imagine seeing red (intractable) or more like Hume's missing shade of blue (tractable). This uncertainty, in itself, might pose a further obstacle: we each *don't know* whether we can reconstruct another's experience out of familiar ingredients if we try hard enough or smart enough, or if there's some distinctive feel that we're missing. But even if there is, at the end of the day, some un-scaffoldable feeling that is proprietary to one group, this might not support any substantial pessimism about empathic understanding. That's because the distinctive quality of a particular experience, all by itself, seems less important to understand than what it means for the person and how it impacts their broader mental life – things that seem more amenable to scaffolding. A more significant challenge is that the recombination process necessary for that scaffolding may face its own sort of obstacle.

Awkward combinations

Sometimes the problem is not having the right pieces, but putting them together the right way.[7] This is where imagination is often thought to shine: recombination of elements drawn from experience is often held up as the central capability of the imagination, and is central to Kind's account of imaginative scaffolding. An initial problem is simply that strong associations, once formed, tend to operate involuntarily. Suppose that my ideal 'game night' is going to a smoke-filled back room to play poker while drinking whiskey, and yours is going to a friend's brightly-lit apartment to play computer games and eat chips and guacamole. If I try to empathise with your experiences of 'a fun game night', I might find that whiskey, smoke, and playing cards keep inserting

themselves into my imagining, no matter how many times I try to make sure I am imagining a brightly-lit room full of computers and dips. Moreover, I may find that I can only imagine *enjoying* the night when the cards and whiskey are there, while imagined guacamole and monitors cause me to imagine the experience as ugly and unpleasant, falsifying how you would actually experience it.

But this sort of difficulty hardly seems intractable, since the involuntariness of the association is a product of long repetition and should likewise be breakable by repetition: enough practice at imagining game night without whiskey seems the right kind of thing to let us eventually overcome this obstacle. The skill of imaginative scaffolding seems to be precisely what is needed here. However, there may be a more enduring and interesting sort of difficulty that impedes scaffolding, which is brought out by Bailey (2023a) in commenting on an example from Langkau (2021):

> [I]f I want to simulate another's love of hockey, which I don't myself care for, I can use my experience of loving the summer Olympics to help in that operation. […] I take my own experience of sport-oriented love, detach it from the summer Olympics, and imaginatively 'stitch' it to a representation of hockey. […] The problem is that my available experience of loving sport does not look like the sort of thing that could be imaginatively stripped of its usual object [because it] is a construal of it as admirable because characterized by the elegant movement of delicate bodies. […] If I try to combine [this] with a representation of hockey, the result will not be a picture, in my mind's eye, of hockey as admirable. These two elements resist being so conjoined because the elegant movement of delicate bodies just isn't a feature of hockey. (Bailey 2023a, pp.225-227)

The worry is that not all experiences are freely recombinable: we may have experience of watching hockey, and experience of enjoying sport, but simply sticking these together won't work, because the enjoyment isn't simply enjoyment but enjoyment-in-virtue-of specific features, which hockey lacks.

One important gender-related experience with this structure is sexual and romantic attraction. People attracted to men and people attracted to women share the experience of finding people attractive (just as hockey-lovers and summer-olympics-lovers share the experience of finding a sport admirable), and to that extent might attempt something like the scaffolding that Langkau and Kind describe, taking their experiences of attraction to one gender, subtracting that gender, and attaching their non-attraction experiences of the other gender. But Bailey's worry seems apposite here: attraction is not simply 'attraction to X', but 'attraction to X in virtue of … ' For many people, the traits that make a man attractive, both physical and behavioural, might clash with the traits that make a woman attractive. As a result, someone attracted to men might find it hard to 'get' what those attracted to women like about them, and vice versa.

Of course this point should not be overstated: false universalism is a danger here as elsewhere. Some bisexuals might find others attractive in ways that have nothing to do with gender; so might some monosexuals, in that gender-specific traits might function as a necessary condition for attraction, without entering into its basis. Moreover, there are lots of differences in what makes a person attractive *within* gender categories. Two friends might both be into men, but find each other's favoured types completely unappealing, asking each other in bemusement, 'how can *that* be sexy?'

