*Imagining Others*

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# Introduction

Can you imagine what it’s like to be, say, Vladimir Putin or Stephen Hawking? Can you imagine acting, thinking, and feeling as these individuals do, taking their perspectives, and grasping the subjective reasonableness of those perspectives? Most of us know a fair about Putin and Hawking, but for most readers these individuals’ lives are radically different from their own. The question is: Can we correctly imagine what it is like to be someone who is really different from us? Empathic imagination is the capacity that is supposed to give us just this kind of access to other minds.

There is a puzzle about empathic imagination, though. Both philosophical arguments and empirical evidence support the claim that empathic imagination can give us intimate knowledge of others’ thoughts and feelings. However, other philosophical arguments and empirical data indicate that empathic imagination often fails miserably on this front, especially when imagining the thoughts and feelings of those with different lived experiences. Considering empathic imagination in the context of fiction further complicates the assessment of this capacity because in the case of fiction we *seem* to be able to do what the critiques of empathic imagination say we cannot do: vividly and accurately imagine the thoughts and feelings of those whose lives different dramatically from our own. In a nutshell, evidence suggests that we tend to correctly empathically imagine those like us, we often fail to correctly empathically imagine those who differ from us, but we tend to succeed in empathically imagining fictional characters who are very different from us. I shall consider various ways of explaining this puzzling pattern of imaginative success and failure. I shall argue that the best explanation of this pattern of success and failure centers on the motivations driving empathic imagination.

# Imagining Others

Broadly speaking, empathy is understanding and sharing the feelings of others. More precisely, on the view I endorse, empathy has two necessary and jointly sufficient components: perspective taking and affect sharing, sometimes called cognitive empathy and affective empathy (Coplan 2011; Goldie 2000). To empathize is to (try to) imaginatively adopt a target’s perspective and come to share the target’s affect. The empathizer’s mental state attributions may not be complete or completely accurate, and her affect may be diminished or slightly different from the target’s affective experience. Perfect correspondence is not required, and the debate in this paper does not depend on *perfect* correspondence. As long as the perspective taken and affect experienced mostly correspond to the target’s perspective and affect, this will count as successful empathy.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Imagination is involved in both the perspective-taking and affect-sharing components of empathy. When we empathically imagine – or, if you prefer, *mentally simulate*, *mentally recreate*, or *enactively imagine* – we imagine having certain experiences. The target of these imaginings can be ourselves: our past selves, ourselves in counterfactual scenarios, or ourselves in the future. The target can also be other people, including people we know, real people we do not know, historical figures, or fictional characters (Friend 2007; Robinson 2010; Walton 1990). Asa result of the imaginative perspective taking, we imagine experiencing certain emotions that (when successful) correspond to the target’s emotions.

Putting this all together, when we empathize, we use imagination to mentally simulate having a target’s beliefs, desires, and intentions, and we then come to imaginatively experience the target’s emotions. Many scholars of empathy argue that it is a good method for understanding others’ experiences, perspectives, and reasons. For example, Ian Ravenscroft (2017) maintains that empathy is a useful, reliable tool for understanding *what it is like to be* another person. He articulates three criteria for a subject to know what it is like to be a target: (1) The subject and target are in phenomenologically similar emotional states. (2) The target knows (1). (3) The target knows that (1) was brought about by imagining (or observing) the target (2017, p. 149). Ravenscroft argues that we can and frequently do come to learn what it is like to be another person in this way. Of course, there are limits to our ability to understand others’ lived experiences. For starters, we can never *fully* know what it is like to be another person without becoming that person, which of course is impossible (Goldie 2011). So, the best we can do is try to understand what it is like for someone else to have certain thoughts and experiences. Furthermore, we sometimes get it wrong (Ravenscroft 2017, p. 152), Ravenscroft acknowledges. Despite these limitations, many exercises of empathy enable this kind of knowledge of other people.

