

# 13 Can we empathize with emotions that we have never felt?

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## 13.1 Introduction

Among contemporary proponents of the simulation theory, the idea that empathy entails an experiential or phenomenal dimension has been defended in different forms. Stueber argues that re-enactive empathy – which differs from basic empathy insofar as it entails perspective-taking – “is particularly suited to making it possible for us to access another person’s mental life in *its full phenomenal richness* and understand what it is like to be or to act as the other person” (2023: 11, my emphasis). In his view, whether empathy realizes its potential phenomenal dimension depends on how intensively we activate our imagination. Other authors such as Maibom (2017) and Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo (2021) argue for the existence of an affective or experiential empathy. Unlike cognitive and agential forms of empathy, they argue, respectively, that in affective or experiential empathy the empathizer feels what the other is going through.

No matter whether we understand the experiential dimension of empathy as one of its potential realisations or the main feature of one of its types, the view that experiential empathy (hereafter, empathy) entails experiential or phenomenal imagining becomes problematic when it comes to explaining how we empathize with emotions that we have never felt. Indeed, according to a long and venerable philosophical tradition (e.g. Nagel 1974; Jackson 1982; Paul 2014), imagination is constrained by prior experiences. We have to be acquainted with the qualitative feel of the other’s experience in order to imagine it. Peacocke describes this constraint as follows: “to phenomenally imagine an experience with a certain feeling, you must have actually experienced that feeling” (2020).<sup>1</sup> To imagine how an emotion feels, we need to be acquainted with its phenomenal property or qualitative feel, otherwise we cannot experientially imagine it.

An objection that has been put to simulationist accounts claims precisely that if we cannot imagine how the other feels because we are not acquainted with their experience, empathy cannot take place. According to

this objection, if we have never experienced the other's existential despair, psychotic alienation, or courtly love, we are unable to recreate the qualitative feel of each of these states and, as a result, empathy is not possible. As Burns puts it, a problem with the simulation theory is that I can only have an emotional state similar to the other's state "if I *already know* what his emotional state *is*" (2017: 214).<sup>2</sup> Early phenomenologists such as Scheler (2008/[1913/1923]) and Stein (1989/[1917]) were already employing the experiential constraint to argue against Lipps's (1903) proto-simulationist "imitation theory." As they argue, if our comprehension of the other were based on the reproduction of our own previous experiences, it would be impossible to comprehend unfamiliar experiences such as mortal terror.

Note that we cannot avoid this objection by simply rejecting the simulation theory and instead adopting one of its current alternatives, such as the theory theory (Carruthers and Smith 1996) or the direct perception theory (Zahavi 2011). We cannot deny the existence of a human ability described in terms of empathy which consists in imagining the phenomenology of the other's experience and resonating with it. This ability must be distinguished from similar abilities for which we employ the same term such as the immediate apprehension of the other's experience in her bodily expressions. Unlike the immediate apprehension of what the other is going through, the human ability to empathically imagine how the other feels presupposes that the empathizer undergoes a "vicarious experience" and, in so doing, there is an interpersonal similarity between her and the other.<sup>3</sup> Insofar as this human ability entails a phenomenal dimension and involves imaginatively re-living the other's experience, we cannot avoid the experiential constraint and, thus, we are confronted with the objection to which it gives rise.

In the face of this objection, the present chapter aims to offer a moderate dose of optimism. In particular, it develops a model to explain how we imagine the other's novel emotions by drawing on phenomenal concepts, affective memories, and imaginative scaffoldings. I argue that this model can explain how we empathize with the other's emotions no matter if they are familiar or novel to us. However, in the latter case, the imagined phenomenal quality is not identical but probably only similar to the other's emotion. This similarity suffices for us to speak about empathy.

Drawing on a weaker interpretation of the experiential constraint, the next section offers a preliminary but vague answer to the question raised in this chapter (Section 12.2). Then, in order to develop a more precise answer, I focus on the experiential dimension of empathy and argue that, for empathy to exist here, the experiential imagining has to be based in other-oriented perspective-taking (Section 12.3). I proceed to argue that what is experientially imagined in these cases is the qualitative feel of the

other's particular emotions (Section 12.4). I develop a model that explains how we imagine the other's novel emotion by generating a state with a similar phenomenal property (Section 12.5). I address two possible objections to the proposed account (Section 12.6), before summarising the main findings in the conclusion (Section 12.7).

## 12.2 A preliminary answer: a weak reading of the experiential constraint

A closer look at the formulation of the objection presented earlier shows that at its core lies a strong reading of the experiential constraint. In this reading, to imagine a phenomenal property  $x$ , you are required to have experienced a state with exactly this property  $x$ . The argument sustaining the objection runs as follows. According to the first premise, empathy (or at least experiential empathy, the form of empathy at stake in this chapter) presupposes that we simulate the phenomenal property  $x$  that is typical for the other's emotional state. According to the second premise, which contains the strong reading of the experiential constraint, we must have already experienced a state with exactly this phenomenal property  $x$  to be able to simulate it. It follows that, if we have not experienced the state with the phenomenal property  $x$  that is typical for the other's emotional state, we cannot experientially imagine it. As a result, empathy cannot take place.