There is also an interesting interaction between attraction, admiration, and aesthetic appreciation. Someone who is only attracted to men might nevertheless be able to

recognise and enjoy beauty in women. The empathic difficulty for them is thus not 'how could someone look beautiful-in-virtue-of these features?', but specifically 'how could someone look *sexy*-in-virtue-of these features?' As a result, they might misunderstand someone else's experience of attraction in part because they can so easily imagine finding women beautiful-*qua*-feminine, without realising that they have missed a significant difference by failing to imagine finding women sexy-*qua*-feminine.

People sometimes report a version of this error as delaying their own realisation that they were gay or bisexual.[8] Although they had feelings of same-gender attraction, they assumed that these feelings were just a normal part of the heterosexual experience, because they had lots of evidence of people of the same gender calling each other 'beautiful' or enjoying each other's company. Without direct insight into the experiential tenor of straight people's feelings for each other (and often operating in a hermeneutically unfriendly environment shaped by homophobia and heteronormativity), it wasn't at first clear that their own sexual and romantic feelings were sharply different.

So far I have been talking about how someone else's gender interacts with our attraction to them, but gender also enters into our aesthetic sense of ourselves: images of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny are absorbed into both our picture of how we want others to look and our picture of how we ourselves should look. A woman, used to evaluating her appearance by feminine standards, may face an Awkward Combination obstacle when imagining a man's experience of feeling good about his appearance, even though she is familiar with both 1) experiences of 'feeling good about my appearance', and 2) experiences of something as beautiful-*qua*-masculine. For her, those two elements might 'resist amalgamation into a single coherent evaluative apprehension' (Bailey 2023a, 227): looking good *qua* masculine might only pair with 'perception of attractive other', not with 'feeling good in myself'.

So there is a lot of scope for Awkward Combination problems in empathically understanding across differences in gender experience. But how tractable are these problems? This turns on what explains the awkwardness of the combination: *why* don't these two elements 'fit together'? In some cases it might be a reflection of necessary truths (akin to the impossibility of imagining the number 67 being in love), but presumably that's not the case here. But is it simply a matter of association and repetition? Has the imaginer simply had so many experiences where (say) 'sexy' and 'masculine' went together that they're now indissolubly linked? If so, then it seems as though sufficient practice at imagining different combinations of ideas should be able to gradually wear away the awkwardness, and dissolve that indissolubility. Or, alternatively, does it reflect something fixed and innate about the imaginer's psyche, which no amount of social training and reinforcement could change? As applied to gender, this question is of course a very live, and very controversial one: it is a significant fact that both sexual orientation and gender identity appear to be extremely resistant to change even through concerted, often brutal, often consensual, efforts at 'conversion'. This suggests that there is something more than mere associative learning at work.

However, even if the awkwardness of an Awkward Combination reflects something one cannot change in reality, it need not follow that it cannot be changed in imagination. It may not be possible to become gay if I am straight, or vice versa, but it might still be possible to learn to inhabit a different sexual persona in imagination – perhaps not

with the sort of visceral immediacy necessary to actually enjoy such a relationship, but enough to understand those who do.

Alternatively, we might frame things, as Bailey does, in terms of 'sensibilities': our evaluations are so shot through with our own sensibility that imagined evaluations will carry over that sensibility, even if it clashes with the sensibility of the target we are trying to understand. And sensibilities might be innate, or at least difficult to change (though see Bailey 2023b). However, most of us are 'not so single-minded or pure of thought' (Bailey 2023a, 236) as to have only one sensibility: instead we have many subsidiary sensibilities that imagination can draw out, which allow us to understand people with a different 'home' sensibility from ours. This suggests we can understand people with, say, different sexual orientations, but only to the extent that there is some trace or potentiality of their orientation lurking within us (though the question of how to detect these subsidiary sensibilities and what determines them is an open one). So whether or not we accept Bailey's analysis of sensibilities, it seems reasonable to suspect that Awkward Combination problems, at least those that are not anchored in necessary truths, may be tractable with enough practice and effort.

Inappropriate backgrounds

A third sort of obstacle is the way that each element of our experience is influenced by our experiential 'background', i.e. by aspects of our experience that are not attended, not explicit, perhaps not introspectively identifiable at all. The boundary between this sort of problem and the last might be a fuzzy one, since the line between 'attended' and 'unattended' may not be sharp. But the category is worth distinguishing, because the unattended status of the background poses distinctive problems for empathic simulation. Partly this is just because it is harder to know what we need to change; partly it is because imagination has a documented tendency to 'focalise': to 'focus almost exclusively on the central feature of a situation' (Maibom 2022, 162), while neglecting the many peripheral factors that influence real experiences.[9] Hence even if we have the right experiential ingredients, and combine them in the right way, our imaginings will still tend to be inaccurate when they are of people with very different experiential backgrounds.

