

# KNOWING WHAT IT IS LIKE AND TESTIMONY

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It is often said that ‘what it is like’-knowledge cannot be acquired by consulting testimony or reading books [Lewis 1998; Paul 2014; 2015a]. However, people also routinely consult books like *What It Is Like to Go to War* [Marlantes 2014], and countless ‘what it is like’ articles and youtube videos, in the apparent hope of gaining knowledge about what it is like to have experiences they have not had themselves. This article examines this puzzle and tries to solve it by appealing to recent work on knowing-wh ascriptions. In closing I indicate the wider significance of these ideas by showing how they can help us to evaluate prominent arguments by Paul [2014; 2015a] concerning transformative experiences.

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## 1. Introduction

There are, for better and worse, many experiences I have not had. For example, I have never experienced going to war, delivering a stand-up comedy routine, giving birth to a child, riding a bike, or smelling a skunk. Suppose I want to know what it is like to have one of these experiences. What should I do? The obvious answer is that I should go out and have the experience myself. As David Lewis reminded us, ‘Experience is the best teacher’ [1988: 447]

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when it comes to ‘what it is like’-knowledge (‘WIL-knowledge’ or ‘knowing-WIL’). But sometimes having the relevant experience is undesirable, impractical, or even impossible. In such circumstances, what can I do if I want to know what it is like to have one of these experiences? Could I gain this WIL-knowledge by reading stories or talking with the experienced? Philosophers who write on WIL-knowledge often answer such questions with an emphatic ‘No’:

If you want to know what a new and different experience is like, you can learn it by going out and really *having* that experience. You can’t learn it by being told about that experience, however thorough your lessons may be. [Lewis 1998: 29]

What we learn from the case of Mary is that stories, testimony, and theories aren’t enough to teach you what it is like to have truly new types of experiences—you learn what it is like by actually having an experience of that type. [Paul 2014: 13]

As the quote from Paul indicates, familiar intuitions about Mary in her black-and-white room [Jackson 1982] support a *pessimistic attitude* towards the possibility of gaining WIL-knowledge merely by consulting ‘stories, testimony, and theories’ or any other means that do not involve having the relevant experience oneself. And expressions of this pessimistic attitude can be found not only in philosophy but also in novels, films, and pop music [see Hellie 2004 for examples].

Why assume that the pessimistic attitude is correct? The implicit rationale is that knowing-WIL is subject to some kind of experience condition such that, at least in normal circumstances, one can know what it is like to  $\Phi$  only if one has  $\Phi$ -ed oneself.<sup>1</sup> As Lewis

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘in normal circumstances’ qualification relates to Lewis’ [1998: 448] suggestion that it is at least metaphysically possible that future neuroscience or magic could be used to put a subject who does not know

[1998: 447] says of skunks: ‘If you haven’t smelled a skunk, then you don’t know what it’s like. You never will, unless someday you smell a skunk for yourself.’ The experience condition can be motivated not only by considering distant hypotheticals involving near-omniscient neuroscientists, or animals with very different forms of cognition [Nagel 1974], but also by everyday contrasts between people with different life experiences. As Paul [2014: 7–8] writes: ‘If you are a man who has grown up and always lived in a rich Western country, you cannot know what it is like to be an impoverished woman living in Ethiopia, and if she has never left her village she cannot know what it is like to be you . . . You need to have the experience itself to know what it is really like’.

However, there are also many practices and judgments that seem to testify to our (at least tacitly) holding an *optimistic attitude* towards the possibility of using stories, testimony, and theories to gain WIL-knowledge. For example, in *What It Is Like To Go To War* Karl Marlantes tries ‘to explain what it was like for me to go to war’ [2011: 255], offering a series of reflections on the psychological, moral, and spiritual, aspects of his and others’ experiences of going to war. And Marlantes makes it clear that he wants to communicate this knowledge to people who have *not* been to war, especially young people facing the possibility of going to war for the first time, and politicians considering whether to send young people to war.

Similarly, the journalist Stan Grant [2015] writes in an article responding to the racist abuse of the AFL sports star Adam Goodes:

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what it is like to  $\Phi$  into in the same underlying physical state as someone who has that knowledge (and Lewis assumes that one could thereby know what it is like to  $\Phi$  without having  $\Phi$ -ed oneself).