Yet, we have good grounds to reject the strong reading of the experiential constraint that sustains the second premise. We know from our own experience that, on certain occasions and to a certain extent, we are able to imagine the qualitative feel of the other's emotional states, even if these are novel to us. If only roughly, we can imagine how parental love or humiliation feels even if we have never experienced exactly these emotions. Most importantly, research in the contemporary philosophy of imagination (e.g. Kind 2020; Peacocke 2020) argues that to imagine a phenomenal property  $x$ , we are not required to have experienced a state with exactly this property  $x$ . Drawing on previous experiences, we can imagine a phenomenal property  $x$  which is novel to us. As a result, it is more plausible to assume a weak reading of the experiential constraint. Although imagination depends on experience, we can imagine novel phenomenal properties on the basis of what we have already experienced as long as we can relate them to familiar phenomenal properties.

This weak version of the experiential constraint has consequences for empathy. According to this weak reading, if, to imagine the phenomenal property  $x$  experientially, we need not necessarily have experienced a state with exactly this property but only one with a property related to it, empathy with novel emotional states is possible. Thus, even if we are unfamiliar with the qualitative feel of existential despair, psychotic alienation or

courtly love, we can imagine their respective qualitative properties experientially by drawing on previous experiences with related phenomenal properties. In this weak reading, the objection loses its validity.

This reasoning provides a preliminary answer to the main question motivating this chapter. Insofar as we can imagine novel phenomenal properties as long as they are related to familiar phenomenal properties, empathy with emotions we have never felt is possible. Empathy might fail for other reasons, but it does not fail because we are unable to imagine the qualitative feel of the other's emotional states tout court when these are novel to us. Yet, this positive answer remains vague and rather unsatisfactory if we cannot explain how we de facto imagine the phenomenal character of novel experiences in the context of empathy. Thus, the challenge is not that we can never imagine the qualitative feel of emotional states not previously felt, but that we have to explain how this imagining is possible.

### **13.3 Empathy, other-oriented perspective-taking, and cases of parallel imagining**

A more precise answer to the question motivating this chapter requires an analysis of the experiential dimension of empathy. Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo describe the grasp of the qualitative feel of the other's emotional state in terms of "phenomenal insight" (2021). For Stueber (2023), the realisation of the experiential dimension of empathy requires us to understand what the other is going through. In my view, to experientially imagine the qualitative feel of the other's experience, other-oriented perspective-taking is necessary.

In general terms, perspective-taking requires that we represent the other's experience to ourselves. The empathizer reconstructs in her mind what the other is going through by means of imagining that something is the case, or by imagining the other doing something, etc. In this imaginative process, the empathizer imagines "from the outside." The representation of the other's experience can vary in its "scope." The experiences we can represent to ourselves range from the other's single experience (e.g. an emotion) and the combination of the other's experiences (e.g. an emotion and a perception, an emotion and a belief, and an emotional state entailing different emotions) to the set of potential forms in which the other can engage with the world (see Vendrell Ferran 2023).

Once the other's experience has been represented in our mind, perspective-taking can occur. We not only imagine the other's situation but we imagine being in that situation, that is, we imagine "from the inside." Some contemporary philosophers distinguish between self- and other-oriented perspective-taking (Coplan 2011). In the former case, we imagine how it is for ourselves to be in the other's situation, while in the

latter case, we imagine how it is for the other. For empathy, other-oriented perspective-taking is necessary. Indeed, in self-oriented perspective-taking, we do not reach the other and remain oriented towards ourselves, and so no real understanding of the other's experience is possible.

Yet, since "other-oriented perspective-taking" has been subject to criticism in recent literature (e.g. Goldie 2011), work with this conceptual construct requires us to refute the main objections raised against it. First, it has been argued that, to reconstruct the other's perspective, we have to resort to our own psychology and, given that our psychology can significantly differ from that of the other, we can be mistaken in our imagining about what the other is going through. In my view, although a purely other-oriented perspective-taking is not possible, we can adopt the other's perspective when we have enough information about the other so that the relevant aspects of her situation can be reconstructed. Second, other-oriented perspective-taking has been regarded as undesirable because, if we are able to imagine how it is for the other, then the distinction between self and other vanishes, thus making empathy impossible. Yet, the fact that the empathizer can switch between both forms of perspective-taking helps to sustain the differences between self and other and make them even more salient.

That said, like Coplan (2011) and Goldie (2011) but unlike Walton (2015), I assume that "other-oriented perspective-taking" requires that we imagine being the other while maintaining the self–other differentiation. More precisely, we imagine ourselves with the other's traits relevant to reconstruct her experience. In order to empathize with the other's sadness, I do not imagine myself in her place, but rather I imagine being the other by adopting those of her traits (e.g. her biography, psychology, and system of values) relevant to her experience of sadness. Here the other is part of the content of the empathizer's imagining. To underscore that the other is part of the content of the imagining, let's refer to these imaginings as "empathic imaginings." It is only by virtue of imagining being the other that can I better understand the background to her sadness and the specific web of thoughts, emotions, memories, etc. linked to it.