This point is often made by appealing to the role of embodiment, broadly construed (see esp. Clavel Vázquez and Clavel-Vázquez 2023; Mackenzie and Scully 2007). The last section already discussed some different ways of experiencing one's body focally, in the sense of focusing on one's body as a particular thing to think about and judge aesthetically. But our experiences of the world around us are systematically influenced by our embodiment even when we are not attending to our body itself, sometimes through mechanisms operating entirely outside of awareness (e.g. fluctuating neurotransmitter levels), sometimes by mechanisms that are accessible to awareness on a given occasion, but whose aggregate effect over long periods is not obvious (e.g. how your height shifts your view of space).

Note that differences between people's 'embodiments' here need not mean differences in bodily properties; people with the same kind of body might have different experiential relationships to their bodies, and through their bodies to the world. Young's famous discussion (1980) of 'throwing like a girl' emphasises how girls are

trained to inhabit their bodies in a different way from boys (spatially constricted, moving one part at a time, making no use of lateral space) even at an age when their bodies are largely equivalent. And a common theme of feminist analysis is that women are forced to experience themselves through the viewpoints of others who may gaze at, judge, and potentially assault their bodies, yielding a form of experience shot through with visibility and vulnerability.[10]

Clavel Vázquez and Clavel-Vázquez discuss a case where a gender difference in backgrounds undermines empathic simulation:

> … if John engages in an exercise of experiential imagination to understand why Anna would be afraid of walking home alone after a night at the pub [he is] taking up Anna's perspective *from his* perspective, the perspective of […] someone who has likely never been stalked or harassed, or who has likely never feared for his safety when rejecting someone's sexual advances. (Clavel Vázquez and Clavel-Vázquez 2023, pp.1398–1403)

However, while embodiment provides a rich vein of examples, it is not actually essential to recognising this sort of problem. Our experiences reflect the accumulated influence of many background factors of which we are not distinctly aware: for example, gender differences in how one is raised to think of one's own mind and mental capacities might produce very different reactions to, e.g, a lack of feedback from one's advisor. This difference might not be traceable to any specific, introspectively identifiable thought or feeling: indeed, it might be something that a person can only realise about themselves by hearing how, say, a lack of feedback shook someone else's confidence, and then finding, when they either go through, or imagine going through, the same events, that for them it would have nothing like that impact. So although Clavel Vázquez and Clavel-Vázquez defend pessimism in part by reference to the thesis of embodied cognition, even someone sceptical of that thesis should still recognise the danger of Inappropriate Background problems for empathic understanding.

How tractable are Inappropriate Background problems? Potentially quite intractable, because overcoming them faces three quite different hurdles. The first is metacognitive: not only do we not know about the experiential background of other people, we often don't know – or better, don't notice – our own experiential background. By definition, it is those aspects of experience to which we generally do not or cannot attend, so knowing how our background differs from someone else's is difficult. Second, even if we know exactly what to do, the actual process of imaginatively cancelling all the relevant background influences and then imaginatively recreating more accurate ones is extremely 'labour-intensive': the sheer number of influences, each individually quite small, could overwhelm our cognitive capacities. Third, even if we could, with great effort, contrive all the necessary adjustments, we risk misrepresenting the other precisely because what is automatic for them is effortful and attentive for us, as well as being potentially infused with other extraneous feelings, like an affect of virtue, guilt, political resoluteness, exoticising curiosity, etc.

Each of these hurdles might be overcome through different means. For instance, one might try to address the first hurdle, our ignorance of how our backgrounds differ from other people's, through testimony: ask them, and listen to what they tell you (cf Kind 2021, 247–248, 253-255). It is not as though each of us begins the enterprise of empathic understanding *de novo*: we have a civilisation's-worth of debates, first-hand accounts,

social science, and however many living people are willing to explain their experiences to us. Indeed, failures of empathic imagining can be a useful part of this process: if John, in Clavel Vázquez and Clavel-Vázquez's example, finds his imagined affect consistently differing from the affect Anna reports, that in itself tells them both something about how their respective experiences reflect different backgrounds.[11]

But even having access to detailed testimony does not by itself resolve the second hurdle: indeed, adding a lot of extra information threatens to exacerbate worries about cognitive overwhelm. Here one might suggest that the thin and abstract operations of cognition can be usefully supplemented by engaging our sensory and motor capacities: change what we perceive and do, and where we do it, and with whom. If we put ourselves in circumstances closer to the people we are trying to understand, spend time around them, and so on, we may be able to supply richer and more fine-grained building materials for our imaginative scaffolding efforts.