Here's what I can do. I can tell you what it is like for us. I can tell you what Adam must be feeling, because I've felt it. Because every Indigenous person I know has felt it.

In context, it is clear that Grant is addressing non-Indigenous Australians here and is attempting to tell that audience what it is like for himself, and other Indigenous Australians like Goodes, to experience the forms of systematic racism they face living in Australia. And it seems reasonable to interpret Grant as thereby expressing some degree of optimism that his audience might *learn* something about what it is like to have these experiences from his testimony.<sup>2</sup>

These examples are not isolated cases. A bit of googling reveals countless WIL-articles, youtube videos, books<sup>3</sup>, and blog entries, where a speaker (who knows what it is like to  $\Phi$ ) attempts to tell other people (who have not  $\Phi$ -ed themselves) what it is like to  $\Phi$ . But, of course, with any of the relevant experiences there will always be the compelling thought that 'You need to have the experience itself to know what it is really like' [Paul 2014: 8]. What exactly is going on here? What is the value of these acts of testimony if the intended audience can never gain the knowledge that the speaker is trying to communicate?

Consider a slightly different kind of example. The philosopher Nancy Sherman is a renowned expert on the traumas involved in going to war [see e.g. Sherman 2010]. Sherman

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<sup>2</sup> As we will discuss in Section 2, a knowing-WIL ascription is a kind of knowing-wh ascription. As Poston [2016] points out, in general we would expect that if  $A$  knows-wh  $Q$  for some embedded question ' $wh-Q$ ' (e.g. 'when the play is on'), and  $A$  tells  $B$   $wh-Q$  (e.g.  $A$  tells  $B$  when the play is on), then  $B$  will now know  $wh-Q$  as well (e.g.  $B$  will know when the play is on), assuming that standard conditions for the transference of knowledge through testimony are in place. It could be that knowing-WIL ascriptions are an exception to this generalization (Poston thinks that knowing-how-to ascriptions are an exception like this). And the intuitions that support the pessimistic attitude provide some prima facie support for that conclusion. The point here is simply that our practices of sharing and seeking out testimony about what it is like to  $\Phi$  also provide some prima facie support for the opposite conclusion.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see *What It Feels Like* [Jacobs 2003], which consists of 148 first-person reports of different experiences with titles like 'What it feels like to be bitten by a shark', and 'What it feels like to give birth'.

has interviewed hundreds of veterans about their experiences and uses ideas from moral philosophy and psychoanalysis to try to better understand ‘their inner wars’ [2010: 48]. However, in contrast to Marlantes, Sherman has never gone to war herself. Should we insist then that—analogous to Mary in her black-and-white room—Sherman’s years of study and research could not *in principle* have helped her to gain *any* knowledge about what it is like to go to war? There is certainly a sense in which that insistence seems apt, but I submit that there is also another sense in which it seems incorrect or, somehow, misleading.

At this point some readers may suspect: (i) that any *prima facie* tension between the pessimistic and optimistic attitudes can be explained away; and (ii) that the way to do that is to reject the optimistic attitude outright, and explain any value that these WIL-resources have *solely* in terms of their providing us with access to forms of knowledge *other* than knowing what it is like to  $\Phi$  (or perhaps other non-epistemic benefits). In a brief footnote, Paul [2014: 7] seems to want to embrace a position like this. However, Paul is silent on what these other forms of knowledge might be only saying that it is a ‘difficult question’ to figure out what such resources teach us.

I agree with (i) but I am skeptical about (ii) as a way of resolving this puzzle. I will not argue against (ii) here but my suspicion is that any view that rejects the optimistic attitude outright will fail to adequately explain all of our apparent practices of trying to communicate WIL-knowledge. Relatedly, I think any such view will struggle to explain the important moral obligations we can be under to try and better understand the subjective lives of other people. For these reasons, I want to explore a different way of endorsing (i), namely, by showing how, despite appearances to the contrary, one can consistently view *both* attitudes as being correct, or at least as pointing us towards important truths. I will try to meet that challenge in Section 3, but first I need to introduce certain ideas about the linguistic form and meaning of knowing-WIL ascriptions.