Once other-oriented perspective-taking has occurred, the empathizer can experientially imagine the qualitative feel of the other's experience. These are empathic imaginings of the phenomenal property of the other's experience. To this end, we not only grasp the phenomenal character of the other's experience "from the inside," but we experientially imagine it.<sup>4</sup>

An experiential imagining of the qualitative feel of the other's experience not based on adopting the other's perspective can be problematic because instead of imagining how the other feels in a particular situation, the empathizer can imagine how she would feel if she were in the character's place. The outcome of both imaginative activities can differ greatly. For instance, while in a certain situation, the other might experience sadness,

the empathizer would perhaps remain indifferent. As a result, the realisation of the experiential dimension of empathy has to be oriented towards the other. Otherwise, the empathizer can end up imagining how it feels for her to undergo a certain situation but miss completely how it feels for the other to live through it.

Let's examine now the case in which the outcome of our empathic imaginings, that is, imaginings based on other-oriented perspective-taking, is the same as in cases of experiential imagining not based on it. To this end, I distinguish cases of "empathic imagining" from two cases of "parallel imagining."<sup>5</sup>

As mentioned earlier, in empathic imaginings of the phenomenal character of the other's experience, by virtue of other-oriented perspective-taking, the empathizer imagines being the other and then recreates the phenomenal character of the other's emotional experience. Here the other is part of the content of the empathizer's experience. The empathizer imagines being the other and undergoing her emotional state, while maintaining the distinction between self and other. For instance, the empathizer imagines being the other and recreating the qualitative feel of the other's sadness.

Now, consider two cases of parallel imagining which do not involve other-oriented perspective-taking. The first case of parallel imagining entails self-oriented perspective-taking. For instance, the other feels sad and I imagine myself experiencing sadness. My imagining is parallel to her actual experience. However, unlike what occurs in empathy, here the other is not part of the content of my experience. Rather, I imagine myself feeling an experience of the same type as the other's experience. The content of my imagining is a virtual self undergoing an experience which is of the same type as the other's experience. Importantly, this self is explicitly mine.

The second case of parallel imagining consists in experientially imagining the other's emotional state but without any form of perspective-shifting. For instance, I see the other's sadness and I imagine how sadness feels. Again, my imagining here is parallel to the other's actual experience. As in the former case of parallel imagining, the other is not part of the content of my experience. Yet, unlike the former case in which I explicitly imagined myself undergoing the other's experience, in this case, I merely imagined the qualitative feel of the type of experience undergone by the other. In my view, this imagining also involves a subject feeling the emotional state: there is an implicit self as part of the content of this imagining.<sup>6</sup>

The outcome of each case is the same. We end up having a "vicarious feeling" similar to the other's experience. Yet, only the first of the cases presented earlier which involve other-oriented perspective-taking can be regarded as empathy and leads to the realisation of its experiential dimension. Only in imagining being the other can we get a grasp of what the other is going through and simulate the phenomenal character of her experience.

Empathy requires a closer link between the empathizer and the other with whom we empathize, a link which involves imagining being the other, and which is not present in the cases of parallel imagining discussed earlier. By contrast, cases of parallel imagining do not grasp the particular qualitative feel of the other's experience because the other is not part of the content of the imagining. In parallel imagining, I might generate the qualitative feel of the emotion attributed to the other but the other is not part of the content of these imaginings. Cases of parallel imagining are not empathy.

### **13.4 Empathic imaginings of the qualitative feel of the other's particular emotions**

In the previous sections, I worked with the idea that what we imagine in empathy is the qualitative feel of the other's emotional experience. Let us focus here in more detail on the content of the type of experiential imagining I described as "empathic."

To begin, this chapter is concerned with empathising with emotional experiences. Yet, my focus is the phenomenal character of "particular" emotions such as despair, alienation, and love.<sup>7</sup> I leave aside here cases of empathy with the phenomenal character of "general" emotional experiences which involve different particular experiences and extend over time such as being terminally ill, experiencing a schizophrenic episode, or being a troubadour in the Middle Ages. These general experiences encompass different emotions, feelings, sensations, perceptions, thoughts, etc. which might evolve and change over time and which differ strongly from person to person.

There are two reasons for this research focus. First, according to Wiltsher (2021), we cannot successfully imagine the general phenomenal character of an experience by drawing on exemplary experiences (2021: 322). We cannot imagine what it is to be terminally ill, to experience a schizophrenic episode, or to be a troubadour by means of imagining exemplary experiences for each of these cases. When we try to reproduce them, the problem – as noted by Wiltsher – is that we have to organize the different experiences in an order of relevance that is not always possible: we might lack one of the aggregates essential to the experience, or experiences might differ from person to person so that there is no qualitative feel generalisable to them all. Second, as argued by Werner (2023, in this volume), temporally extended experiences do not have a particular phenomenology. To be terminally ill does not feel a specific way, just as experiencing a schizophrenic episode or being a troubadour does not have a unique qualitative feel. In fact, they entail different particular emotional experiences.