Changing our real-world experiences does not, however, remove the third hurdle, and may exacerbate it: the very fact that we pursue such changes out of a desire to empathically understand a different group constitutes a difference from them (cf. Ngo 2017). Pulp's song *Common People* offers a focused critique of a rich person who makes just such an effort at understanding the 'common people' by sharing their life conditions. Pulp argues scathingly that this effort will fail:

> Rent a flat above a shop /Cut your hair and get a job /Smoke some fags and play some pool /Pretend you never went to school
>
> But still you'll never get it right /'Cause when you're laid in bed at night /Watching roaches climb the wall /If you called your dad he could stop it all (Pulp, *Common People*)

Here the simulation of various focal experiences (such as playing pool and watching cockroaches) is executed not only in imagination but in reality; yet elements of the experiential background, like the sense of power that comes from an escape option being always available, and from the effort at understanding being a deliberate contrivance, still produce a systematically different experience, yielding the conclusion that the addressee of the song 'will never understand /How it feels to live your life /With no meaning or control'.

Perhaps there is a way to combine these approaches so as to overcome their respective deficits: some combination of social research, 'empathic listening' (Ngo 2017, 120), social contact, and shared experiences might eventually allow for empathic imagining to correct for differences in experiential background. Of course we might then ask how much epistemic credit should be given to each part of this process – is the imagining really doing any of the work? But as long as imagination can be combined with these other resources, it seems to me that belief in a strictly intractable obstacle here is unwarranted.

Conclusion: how accurate do we need to be?

What does all of this mean for the overarching debate between optimists and pessimists about understanding through imagination? Here Clavel Vázquez and Clavel-Vázquez make an important point:

> If optimists want to argue that the approximation yielded under the constraints we have developed in this paper is enough to do the work, they need to clarify what the precise

> aims of perspective-taking imaginative projects and their success conditions are […] accuracy conditions will depend on the particular context and aims for which experiential imagination is invoked. (Clavel Vázquez and Clavel-Vázquez 2023, p.1416)

Whether empathic imagining is sufficiently accurate depends on what we want it to achieve, and there are numerous goals for which it has been held up as necessary or desirable. We may initially distinguish four.

Is X's empathic imagining of Y accurate enough to …

- … let X make policy decisions based on Y's quality of life? (The focus of Mackenzie and Scully 2007)
- … let X make rational decisions about personal choices to become more like Y? (The focus of Paul 2014 and Kind 2020a)
- … to motivate X to promote Y's interests in useful ways? (Arguably the underlying concern of the figures quoted in the introductions of Kind 2021; Roelofs 2021; Wiltsher 2021)
- … provide Y with the intrinsic good of being 'humanely understood' by X? (The focus of Bailey 2022; 2023a)

Some of these can be read in both more individual and more social ways. For instance, the third function could be either about one person (e.g. John in Clavel Vázquez and Clavel-Vázquez's example) wanting to be helpful and considerate, or about collective empathy as something mobilised on behalf of a social movement (e.g. empathy with victims of injustice, or empathic understanding as a corrective to hostility born from incomprehension). Likewise, the fourth function could be either about differently-gendered people in relationships trying to understand each other better[12], or about women or LGBT + people demanding social recognition of their experiences, not as a means to the end of greater social acceptance, but as a constitutive part of it.

Different functions might impose different standards of accuracy: being moved to take actions in solidarity with others might not require much precision, whereas making policy determinations about how much a year of a disabled person's life is worth, compared to a year of an abled person's life, arguably demands a very high level of accuracy, that may rarely or never be met in practice. Moreover, the availability of alternatives matters. In many situations, asking someone directly what they want or think can do better than trying to empathically imagine being them, but sometimes this is either impossible, or insufficient. The fourth function, humane understanding seems to essentially require empathic imagining: just being told how someone feels and believing it will always leave an unsatisfying opacity, even if it is sometimes the best we can do.