Ravenscroft is not alone in arguing that empathic imagination is a useful tool for helping us understand others. Karsten Stueber (2017), for instance, argues that empathy not only allows us to know *what* someone else thinks, feels, and will do, it also reveals a target’s *subjective* reasons for actions. That is, empathic imagination allows us to understand what counts as reasons for the target from her own perspective. The capacity to understand a target’s subjective perspective is what makes empathic imagination uniquely valuable. Along these same lines, various philosophers argue that empathic imagination can help us (i) find meaningful common ground with people who ostensibly have very different experiences, beliefs, and values (Read 2021), (ii) resolve conflict due to misunderstanding and allow us to have deeper and more meaningful interactions (Hannon 2020), (iii) learn about fundamentally new types of experiences (Kind 2021; 2020), and (iv) make us less biased by allowing us to consider and balance diverse perspectives and lived experiences (Maibom 2022). If these views are correct, empathic imagination can be a powerful tool for navigating interpersonal differences.

Empirical support for this idea comes from discussions of the Empathic Accuracy research program and evidence rallied in favor of the Simulation Theory of mindreading. For the last two decades, research on Empathic Accuracy shows positive findings indicating that we can accurately imagine others’ thoughts and feelings significantly better than chance (Ickes 2001; Ta and Ickes 2017). The methodologies and findings are nuanced, but overall they indicate that we perform at rates much higher than chance when empathically imagining others’ thoughts and feelings.

Simulation theorists cite numerous findings indicating that empathic imagination is our primary method of understanding and predicting others’ behaviour (Goldman 2006; Gordon 1986; Heal 2003). Simulation Theory predicts a few sources of error in mentally simulating others’ minds, such as egocentric projection and failure to quarantine one’s own knowledge (Goldman and Sebanz 2005; Gordon 2005). In cases where we let our own mental states warp our mental simulation, we are of course more likely to make mistakes. However, these types of errors are understood as quirks in an otherwise reliable psychological process. Even scholars who posit multiple methods of understanding others hold that imaginatively enacting others’ experiences gives us unique epistemic insight into other people.

Though this survey is brief, it indicates that many scholars of empathy regard empathic imagination as a useful epistemic tool. These views are committed to the idea that we can successfully imagine experiencing others’ thoughts and feelings. In other words, the thoughts and feelings we imaginatively adopt tend to correspond fairly well to the thoughts and feelings of the target. The next section considers some arguments against this assumption.

# Mis-imagining Others

Several philosophers and psychologists have argued against the epistemic and moral utility of empathy. Paul Bloom (2017), Jesse Prinz (2011), and Fritz Breithaupt (2019) have argued that empathy is biased, fragile, easily manipulated, and further entrenches conflict. In essence, they argue that we often do not correctly empathically imagine the minds of out-group members. Empirical data from psychology indicate that, as a matter of descriptive fact, we often do not empathize with those we regard as social, political, or religious opponents (Cikara, Bruneau, and Saxe 2011). In fact, instead of empathizing with their negative affect, we often experience schadenfreude at their suffering (Cikara et al. 2014).

Thus, we either do not bother to try to imagine experiencing their thoughts and feelings, or we try to imagine and fail miserably in numerous different ways, or we harness our imaginative efforts on behalf of our own side of a conflict, thus making things worse. There are many ways to fail epistemically and morally with empathy, these thinkers argue, so we should not even bother with it.

These are bold claims, but some elements of the critiques are widespread. For example, contrary to what Ravenscroft (2017) claims, Peter Goldie (2011) argues that imagining *being* another person is impossible. Because of the inherent subjectivity of our mental lives, one person can never fully grasp what it is like to experience someone else’s subjective thoughts and feelings. Instead, we should focus on imagining *ourselves* in the other person’s situation and imagine what *we* would think, feel, and do in that situation. This distinction is sometimes called the imagine-other/imagine-self distinction. Goldie argues that imagine-self empathy is the only empathy that is possible.

Katherine (Tullmann 2020) takes up Goldie’s argument against imagine-other empathy and argues that imagine-self empathy is similarly problematic. We cannot even imagine ourselves experiencing what the target experiences because our own imaginings are shaped by our own beliefs, goals, and values. Thus, whatever we end up attributing to the target is likely to be a warped version of what we think we would or should think or feel, not what a target does in fact think and feel.