More precisely, the content of our empathic imagining is the phenomenal property of the particular emotion. Each emotion has a particular qualitative feel or phenomenal character. The phenomenal character of

an emotion is characterized by different dimensions which encompass the emotion's particular hedonic valence, the emotion's specific action tendencies, and the emotion's intrinsic feelings (see also Loev et al. 2022). For instance, fear is unpleasant, it comes with the action tendency to protect oneself and is linked to the feeling of one's own integrity being threatened and feelings of narrowness in the chest, freezing, etc. Importantly, in empathy, it belongs to the content of my imagining that the imagined qualitative feel is the qualitative feel of the other's emotion and that I maintain the self–other differentiation when I imagine it.

To what extent the empathic imagination of the qualitative feel of the other's emotion is accompanied by the recreation of other aspects of the emotional experience is a question of the scope of our imaginings in perspective-taking. Emotions are not just felt; they are also intentional states. They target objects of different kinds (e.g. items, animals, persons, and states of affairs). These objects are presented to our minds by means of cognitive states (e.g. perceptions, imagining, memories, suppositions, and beliefs) and can vary individually, culturally, historically, etc. To empathize, it is not necessary for us to know what the other's emotion is directed towards. To empathize with the other's sadness does not necessarily require that we know what the other is sad about. These objects can be known or unknown to the empathizer. Yet, knowledge about the objects of the other's emotions will be helpful in understanding what the other is going through.

Moreover, emotions present the targeted objects as being imbued with evaluative properties or value qualities, usually called formal objects. The formal objects of the emotions are not variable. For instance, sadness presents its different objects as having the evaluative property of being negative and bad. Given that each emotion is linked to a specific range of formal objects, imagining the qualitative feel of the emotion always involves getting a grasp of the formal object towards which the other's emotion is directed. Thus, it is possible for an empathizer to apprehend the other's sadness, imagine the phenomenal property of this emotion, and understand that for the other things are bad. To what extent the empathizer will be able to grasp more specifically the value property to which the emotion is particularly linked depends on the case in question. However, the realisation of the experiential dimension of the other's experience in empathy concerns only the qualitative feel of the other's emotion and not the targeted objects or the evaluative dimension in which these are presented to us.

Insofar as the realisation of the experiential dimension of empathy requires us to imagine experiencing the qualitative feel of the other's particular emotion, that is, to re-live it and to undergo a vicarious experience, we need to explain how we come to experientially imagine the qualitative feel of emotions we have never felt. Drawing on how we imagine the qualitative feel of emotions more generally, the next section develops a model



according to which the empathizer generates the phenomenal property of the other's emotion employing phenomenal concepts, affective memories, and imaginative scaffoldings.<sup>8</sup>

### 13.5 Empathic imaginings of the qualitative feel of emotions that we have never experienced

#### 13.5.1 *Identifying the phenomenal property of the other's emotion*

In order to recreate the qualitative feel of the other's experience, we need to identify the phenomenal property of the other's emotion. This requires the use of phenomenal concepts. I work here with the view that phenomenal concepts represent phenomenal properties and enable us to recognize these properties when we have an experience that instantiates them. Importantly, and as noted by Peacocke (2020), to have a phenomenal concept, we must have not only experienced the phenomenal property but also noticed it. This noticing can be intentional or involuntary (e.g. via associations).

When we are familiar with the other's emotion and have a phenomenal concept to refer to its qualitative feel, the use of phenomenal concepts enables us to subsume the phenomenal property of the other's emotion and the phenomenal property of an emotion under the same category. When we have experienced the other's emotion but do not have a phenomenal concept for it because the emotion has gone unnoticed, Peacocke (2020) argues that we can form a phenomenal concept by recalling the qualitative feel of a past emotion and noticing the phenomenal property that went unnoticed. We can then subsume the qualitative feel of the previously experienced emotion which went unnoticed and the phenomenal property of the other's emotion that is novel to us under the same category.

When we have never experienced the other's emotion, not only do we lack a phenomenal concept for the phenomenal property of the emotion but we are unable to form one (because we cannot notice it in a previous experience). In my view, in these cases, we employ the phenomenal concept used for a familiar phenomenal property that we identify as being similar to the phenomenal property of the other's emotion.

The identification of a similarity is a necessary condition for being able to subsume the novel qualitative feel of the other's emotion and a familiar qualitative feel under the same category. Thus, if we cannot identify the qualitative feel of the other's emotion as being similar to a familiar emotion, we cannot imagine how the other feels. If we cannot identify similarities between the other's existential despair, psychotic alienation, or courtly love and an experience familiar to us, we will not be able to subsume the qualitative feel of the other's novel emotions and the qualitative feel of a familiar emotion under the same category. As a result, we will neither imagine nor empathize with the other's emotions.