## 2. Knowing-WIL as Knowing-Wh

Consider the following sentences:

- (1) Mary knows what it is like to go to war.
- (2) Mary does not know what it is like to see something red.
- (3) John knows where the best coffee is.
- (4) Stephanie knows when the game will begin.
- (5) Jill knows why the game was fixed.
- (6) Bob knows how to swim.

The view I will develop in the next section relies on two assumptions about the states of knowledge attributed by knowing-WIL ascriptions like (1) and (2). Both of these assumptions could be questioned but, like many others, I take these claims to be extremely plausible and I will take them for granted here.

The first assumption is that knowing-WIL is a species of *knowledge-wh*.<sup>4</sup> More precisely, our first assumption is that knowledge-WIL ascriptions like (1) and (2) are knowing-wh ascriptions just like (3)–(6), and attribute the same kind of knowledge as these other knowing-wh ascriptions. Knowledge-wh can be defined as the knowledge attributed by ascriptions where the complement of the knowledge verb is an interrogative clause headed by a question-word like ‘why’, ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘whether’, or ‘how’.

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<sup>4</sup> For support of this assumption see Ginet [1975: 5–6], Hellie [2004], Lycan [1996], Stoljar [2016], and Tye [2009; 2011].

The second assumption is that something like the standard question-answer semantics for knowledge-wh is correct and can be extended to knowing-WIL.<sup>5</sup> Very roughly, on a first-pass version of this semantics a knowledge-wh ascription is true just in case the relevant subject knows some<sup>6</sup> proposition that answers the relevant embedded wh-question. Applied to knowing-WIL ascriptions this semantics would tell us that (1) is true just in case Mary knows some proposition  $p$  that answers the embedded WIL-question.

With respect to other knowledge-wh ascriptions there are fairly standard suggestions about what kinds of propositions answer their respective embedded questions. It is often claimed that knowing-where/when/why/whom/how ascriptions respectively quantify over *locations*, *times*, *reasons*, *individuals*, and *ways*. For example, one might give the following truth conditions for (3) and (6):

‘John knows where the best coffee is’ is true if and only if, for some location  $l$ , John knows that  $l$  is where the best coffee is.

‘Bob knows how to swim’ is true if and only if, for some way  $w$ , Bob knows that  $w$  is a way for himself to swim.

What kinds of propositions answer the embedded questions of knowing-WIL ascriptions? A number of suggestions have been made [e.g. Ginet 1975; Hellie 2004; Lycan 1996; Stoljar 2016; and Tye 2011]. The response I will give to our puzzle could be developed using any of

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<sup>5</sup> For support for this semantics see Braun [2006; 2009]; Brogaard [2008; 2009], Groenendijk and Stokhof [1982; 1984], Karttunen [1977], Mastro [2010]; Pavese [2017], Stanley [2011a; 2011b], and Stanley and Williamson [2001]. For criticisms and alternatives see Bengson and Moffett [2011] and Farkas [2016].

<sup>6</sup> For ease of exposition, I am focusing here only on the more relevant ‘mention some’ interpretation of knowing-wh ascriptions, rather than the ‘mention all’ interpretation on which the subject has to know *all* of the answers to the embedded wh-question.

these views but I will follow the account in Stoljar [2016], as I take this to be the most detailed and promising of these proposals.

On Stoljar's view, there are a number of connections between knowing-WIL and knowing-how ascriptions. This includes the fact that they both quantify over *ways*, however, in the case of knowing-WIL ascriptions it is *ways of being affected by events* rather than *ways of performing actions*. In stereotypical contexts when we ascribe knowing-WIL we will be concerned with ways of being *experientially* affected by events, such that one *feels* a certain way in virtue of some event. Leaving aside some details that we will not need, Stoljar's view can be represented as the thesis that, in a stereotypical context, a knowing-WIL ascription like (1) is true iff there is some way *w* such that Miguel knows that *w* is a way it feels to go to war. As Stoljar [2018: 110] says, on his view “‘knowing what it's like to F’ is plausibly analyzed in contexts like these as being roughly equivalent to ‘knowing how it feels to F’”.