The diversity of different obstacles to empathic understanding suggests a moderate scepticism in practice: there are many ways to go wrong, and they are virtually impossible to identify in advance of trying and failing. At the same time, I don't think there's much support here for in-principle pessimism. Missing Ingredient problems offer the clearest cases of obstacles that might be really intractable, like differences in colour experience, but all by themselves these seem like the least practically significant, and it's unclear if there actually are any of these associated with gender differences. Inappropriate Background problems offer the clearest cases of obstacles that seem practically important,

but also seem potentially the most tractable with enough time, effort, and listening. There might be intractable Awkward Combination problems, but no clearly intractable cases have been demonstrated. So while this paper does not seek to establish optimism in general, I think the upshot of this discussion is more friendly to cautious optimism than to outright pessimism.

A further function of empathic understanding across gender differences is in indirectly providing self-knowledge: people's ability to recognise themselves as trans, gay, bisexual, or asexual may depend not just on direct introspection but on grasping how they compare to others – on realising 'oh, most people *don't* feel this way'. This blunts the practical force of pessimism, because despite all the misunderstandings and pitfalls that we are prone to when we imagine across differences, we cannot avoid doing so. We need some imaginative grasp on other people's experiences, and on how they compare to our own, in order to even know who is different from us and who is not.

Notes

1. None of the terms used in this definition are uncontested, so I will not dwell overmuch on stipulating or defending my own usage; for definitional discussions see, e.g., Stueber 2006, Coplan 2011; Langkau 2021; Maibom 2022.
2. For what it's worth, there may be average gender differences in colour-vision itself: not only are women more likely to be tetrachromats and less likely to be colour-blind, but some studies suggest that there may be differences in average perception of certain colours (see Block 1999 for discussion). But if this kind of subtle difference posed an obstacle to mutual understanding, gender would hardly be the place to focus: there is enough variation among individuals that we would have to start wondering if we really knew what anything looked like to anyone else.
3. With menstruation this is actually less true than usually assumed: there is some evidence that trans women on hormone replacement therapy sometimes start to experience a monthly cycle of rising and falling hormones, likely due to feedback mechanisms in the endocrine system. This can produce some of the physical and mental changes associated with menstruation, even without vaginal bleeding. (See, e.g., Brabaw 2020)
4. The meme-phrase 'the feminine urge to X' has become popular online in recent years, together with counterparts like 'the masculine urge to X' and 'the nonbinary urge to X'. The meme appears to be self-consciously ironic when not absurdist: the first popular example appears to be 'the feminine urge to stab'. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-feminine-urge
5. Others don't: it may be that people comfortable in their assigned gender have a wide range of degrees and forms of gender identification, from deep commitment, through casual indifference (sometimes called 'cis-by-default', Brennan 2015) to nonbinary people who don't realise they're nonbinary yet.
6. There is an interesting tradeoff here between competing social goals: the narrative of confidence, of 'we always knew', has the merit of countering reflexive dismissal from cis people ('it's just a phase'), both in public discussions and in negotiating with the medical system, but it can also potentially exacerbate this hermeneutical challenge for trans people trying to identify and understand their own feelings, who may assume that if they didn't 'always know' that is sufficient proof that they're not trans.
7. It is an interesting question whether we can draw a sharp line between the two. One way of thinking about Hume's missing shade of blue is that it can be manufactured by the imagination specifically by combining elements (e.g. hue, luminance, and saturation) drawn from seeing other shades of blue. See e.g. Mizrahi 2009; Roelofs 2014.
8. For discussion of this sort of difficulty see esp. Wilkerson 2009; Díaz-León 2017.

9. See Schkade and Kahneman 1998; Wilson et al. 2000; Gilbert, Gill, and Wilson 2002.
10. Hence one example of failed empathy that has become cliche: men who respond to complaints about public sexual harassment by saying 'I'd love it if people catcalled me!', because they imagine the focal experience (expressions of sexual interest from a stranger) against the background of their own past experience of sexual interactions and public embodiment, failing to appreciate how different women's backgrounds are likely to be.
11. Wiltsher refers to the learnt ability to link differences in present experience with differences in social situation as 'experiential mastery' (2021, p.323), and suggests that this is the most that privileged people can realistically aim to achieve in terms of empathic understanding of marginalised people.
12. Emma Goldman identifies this as a key failing of patriarchal society: 'behind every marriage stands the life-long environment of the two sexes; an environment so different from each other that man and woman must remain strangers. Separated by an insurmountable wall of superstition, custom, and habit, marriage has not the potentiality of developing knowledge of, and respect for, each other' (Goldman 1910).

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