The similarity condition raises a question concerning how we identify the phenomenal character of the other's novel emotion as being similar to the phenomenal character of an emotion that has been felt previously. Similarity indicates a relation between two elements, but unlike what occurs in cases in which we have felt the other's emotion, the identification of a similarity is challenging here because we are not acquainted with one of its elements. Nonetheless, in my view, the identification of a similar trait can occur when the empathizer gathers information about the qualitative feel of the other's emotion. Though this knowledge cannot replace having had the experience ourselves, it can be sufficient for identifying familiar traits. Importantly, the similarity can also be identified associatively and unintentionally. Some metaphors and comparisons employed by another person in describing her feelings might suggest associations with emotions that are already familiar.

For instance, when we (intentionally or not) obtain information about courtly love (novel to us), in this way we can realize that it encompasses elements of love, humility, and admiration – emotions that perhaps we have already experienced. Analogously, we can identify a similarity between the qualitative feel of the other's existential despair (novel to us) and one or more emotional states that are already familiar to us, such as anxiety, concern, fear, hopelessness, helplessness, feeling threatened, feeling bad, and so on (in cases where we have undergone one of these emotional states). As a result, by using the phenomenal concept employed to refer to the qualitative feel of familiar emotions to describe the phenomenal character of the other's novel emotion, we subsume both under the same category. Though they are not identical to the phenomenal property of the other's emotions, we can apply these phenomenal concepts to capture the qualitative feel of the other's emotion, or at least come close to it.

### *13.5.2 Retrieving the phenomenal property of the other's emotion*

Identifying the phenomenal property of the other's emotion by means of a phenomenal concept does not suffice for empathy to take place.<sup>9</sup> As argued earlier, the realisation of the experiential dimension of empathy requires us to imaginatively re-live what the other is going through and to resonate with it.

According to the proposed model, in order to imagine the qualitative feel of an emotion, we have to retrieve its particular phenomenal property by remembering it. The idea that affective memories are the basis for imagining the experience of an emotion has been stated in the context of fiction by Peacocke (2020). In the specific context of empathy, the claim has been developed by Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo (2021), who turn to recent work on episodic memory. They argue that memories of past experiences serve as “raw material” on the basis of which we simulate.

Further support for the role of affective memories is provided by empirical research on imagining sensations. Blackwell has argued that the generation of mental images involves the retrieval of sensory representations from memory which can then be re-experienced or combined with other sensory representations to create scenarios that we have never experienced (2020: 242). Though Blackwell develops his model to explain how we retrieve sensations, memory can be regarded as playing a role for the emotions as well. In both cases, what is retrieved is not the object of the experience but its qualitative feel or phenomenal property. There is no reason to think that the mechanisms involved in experientially imagining the qualitative feel of sensations differ substantially from the mechanisms involved in experientially imagining the qualitative feel of emotions. In both cases, the imaginings have phenomenal properties as their content.

I will work here with the view that the remembered qualitative feel of the past emotion consists neither in having the emotion again nor in creating a new emotion of the same kind (for the latter view, see Debus 2007). Rather, when we experientially remember a past emotion and have an affective memory, the remembered emotion has the status of a “quasi-emotion” (Arcangeli and Dokic 2018; Todd 2023; Vendrell Ferran 2022). First, there are phenomenological differences that enable us to identify the retrieved emotion as being different from a real emotion. The phenomenal character of the retrieved emotion is coreless and schematic in comparison to really experiencing the emotion. Second, the retrieved emotion is not anchored in our mental economy like a real emotion is: for instance, it has a less pronounced motivational impact on our actions and a more limited influence on our thoughts. Moreover, you can have an affective memory while being in a different emotional state: you can remember your sadness, for instance, while being in a positive mood.

A further argument for the “quasi-emotion” view is that we remember the past emotion in detachment from the original overall experience. Peeters et al. (2022: 170) have argued that memory perspective is not only constructive<sup>10</sup> but also multidimensional. In particular, they identify visual, agential, emotional, and social dimensions of perspectives in memory. These aspects can vary from each other, making it possible to construct the original experience from perspectives which might differ from the original one. The fact that affective memories are open to constructive activities that vary across different dimensions gives further support to interpret them in terms of “quasi-emotions.” Indeed, real emotions are not experienced as detached and are not easily open to constructive activities across different dimensions.

In my view, the “quasi-emotion” provided by episodic memory is what Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo called the “raw material” on the basis of which in empathy we experientially imagine the qualitative feel of the

other's novel emotion. It speaks in favor of this view that the empathically imagined emotion is a "quasi-emotion" as well.<sup>11</sup> The arguments are similar to those provided for the case of affective memories. First, regarding the phenomenology, when I empathically imagine feeling sadness, I can distinguish this from really feeling sad. The empathically imagined emotion feel – as Hume argued for imagined emotions more generally (2008: 85) – "less firm and solid" in comparison to the latter. Second, the emotion we reproduce in empathy is not anchored in our mental economy in the way that real emotions are. Like other products of our imagination, they are easily subjected to our will. In contrast, real emotions are more difficult to control. Linked to this issue is the fact that the emotion recreated while empathising with the other does not motivate action in the same way as real emotions do. While real fear is not easy to control and might motivate me to run away from the dangerous object, empathically imagining feeling fear is easier to control and does not lead me to flee. Moreover, we can empathically imagine an emotion while being in an affective state with the opposite hedonic valence without experiencing tension between the two emotional states. Therefore, both the remembered emotion and the empathically imagined emotion are "quasi-emotions." Neither when we remember a past emotion nor when we empathically imagine an emotion are we really undergoing an emotional experience. If the remembered emotion and the empathized emotion were from a distinct nature (for instance, if the remembered emotion were a real emotion but the empathized emotion not, or vice versa), the thought that the former serves as material for the latter would appear less plausible.