### 3. A Response

Knowing what it is like to  $\Phi$  is a form of knowledge-wh and, as such, can be analysed in terms of knowing a proposition that answers its embedded question. How can these assumptions help with our puzzle? I think the key to making progress on our puzzle is to note how it resembles familiar insufficiency challenges to the standard question-answer analyses of knowledge-wh. Consider the following examples, both based on cases in the literature:<sup>7</sup>

*Cycling*: Miguel tells Mary that *that way* [pointing at a cyclist] is a way for her to ride a bike. But Mary has never even attempted to ride a bike herself. Does Mary now know how to ride a bike?

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<sup>7</sup> The first case is adapted from Stanley and Williamson [2001] and the second is from Stanley [2011b]. For a well-known case involving knowing-who see Braun's [2006] *Hong Oak Yun* example.



*Coffee*: Miguel points to a photo of the interior of his favourite café in Norwich and tells Mary ‘This café serves the best flat white in Norwich’. Mary herself has never been to Norwich. Does Mary now know where to find the best flat white in Norwich?

With respect to each example, it is plausible that there would be contexts in which we would judge an assertion that Mary possesses the relevant knowledge-wh to be false. But in each example Mary does know a proposition that addresses the relevant embedded question. And, importantly, we can generate similar looking cases for WIL-knowledge:

*Cerebroscope*: Mary has been confined to a special black-and-white room all her life so that she has never had an experience of seeing something red (as in Jackson’s original case, except here Mary lacks the extraordinary knowledge of the physical world that she has in the original thought-experiment). Before she leaves her black-and-white room Mary uses her cerebroscope and comes to know that *that* [demonstrating a brain state of a subject who is seeing something red] is the way it feels to see something red. Does Mary know what it is like to see something red?<sup>8</sup>

*War*: Mary is a renowned expert on the subjective experiences of going to war. As a result, Mary knows many true and informative propositions about the way it feels to go to war. But Mary has never been to war herself. Does Mary know what it is like to go to war?

How should someone who likes the question-answer semantics for knowing-wh respond to these kinds of insufficiency challenges? One important kind of response is to concede that

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<sup>8</sup> *Cerebroscope* is based on a case from Tye [2009], except that in Tye’s case Mary has the same extraordinary knowledge she has in Jackson’s original case because he is interested in providing a response to the knowledge argument. However, we need not take any stance here on the knowledge argument. The claim here is only that in *this* case (where Mary’s overall state of knowledge is more ordinary) Mary, intuitively, fails to know what it is like to see something red.

merely knowing a proposition that addresses the relevant embedded wh-question does not suffice to possess some given form of knowledge-wh. Rather, possessing the relevant form of knowledge-wh is a matter of knowing such a proposition *and* also knowing that proposition *in the right way*.<sup>9</sup> For example, Stanley and Williamson [2001] suggest that knowing how to ride a bicycle is a matter of there being some way *w* such that one knows, under a *practical mode of presentation*, that *w* is a way for oneself to ride a bicycle. Similarly, Stanley [2011b] suggests that for ‘Mary knows where to find coffee’ to be true Mary needs to know of a particular place that she can buy coffee there, *and* she has to think of that place *in the right way* (a way that enables her to locate that place in objective space).

Can we offer a special way of knowing response to cases like *Cerebroscope* and *War*? In these examples, Mary does know a relevant proposition of the form ‘that way is a way it feels to  $\Phi$ ’. The problem is that her knowledge is not suitably grounded in her own experiences of the relevant type, for the obvious reason that she has not had any such experiences. Mary knows the right kind of propositions but she does not know them *in the right way*—what we could call a *phenomenal way of knowing*.