Olivia Bailey (2021; 2018) argues that empathy amongst people with vastly different experiences is nearly impossible. Empathizing with another’s experiences involves imagining being in their circumstances, having their mental states, and experiencing their emotions. Emotions, she argues, have an evaluative aspect. When we experience anger, disgust, or fear, we implicitly approve of our appraisal of the target as infuriating, disgusting, or scary. Of course, upon reflection we may reject our emotional responses as inappropriate. However, Bailey argues, we are inclined to approve of our emotional appraisals as fitting responses in the moment. When we empathize with someone whose lived experiences are vastly different from our own, it is difficult or perhaps even impossible to imaginatively recreate their affective experiences. Specifically, we cannot capture the appraisal embedded in the emotions nor the approval of that emotional experience. As such, we cannot accurately empathize with someone whose experiences, perspectives, and emotions radically differ from our own.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Both Tullman and Bailey argue that instead of empathizing in these circumstances, we should simply trust. As Tullman puts it, ‘instead of trying to imagine what the social Other thinks or feels, subjects should ask for and listen to others’ views and, importantly, trust their testimony’ (Tullmann 2020, p. 205). We should trust what others say about their experiences. Trust their evaluations. Trust their behaviour. Trusting in these circumstances requires a heavy dose of intellectual humility, that is, of acknowledging that your own perspective may be limited or flawed.

Adam Morton (2017) argues that imagination is always incomplete and often is inaccurate. Incompleteness and inaccuracy are especially problematic when imagining experiencing others’ feelings. The failure will generate frustration on behalf of the empathizer or empathizee, possibly a false sense of understanding in the empathizer, and ultimately is more hassle than it is worth. Instead of using imagination in an empathic mode, Morton suggests we use imagination to anticipate how the target will respond to ourbehaviour (Morton 2017, p. 187). We ought to focus on whether the target will find our words, gestures, and behaviour thoughtful or caring. This process, he argues, need not involve empathically imagining others’ feelings.

The theorists in this section are clearly pessimistic about the epistemic utility of empathic imagination. The underlying theme seems to be that empathy often does not lead to understanding others. Given these purported obstacles, we should use other strategies for mediating social interactions, e.g., (i) exercising unemotional rational thought in evaluating social and moral situations (Bloom 2017), (ii) simply trusting others’ testimony (Bailey 2018; Tullmann 2020), and (iii) using imagination to strategically orchestrate social interactions (Morton 2017).

# Imagining Fictional Characters

Thus far, we have what seems like a straightforward disagreement about the reliability – or perhaps reliability conditions – for empathic imagination. Some arguments conclude that empathic imagination is a reliable tool, some arguments conclude it is not, especially when used on those outside our inner circle of family and friends. However, empathic imagination in the context of fiction transforms this straightforward disagreement into a difficult puzzle. In the context of fiction, we are invited to experience an intimate peek into lives that are often quite different from our own.

While we do not always empathize with characters, and our own emotional reactions may be misaligned with a character’s mental states and emotions (Carroll 2001), we can and, I submit, often do empathically imagine what it is like to experience what a fictional character experiences.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is what makes narrative fictions so powerful. We do not simply learn what happens in narrative; we learn how it is experienced by the characters in the narrative. Imagine the difference between, say, a CliffsNotes plot summary of *Othello* and our experience of *Othello* as written by Shakespeare. In the former, we learn that Othello is a jealous domestic abuser. In the latter, we come to see how Iago’s lies channel Othello’s sense of honor, love, and trust into feeling like he has no other option but to kill Desdemona. We come to understand his tortured experience despite the fact that for many of us, honor culture, the brotherhood built out of wartime, and domestic violence are not a part of our real lives. We can, of course, toggle between our own perspective as observers and the perspectives of the characters in the narrative (Harold 2000), and sometimes our own perspective may influence how we empathically imagine the character’s perspective. Nevertheless, this is compatible with the claim that we can and often do learn a great deal about what it is like to be a fictional character through empathic imagination (Bailey 2022b).