### *13.5.3 Experientially imagining the phenomenal property of the other's emotion*

Once we have retrieved a qualitative feel, we can imaginatively recreate the phenomenal character of what the other is going through. If we have already experienced the phenomenal property of the other's emotion and can form a phenomenal concept and retrieve its qualitative feel, then we can experientially imagine what the other is going through by applying it to her specific situation. For instance, we might know how existential despair feels and try to adjust this emotion to the other's context by gathering information about it.

In cases where we have not experienced the qualitative feel of the other's emotion, we must employ the phenomenal concept used for the qualitative feel of an emotion identified as similar and retrieve this similar phenomenal property via episodic memory. If we have not experienced existential despair, we can retrieve feelings we have experienced before, such as anxiety, concern, fear, hopelessness, helplessness, feeling threatened, feeling

bad, and so on. If we have not experienced courtly love, we might be able to retrieve the qualitative feel of love, humility, or admiration.

To approach the phenomenology of the other's experience, we can introduce changes in the retrieved qualitative feel. To this end, the process Kind (2020) describes as "imaginative scaffolding" plays a crucial role. According to Kind, thanks to our imaginative abilities, we are able to make imaginative additions, subtractions, and modifications to known experiences so that we can then simulate a new experience.<sup>12</sup>

In my view, these processes can be divided into two different types. Both types can enrich each other. First, there is the combination of already-known phenomenal properties. This happens when, for example, I recreate the phenomenal properties of courtly love by combining phenomenal properties of already familiar emotions, such as love, humility, admiration, and so on. Analogously, we can recreate the phenomenal property of psychotic alienation by combining familiar phenomenal properties such as confusion, fear, and so on. We can recreate the phenomenal properties of existential despair by combining anxiety, concern, fear, hopelessness, helplessness, feeling threatened, feeling bad, etc. Kind (2020) and more recently Werner (2023) argue that we can only imagine the phenomenology of experiences which are compounded of further elements, which do not themselves constitute a whole, and of which we know some of their constitutive elements. If this is the case, then, we can be optimistic when it comes to generating the qualitative feel of particular emotions. Indeed, if the qualitative feel of emotions can be explained in terms of different elements, as stated in Section 13.4, then even when we speak of basic emotions such as fear or disgust, their respective phenomenal properties can be analysed in terms of more elementary feelings such as feeling bad, tense, threatened, diminished, and so on. Since it is probable that we are familiar with some of the properties of these states, we will have some material on which to base our imagining of novel emotions that also involve them. Thus, a combination of these experiences enables us to imagine more or less precisely what the other is going through.

The second type of scaffolding occurs when we generate a variation of the phenomenal property of an already familiar emotion. For instance, in recreating the phenomenal character of courtly love, we try to modify the phenomenal property of love, humility, or admiration (if we are acquainted with these emotions). In recreating the qualitative feel of psychotic alienation, we might generate variations of confusion and fear. In recreating the phenomenal character of existential despair, we vary the phenomenal nuances of anxiety, concern, fear, hopelessness, helplessness, feeling threatened, feeling bad, etc. One way to generate these variations consists in modifying the "color" or feel of one emotion in the direction of another: we can imagine existential despair in terms of anxiety with a

tinge of worry. We can also generate variations in terms of intensity, such as making the qualitative feel of anxiety stronger when we try to recreate the phenomenal property of existential despair. In this way, we can experientially imagine a qualitative feel which is close to the one exhibited by the other's emotions.

My thinking here is that although the recreation of the qualitative feel of the other's emotion via scaffolding is not always possible (for instance, when we cannot identify a similarity between the qualitative feel of the other's emotion and an emotion already familiar to us), and although it can be more or less accurate (for instance, when, by virtue of having a poor imagination or having not reflected upon our prior experiences, we cannot recreate the phenomenal nuances of the other's experience), and it can even go wrong sometimes (for instance, when we imagine the wrong qualitative feel), on certain occasions and to a certain extent, we are able to imagine the qualitative feel of emotions that we have never felt before.

In this section, I have developed a model to explain how we empathize with other's emotions no matter if they are familiar or novel to us. The upshot of this is that we can imagine phenomenal properties which differ from what we already know and, as a result, we can empathize with emotions we have never felt before. This model provides a more satisfactory answer to the question motivating this chapter than the preliminary answer obtained in Section 13.2. However, according to the proposed model, when the qualitative feel of the other's emotion is novel to us, the imagined phenomenal quality is not identical but probably only similar to the other's emotion. This issue regarding the similarity between the empathizer's and the other's experience will occupy me in the next section.