What is involved in knowing a proposition of the form ‘*w* is a way it feels to  $\Phi$ ’ in a phenomenal way? Following Tye [2009; 2011], I will hold that, minimally, knowing such a proposition in a phenomenal way is a matter of one’s knowledge being suitably grounded in one’s own direct acquaintance with the way it feels to  $\Phi$  through one’s own experiences of  $\Phi$ -ing. As with the notion of practical ways of thinking [Stanley and Williamson 2001: 427],

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<sup>9</sup> Another important kind of response appeals to the context sensitivity of our judgments about whether a given proposition counts as an answer to the embedded question [for discussion see Braun 2006 and 2011 and Parent 2014]. Yet another kind of response involves appealing to different ways of disambiguating the logical form of the embedded question [see Brogaard 2008 and Stanley 2011b: 125–126 for versions of this response to the *Cycling* case].

this minimal idea could then be developed in in two broadly different directions. On the first approach, the idea would be that the object of one's knowledge is a fine-grained Fregean proposition that includes a special acquaintance-based concept of a way it feels to  $\Phi$ . And on the second approach, the idea would be that one has a special acquaintance-based way of entertaining the coarse-grained Russellian proposition that is the object of one's knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

For example, Tye [2011] opts for a version of the Fregean approach in trying to explain the difference between Mary in a case like *Cerebroscope* and someone like himself, who does know what it is like to experience red. Tye suggests that while Mary knows an answer to the relevant WIL-question, and while both he and Mary have a demonstrative concept of what it is like to see something red, only his demonstrative concept 'originates in an act of attending to the relevant phenomenal character in my own experience' [2011: 165–166]. Tye suggests that his concept is that experiencing red is like *this*, where the demonstrative picks out a feature of the phenomenal character of his own experiences of seeing something red. Tye also notes that while in normal contexts only the kind of answer he knows would be counted as an acceptable answer to the embedded question, the answer Mary knows might be acceptable in less normal contexts.

### *3.1 An Initial Response*

Tye's views [2009; 2011] provide us with a promising response to the insufficiency challenges that arise for knowing-WIL. Furthermore, I think they point us towards a way of responding to our puzzle based on two simple ideas:

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<sup>10</sup> See Thau [2002] for a detailed discussion of these two broad alternatives (under different labels) and other related distinctions.

(I) In stereotypical contexts, we will judge a knowing-WIL ascription to be false if the subject knows a proposition of the form ‘*w* is a way it feels to  $\Phi$ ’ that addresses the relevant embedded question but does not know any such proposition *in a phenomenal way*.

(II) One can come to know propositions of the form ‘*w* is a way it feels to  $\Phi$ ’ on the basis of consulting stories, testimony or theories even if one hasn’t had an experience of  $\Phi$ -ing oneself. But one will not thereby know those propositions in a phenomenal way.

With (I)-(II) as their common core, this response to our puzzle can then be formulated in at least three different ways based on different views one might have of the relationship between this phenomenal way of knowing condition and the semantics and/or pragmatics of knowing-WIL ascriptions (each of which has precedents in the knowing-wh literature).

On the first approach, the phenomenal way condition is taken to be a context-invariant constraint on the truth-conditions of knowledge-WIL ascriptions. It might seem to follow that the pessimistic attitude straightforwardly triumphs over the optimistic attitude. For, on this approach, ‘Mary knows what it is like to go to war’ will be false in any context where Mary has not been to war herself. But this assumption is consistent with saying that Mary can know all sorts of true propositions of the form ‘*w* is a way it feels to go to war’ in virtue of her years of research. One can still say then that the optimistic attitude reflects an important truth, namely, that stories, testimony, and theories can help us to know propositions of this form. It is just that merely knowing such propositions is never sufficient for knowing what it is like to  $\Phi$ .

Furthermore, a proponent of this approach could try to provide some kind of pragmatic explanation of the fact that, in some contexts, an utterance of ‘Mary knows what it is like to go to war’ will be *judged* to be true even though it semantically expresses a false

proposition.<sup>11</sup> This is important because, as we have seen, there do seem to be some less stereotypical contexts where it would be reasonable to ascribe WIL-knowledge to a subject even though they have not had the relevant experience themselves.<sup>12</sup> For example, when reviewing one of Mary's books it could be perfectly reasonable to say something like: 'Mary's new book reveals her in-depth knowledge of what it is like to go war'.