Empirical evidence and philosophical arguments indicate that we can successfully imagine what it is like to be fictional characters (Harold 2000; Coplan 2004; Bailey 2022b; Kind 2021; 2020). Empathy with fictional characters is different in some ways from empathy with real people, of course (Petraschka 2021). For instance, there may be no fact of the matter as to what a fictional character thinks or feels if it is not specified in the fiction. Moreover, we cannot ask the fictional characters if we correctly empathized. Thus, in some cases, it is difficult to decisively establish that we have correctlyempathized with a fictional character. Sometimes the fiction is written so that a character’s perspective and emotional experiences are ambiguous, and it is up to the readers to decide whether and how to empathically imagine their thoughts and feelings. The character Iago in *Othello* seems to be just this sort of case. His true motivations, thoughts, and emotions are ambiguous and open to interpretation.

Difficult cases notwithstanding, it seems clear that in most instances there are correct and incorrect ways of empathically imagining a fictional character’s experiences. Imagining Juliet as feeling fear or anger or disappointment toward Romeo is incorrect. We do not need to consult with Juliet, Shakespeare, or a community of Shakespeare scholars to establish that. Most of us most of the time do not incorrectly imagine Juliet’s emotional experiences despite the fact that her life experiences differ dramatically from our own. Indeed, many of the purported virtues of fiction concern its ability to help us see the world from very different perspectives and thereby help us become more understanding and tolerant. Thus, these reflections on empathy with fictional characters indicate that we often correctly empathically imagine the emotional experiences of fictional characters who are very different from us.

# Epistemic utility of imagination

The preceding sections lay out the case both for and against the epistemic merits of imagining experiencing others’ thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The underlying question *seems* to be whether empathic imagination tends to generate correct representations of others’ thoughts and feelings, especially when the others are very different from us, but neither the optimistic or pessimistic takes on empathic imagination explain the pattern of facts.

Here is the puzzle. 1. We seem to be able to empathically imagine others’ thoughts and feelings pretty well when they are close or similar to us. 2. We tend to fail when imagining others who are really different from us. 3. But we are very good at empathically imagining the thoughts and feelings of *fictional* characters who are very different from us. What explains this pattern of imaginative success and failure? The pessimistic views on empathic imagination reviewed above can explain 2, could perhaps be stretched to explain 1, but do not explain 3. The optimistic views on empathic imagination reviewed above can explain 1 and can be stretched to explain 3, but they do not explain 2. None of the views we have encountered so far give a straightforward explanation of 1, 2, and 3. I shall offer a different explanation of this pattern of success and failure of empathic imagination.

Note that any compelling answer to this question will be multifaceted. There is not one simple factor that explains this complicated pattern. However, one important yet underappreciated factor has less to do with the adequacy of empathic imagination and more to do with our motivations. Empathic imagination is a fine and reliable cognitive capacity, but the deployment and exercise of this capacity is deeply influenced by our social motivations. Jamil Zaki articulates a model of motivated empathy that is very helpful here. According to this model, the inclination to empathically imagine others’ thoughts and feelings is driven by our own personal motivations and cares (Zaki 2014).

In circumstances where we will experience positive affect, stronger social bonds, or exhibit socially desirable traits, we employ strategies to facilitate imagining experiencing others’ thoughts and feelings. We choose to pay attention to what others’ say about their experiences, we seek out further information, we appraise their experiences as deserved rewards or unjust misfortunes. When we want to empathize, we lean all the way in to imaginatively immerse ourselves in the target’s experiences.

We do this in close interpersonal relationships, of course. But we also do this with acquaintances and strangers when we expect the narrative to be a happy one or when we think there is some meaningful common ground between us and the others. Importantly, we also do this in engaging with fiction. We choose to open the book, turn on the screen, and visit the theatre. We pay close attention to the characters’ thoughts and emotional experiences. We are open in this way to fictional others’ experiences because (i) it is enjoyable to mentally transport to different realities, and (ii) their differences from us are not threatening because they are not real people and this is not a real social interaction. Being open to empathically imagining radically different experiences is low stakes in the case of fiction because we know that we can always walk away and that there are few real negative consequences to our openness. No one is going to take advantage of us or violate our trust, and it will not interfere with our real-life goals. Thus, the accuracy of empathic imagination in cases of close friends, in-group members, and fictional characters turns on our willingness – not our ability – to imagine experiencing others’ thoughts and feelings.