## 13.6 Possible objections

### 13.6.1 *The isomorphism objection*

This section discusses possible objections against the proposed account. I begin with what I call the isomorphism objection. According to this objection, the proposed account shows that on certain occasions and to a certain extent, we can recreate a qualitative feel similar to the one experienced by the other. In recreating the phenomenal properties of the other's existential despair, feelings of psychotic alienation, or courtly love, the best-case scenario is that I can obtain a qualitative feel which is only similar to the other's emotion. This might be helpful for gaining an insight into the other's mental life, even when this is very different from our own, and it is an epistemic gain for sure, but it is not sufficient for us to empathize with the other. The reason is that the recreated phenomenal property is not identical to the phenomenal property of the other's experience. This objection

is based on the idea endorsed by Feagin (1996: 100) and Coplan (2011: 6) that empathy requires that the empathizer and the other feel the same.

At first sight, this objection seems plausible. Insofar as it indicates the apprehension of what the other is going through, empathy is a success term (Feagin 1996: 3; Gibson 2016: 238; Walton 2015: 2). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, empathy requires the interpersonal similarity condition which suggests that I not only apprehend what the other is going through but also experientially imagine her experience.

That said, in the debate about empathy, there are only a few positions which require that the empathizer and the other feel exactly the same. A strong objection to isomorphism is that it contradicts our experience. In fact, we also speak of empathy in cases where the empathizer and the other do not feel exactly the same. Therefore, rather than isomorphism, authors such as Stueber (2016: 372) argue that a condition of empathy is that there is a qualitative similarity between the experiences of the empathizer and the other. If empathy requires us to feel something similar though not necessarily identical to the other, then the fact that we can experientially imagine a phenomenal quality similar to the other's experience is not a hindrance to empathy.

Moreover, despite being a success term, the imaginative recreation of the other's experience admits different degrees of accuracy. The empathizer can experientially imagine a qualitative feel which is more or less similar to that of the other's emotion. For instance, suppose that a person is undergoing existential despair, and that you empathically imagine the phenomenology of feeling bad combined with the phenomenology of anxiety. In this case, the imagining of the other's emotions is similar but inaccurate. However, we usually refer to these cases in terms of empathy. At the other extreme are those cases in which we are able to accurately re-enact what the other is going through. Thus, empathic imagining might occur with different degrees of accuracy: it ranges from an inaccurate recreation of what the other is going through to a precise re-living of the other's experience. De facto, we already call empathy a vague imagining of the other's experience. Indeed, as argued in Section 13.3, what is important is that the simulation of the qualitative feel of the other's experience is oriented towards the other.

Yet, a high degree of accuracy is a desideratum, and it contributes to fully understand what the other is going through and to realize the experiential dimension of empathy more precisely. In this regard, we need a more detailed picture of the factors that guide our empathic imaginings of the other's emotions. Fiction, testimony, experience, emotional maturity, and knowledge can play a role in recreating the phenomenology of an emotion that is novel to us (Clavel Vázquez and Clavel-Vázquez 2023; Vendrell Ferran 2022). Though the factors that contribute to make the experiential

dimension of empathy more accurate ought to be the object of further research, for the purposes of this chapter, the fact that the empathizer recreates only a similar experience suffices for empathy to take place.

### *13.6.2 The embodiment objection*

What I call the embodiment objection is based on the idea – put forward by Clavel Vázquez and Clavel-Vázquez (2023) and already present in Wiltsher (2021) – that the imagination is robustly embodied due to the sociohistorical situation of the imaginer as a concrete agent. According to Clavel Vázquez and Clavel-Vázquez (2023: 1417), the imagination is constrained not only by the imaginer's mental states but by her particular history of experiences, which results from inhabiting specific social identities. The empathizer's experience is shaped by social structures that depend on the location she occupies. Thus, within a particular sociohistorical context, not all agents will be shaped the same way. This sustains a pessimism about our abilities to imagine the experiences of others who are situated differently. Though the mentioned authors do not deny that imagining can provide epistemic gains, they regard this as limited in cases where we lack the relevant history of sensorimotor and affective interaction that would enable us to access the perspectives of the other that depart significantly from our own. This is because we face novel experiences by drawing on our sociohistorical circumstances and previous experiences.

Suppose I want to empathize with the courtly love experienced by a troubadour. It may be the case that my ability to imaginatively recreate the phenomenology of this kind of love is constrained by my history of affective interactions and my sociohistorical situation as a woman living in the twenty-first century. If I have never experienced courtly love, even though I can try to generate its qualitative feel by drawing on my experiences of love, humility, and admiration, I will be unable to generate its qualitative feel because the way in which I experience each of these states differs from the way in which troubadours experienced them. As a result, I will not be able to empathize.

The embodiment objection concerns not only empathy with people who are historically distant but also empathy with contemporary others who have a different embodied perspective. For instance, if I am not familiar with schizophrenia, it can be difficult to imagine the other's feeling of psychotic alienation in the manner in which the other experiences it. My previous experiences are embedded in a different affective context from those of the schizophrenic person. My particular history and situatedness prepare me to react in a way which differs significantly from how a person with schizophrenia reacts because she will feel certain emotions differently, have a different history of interactions with others, and so on.