On the second approach, the phenomenal way condition is taken to be a constraint on the truth-conditions of knowledge-WIL ascriptions in *some*, but not all, conversational contexts. There will be a straightforward sense then in which both the pessimistic and the optimistic attitudes can be viewed as being correct. This is because, in stereotypical contexts, an utterance of 'Mary knows what it is like to go to war' will be true only if Mary satisfies the phenomenal way of knowing condition (in accord with the pessimistic attitude). But, in other less stereotypical contexts, an utterance of 'Mary knows what it is like to go to war' will be true in virtue of Mary knowing a relevant proposition in a merely non-phenomenal way on the basis of consulting stories, testimony, or theories (in accord with the optimistic attitude).

On the third approach, the phenomenal way condition is never a constraint on the truth-conditions of knowledge-WIL ascriptions. Here, for any context *C*, 'S knows what it is like to  $\Phi$ ' is true in *C* iff there is some way *w* such that S knows that *w* is the way it feels to  $\Phi$ , with no requirement added that S has to possess this knowledge in any special way. It might seem that on such an approach the optimistic attitude straightforwardly triumphs over the pessimistic attitude. But one can still hold that in stereotypical contexts an utterance of 'S knows what it is like to  $\Phi$ ' will only be *judged* to be true if there is some way *w* such that S

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<sup>11</sup> As a comparison, consider Unger's [1975] discussion of *absolute terms* like 'flat', 'straight', and 'empty'.

<sup>12</sup> Or, at the very least, it would be reasonable to make some qualified ascription like 'S knows *something* about what it is like to  $\Phi$ ' or 'S knows *in part* what it is like to  $\Phi$ ' (I will return to these kinds of ascriptions in Section 3.3 below).

knows, in a phenomenal way, that  $w$  is the way it feels to  $\Phi$ . In which case, the pessimistic attitude can still be viewed as reflecting an important truth, namely, that stories, testimony, and theories cannot help us to acquire the states of knowledge we are typically interested in when we make knowing-WIL ascriptions.

I will not try to choose between these options.<sup>13</sup> For our purposes, the key point is that on *any* one of these approaches there will be a good sense in which both the optimistic and the pessimistic attitudes reflect important truths. With regards to the optimistic attitude, we can explain the value of our practices of offering and consulting WIL-stories, testimony, and theories, by pointing out that people can come to know propositions of the form ‘that way is a way it feels to  $\Phi$ ’ by consulting such resources. And, with regards to the pessimistic attitude, we can explain what is correct about our intuitions that one cannot know what it is like to  $\Phi$  by consulting such resources, by appealing to the fact that merely consulting such resources will not help one to know such a proposition in a phenomenal way. In which case, on any of these approaches we can consistently say *both* that Mary knows many truths about what it is like to go to war *and* that it would nonetheless be wrong to say that she knows what it is like to go to war (either because one is saying something false, or true but conversationally inappropriate).

### 3.2 Refining our Response

The above response to the puzzle is on the right-track but inadequate as it stands. The response suggests a picture on which there is a large gulf between knowing propositions of

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<sup>13</sup> See Boër and Lycan [1986] for views that could be used to support the second option; Braun [2006; 2011] for views that support the third option; and Stanley and Williamson [2001] for versions of the first and third options in relation to their practical mode of presentation condition. Parent [2014] provides an excellent overview of issues related to all of these options.

the form ‘ $w$  is a way it feels to  $\Phi$ ’ in a phenomenal way versus knowing them in some non-phenomenal or merely theoretical way, with no intermediate cases falling between these extremes. But the real picture, I think, is closer to one on which these two extremes are just the end points of a spectrum of cases—where stories, testimony, and theories can help us to gain forms of knowledge falling between these two end points and not merely the knowledge at one end of the spectrum.

To help fill in this picture it will be useful to draw on Walton’s [2015] work on empathy. Walton discusses a case where Oscar is exploring a cave and Emily, who knows this, imagines herself in ‘his shoes’ exploring the cave. As a result, Emily herself begins to feel panicked and, thinking that Oscar’s psychological makeup is like hers, she also forms the judgment that Oscar feels panicked. Walton claims that Emily would not thereby be empathising with Oscar, as empathy requires a further and more ‘intimate link’ between her own experience of feeling panicked and her judgment that Oscar feels panicked. The further link is provided if Emily uses her own current experience of feeling panicked as a ‘sample’ to represent Oscar’s experience:

The empathizer’s use of her own current mental state as a sample constitutes an especially intimate link between her state and her judgment about or impression of the target’s . . . Emily’s judgment or impression is not merely that “*I am panicked, and so is Oscar,*” but rather, “*Oscar is as I am, like this.*” She can appropriately say, “I know how it is with him,” or “I know how he feels,” where “know” carries a connotation of intimacy, acquaintance. This is close to what one might call *Verstehen*, or “knowing what it is like” for Oscar. Notice that the content of what she knows is in propositional form: She knows that Oscar feels like this. But this is propositional knowledge of a special kind, with the sample in place of a linguistic predicate in the formulation of what she knows. [Walton 2015: 9]

For our purposes, what is important about Walton’s ideas is that they can help us to identify forms of WIL-knowledge that lie between the two poles of knowledge mentioned earlier. More precisely, we can distinguish at least three different kinds of knowledge of propositions

of the form ‘that way is a way it feels to  $\Phi$ ’—what I will call *knowledge of experience* (KoE).

Using the example of going to war again, we can distinguish:

*Gold-standard KoE*: There is some way such that Mary knows that that way is a way it feels to go to war, and Mary knows this proposition in a phenomenal way in the sense that her concept of that way originated in acts of directly attending to the phenomenal properties of her own experiences of going to war

*Silver-standard KoE*: There is some way such that Mary knows that that way is a way it feels to go to war, and Mary knows this proposition in a phenomenal way in the sense that her concept of that way originated in acts of directly attending to the phenomenal properties of her own experiences distinct from, but relevantly similar to, the experience of going to war (which she has not had).

*Bronze-standard KoE*: There is some way such that Mary knows that that way is a way it feels to go to war, and Mary knows this proposition in some non-phenomenal way.

One cannot gain gold-standard KoE from stories, testimony, or theories because merely consulting such sources won’t help one to have, and be directly acquainted with, the relevant experience. In this sense the pessimistic attitude is correct. However, by consulting such sources one can come to know propositions of the form ‘that way is a way it feels to  $\Phi$ ’. Furthermore, such sources can also help to stimulate, inform, and guide, one’s imaginings, memories, and empathetic experiences helping one to form a concept of the way it feels to  $\Phi$  that is grounded in one’s direct acquaintance with experiences that are distinct from, but which share relevant phenomenal properties with, the experience of  $\Phi$ -ing. Such sources can help us to use our own experiences (occurrent or remembered) as samples to represent the properties of a target experience that we have not had ourselves. In this sense, the optimistic



attitude is correct because stories, testimony, and theories can help us to gain not merely bronze but silver standard KoE.

Suppose Mary has not been to war but she has worked for many years as an ambulance officer. After talking with veterans, or reading the books of Marlantes and Sherman, Mary might learn of particular similarities that obtain between the way it feels to go to war and the way it feels to undergo experiences that she has had herself (e.g. being confronted with extremely traumatised, injured, and sometimes violent, people)—where Mary could pick out the relevant aspects of her own experiences via an “inner demonstrative” as they occur (as in Walton’s case), or via her memories of how such experiences feel. Drawing on her knowledge of these similarities, Mary could then form a concept of the way it feels to go to war that is partly grounded in her own direct acquaintance with the phenomenal properties of experiences that she has had as an ambulance officer. And this concept could be part of the propositional object of Mary’s knowledge when she knows that that way is the way it feels to go to war. (Alternatively, we could say that Mary has a special way of accessing the way it feels to go to war, rather than a special concept of that way.)

In effect, Walton’s ideas help us to distinguish two different phenomenal ways of knowing conditions that one could satisfy when one knows that  $w$  is a way it feels to  $\Phi$ . The first condition requires one to have a concept of  $w$  that originated in acts of directly attending to the phenomenal properties of one’s own experiences of  $\Phi$ -ing (the gold standard case). The second condition requires one to have a concept of  $w$  that originated in acts of directly attending to the phenomenal properties of one’s own experiences of  $\psi$ -ing, where  $\psi$ -ing is distinct from  $\Phi$ -ing but the way it feels to  $\psi$  shares certain relevant phenomenal properties with the way it feels to  $\Phi$  (the silver standard case). And, again, this refined response to our puzzle could be developed in different ways depending on how one thinks of the relationship between these two conditions and the semantics and pragmatics of knowledge-WIL

ascriptions. But, as before, choosing between these kinds of theoretical options is not important for our purposes. What is important is that this refined response to our puzzle now allows us to acknowledge how people can use stories, testimony, and theories to gain a more intimate and acquaintance based knowledge of truths about what it is like to  $\Phi$  (silver-standard KoE), even if they themselves have never had an experience of  $\Phi$ -ing.