However, we often do *not* want to empathize. When we will experience negative affect, interference with our goals or competition, or when it will cost us time or resources, we employ strategies to inhibit empathy. We avoid situations where we might be exposed to others’ thoughts and feelings, we modulate our attention to avoid emotional stimuli, and we appraise others as undeserving of positive experiences and deserving of negative experiences. Thus, in real-life interactions where social capital, projects, money, time, resources, reputations, etc. are on the line, we tend to not be nearly so open to others’ experiences. Moreover, when we are unwittingly or unwillingly exposed to the experiences of others when we are motivated to avoid empathy with them, we appraise their experiences, thoughts, and feelings in uncharitable ways. Crucially, these misattributions are not due to a flaw in the capacity to empathically imagine. They are a result of the cognitive dissonance between not wanting to have an emotional connection with a person and being exposed to information about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

On this view, the factor that explains most of the variation in our empathic successes and failures is our own personal motivations. This is not to say that other factors are *never* relevant. It is undeniably true that in some cases our own thoughts, values, and emotions warp our imagination of others’ thoughts and feelings. It can be difficult to set aside our own perspectives. Furthermore, not everyone is equally good at empathic imagination. Finally, not everyone is equally easy to read. These factors may play a role in the success or failure of empathic imagination. But, neither individually nor jointly do they explain the patterns of success and failure of empathic imagination. They do not explain when and why empathic imagination works well. Motivated empathy does. It explains why we find it easier to empathize with fictional characters who differ from us than real people who differ from us. It explains why empathy is easy amongst in-group members and with people you like and admire. It explains the *process* of tuning into someone’s situation to learn more about them and what happens when we do not want to do that. Though again, one’s motivations are not the only relevant factor, they seem to be a crucial factor when it comes to explaining the success and failure of empathic imagination.

To be clear, motivated empathy is not incompatible with some of the critical views of empathic imagination reviewed above. For instance, Prinz or Bloom or Tullman or Bailey might agree that empathy is motivated and claim that, on top of the problems they have identified, these motivations prevent us from correctly imagining the thoughts and feelings of those who differ from us. The contribution here is to highlight something that is not obvious in the existing discussions of the epistemic limits of empathic imagination: namely, an important factor in its success or failure is something we can *isolate*, *taxonomize*, and *modify*. In other words, this diagnosis also brings about a prescription. A significant problem with empathic imagination across wide experiential gaps is our motivations, so any progress toward increasing understanding, productive social engagement, or trust must target the motivations that drive these social cognitive processes.[[4]](#footnote-4)

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1. I restrict this discussion to “high-level” empathy, i.e., deliberate, conscious, imagination-based empathy. “Low-level” empathy, i.e., the reflexive, non-reflective mirroring of others’ emotions, is not sufficient for helping us understand what it is like to be another person. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bailey has an interesting set of views on the epistemic utility of empathy. On the one hand, in (Bailey 2022b) she argues for a nuanced endorsement of the idea that empathy in fiction can help us learn about vastly different experiences, including experiences that differ significantly from our own. In (Bailey 2022a), she argues that empathy can bring about humane understanding amongst individuals who are similar or very close. On the other hand, in (Bailey 2021; 2018) she argues that empathizing across experiential and perspectival divides is bound to fail. Space considerations preclude an in depth discussion of how to make sense of these *seemingly* conflicting ideas. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See (Coplan 2004) for a review of empirical evidence that we tend to imaginatively adopt the emotional perspective of protagonists in narrative fiction. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers at *Analysis* for feedback that greatly improved the argument and structure of this paper. I presented this paper at a workshop on imagination organized by Christine Werner at University of Giessen and received wonderfully helpful feedback. This paper has benefited from numerous discussions on empathy with students in my graduate seminar on empathy. I’m especially grateful to Shishir Budha for reading and providing comments on drafts of the paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)