Though the idea at the core of this objection cannot be denied, as mentioned in Section 13.6.1, empathy does not require that the empathizer and the other feel exactly the same. Given that empathy admits different degrees of accuracy, it can take place even when we are not accurately re-living the other's experience. Nonetheless, insofar as empathizers aspire to a high degree of accuracy, if we want to counteract the embodiment constraint, other-oriented perspective-taking is crucial. To imagine the phenomenal property of the other's emotion, we have to take her position as an agent situated in a particular sociohistorical context as a point of departure. Despite being limited by our own situatedness, if we want empathy to be accurate, we should resort to the factors mentioned earlier (testimony, fiction, etc.) to be able to experientially imagine the particular way in which she feels.

In this context, I want to mention the importance of "sympathy" as a guide for our empathic imaginings. This idea has been put forward by Svenaeus (2015), who, after noticing that accounts of empathy that underscore the role of imagining have rarely been concerned with what guides our imagining, mentions the importance of sympathy or empathic concern as a kind of feeling with the other that infuses the empathic experience. According to him, this form of sympathy in which we are concerned for the other's well-being can motivate an accurate apprehension of what she is going through. In Drummond's (2023) view, sympathy complements empathy insofar as it directs its attention to the other's mental state as something that is cared about. Though the role of sympathy in guiding empathic imaginings must be analysed further, I think that it might work here as a possible guide to our empathic imaginings. This suggestion fits well with Stueber's idea that the realisation of the phenomenal dimension of empathy depends partly on whether the reasons with which the empathizer is concerned relate to what the agents care about (2023: 122).

### 13.7 Concluding remarks

Let us return to the question that motivated this chapter: can we empathize with another person's emotions when we have never experienced them for ourselves? After providing a preliminary affirmative answer to this question, I have argued that the challenge consists in explaining how we can empathically imagine the qualitative feel of the other's experience when we are not acquainted with it. To this end, I developed a model to explain how we experientially imagine the phenomenal properties of the other's emotions no matter if they are familiar or novel to us. Yet, my plea for optimism has been moderate. Leaving aside the fact that we cannot always imagine novel emotions, and that our imaginings are not always infallible,

I have argued that, when we are unfamiliar with the other's emotion, the imagined qualitative feel is probably similar but not identical to what the other is going through. Finally, I have argued that this similarity provides sufficient grounds for empathy insofar as empathy admits different degrees of accuracy.

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### **Notes**

- 1 This paper focuses on how the experiential constraint affects our ability to imagine new feelings. See Wiltsher (in this volume) on the question of whether we can imagine novel colors.
- 2 Burns introduces this objection as part of a defense of the direct perception theory of empathy.
- 3 Interpersonal similarity is one of the features that distinguishes empathy from similar phenomena in which we apprehend the other's experience, such as mindreading or contagion. In mindreading, we apprehend the other's experience but do not resonate with it, while in contagion the distinction between self and other that is essential to empathy is abolished.
- 4 Though experiential imagination is considered to be the hallmark of imagining from the inside, here, for analytical purposes, I separate the process of perspective-taking and the process of experientially imagining.
- 5 The concept of parallel imagining has been introduced by Walton (2015: 3). Though I adopt this term, I do not endorse Walton's theory. Moreover, here I introduce a distinction between two types of parallel imagining.
- 6 The cases analysed here differ from a further case in which imagining an emotion leads to really experiencing that emotion (Wollheim 1984: 70, 89). I can imagine feeling sad and end up really feeling sad. However, in this case, the imagination would be involved only insofar as it causes or motivates a real emotion.

- 7 I use here the term “emotion” in a broad sense as encompassing emotional states with a similar structure such as intentional feelings (e.g., feeling alienated) and sentiments (e.g., love).
- 8 This model draws on my previous work on how we imagine the qualitative feel of emotions outside the context of empathy (Vendrell Ferran 2022, see also Vendrell Ferran forthcoming). I assume that the psychological mechanisms employed in both contexts are similar.
- 9 In this respect, my account differs from Walton’s, which argues that empathy requires phenomenal concepts but not imagination (2015: 1). For Walton, some cases of empathy might entail imagining, but not all cases of empathy require it.
- 10 For two different views on the constructive character of memory, see McCarroll 2018 and Michaelian 2016. Yet, although Peeters, Cosentino, and Werning argue for the constructive nature of memory, they do not endorse simulationism. In fact, they leave room for preservationism.
- 11 I work here with the view that the result of imagining an emotion (within or without the context of empathy) is a “quasi-emotion.” However, in the debate on empathy, it is a matter of dispute whether the subject actually undergoes the other’s emotion or just imagines it (Petraschka 2023), and in the debate on imagination, several authors argue that imagining an emotional state leads to us experiencing it (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002; Debus 2007; for arguments against this view, see Goldie 2005: 131, 2012: 82; Loev et al. 2022; Todd 2023; Vendrell Ferran 2022; Wollheim 1984).
- 12 Werner (2023) uses the phrase “empathic scaffoldings” for the “imaginative scaffoldings” employed in empathy.

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