### 3.3 Gradability

Silver-standard KoE should not be thought of as a fixed point between gold and bronze standard KoE. The way it feels to  $\psi$  that one uses in forming one's concept of the way it feels to  $\Phi$ , could be more or less similar to the way it feels to  $\Phi$  depending on what, and how many, phenomenal properties they have in common. In which case, one's silver-standard KoE would then be 'closer' or 'further' away from the ideal of gold-standard KoE depending on how strong or weak these similarities are.

These points fit well with the linguistic fact that knowing-wh ascriptions are typically *gradable*, in the sense that they can be modified by adverbial modifiers like 'largely' and 'in part', and by degree modifiers like 'well', 'very well', and 'better than' [see Sgaravatti and Zardini 2008; Pavese 2017]. And, as indicated earlier, this generalization extends to knowing-WIL ascriptions. For example, the following sentences all sound perfectly acceptable:

- (7) Marlantes knows what it is like to go to war better than Sherman does.
- (8) Sherman knows what it is like to go to war better than I do.
- (9) Miguel knows in part what it is like to be a role model.

Pavese [2017] argues that the gradability of knowledge-how-to ascriptions has both a *quantitative* and a *qualitative* dimension, and I think there are likely to be related distinctions for knowing-WIL ascriptions. For example, one way Mary could be said to know what it is

like to go to war better than Susan is if Mary simply knows more true answers (or, perhaps it would be better to say, more parts of some true and complete answer)<sup>14</sup> to the question ‘What is it like to go to war?’. Imagine that neither Mary nor Susan has been to war, but they have both started to study the feelings and experiences of combat soldiers (by e.g. interviewing veterans, and reading the works of authors like Sherman and Marlantes etc.). The only salient difference between Mary and Susan is that while both of them have studied the negatively valenced feelings (e.g. of guilt and shame) experienced by soldiers, only Mary has also studied the positively valenced feelings (e.g. feelings of camaraderie or elation during combat) that soldiers can experience. In such a scenario there would be a good sense in which Mary knows what it feels like to go to war better than Susan. And the gradability here looks to be *quantitative* because it has to do with Mary knowing more truths that address the question ‘What is it like to go to war?’ than Susan.

Now imagine that Mary and Susan know all the same (coarse-grained) answers to the question ‘What is it like to go to war?’. It still might be the case that Mary knows what it is like to go to war better than Susan if Mary has been to war herself and, hence, only Mary entertains these propositions in a way that is grounded in her own experiences of going to war. This gradability—which is the gradability at work in the earlier comparisons between gold, silver, and bronze knowledge—looks to be *qualitative* in the sense that it relates to differences in the quality of one’s access to (coarse-grained) truths about the way it feels to go to war, rather than with the number of such truths that one knows.

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<sup>14</sup> On Pavese’s semantics partial knowledge-wh is defined in terms of knowing some part of a complete answer to the relevant embedded question, and answers to questions are not propositions but ordered pairs where the first element is a proposition and the second element is a question.

My intention here is just to suggest some ways in which one might start to think about the gradability of knowing-WIL ascriptions. In relation to our puzzle, the gradability of knowledge-WIL ascriptions is interesting because it might open up other ways of formulating the response to our puzzle. For example, one might say that what is right about the optimistic attitude is that one can know *in part* what it is like to  $\Phi$  on the basis of consulting stories etc., whilst maintaining that what is right about the pessimistic attitude is that one cannot know *in full* what it is like to  $\Phi$  if one has had not an experience of  $\Phi$ -ing oneself.

#### 4. An Application

I have no pretensions to having given a definitive response to our puzzle. But I hope to have identified a promising schema, or a useful set of tools, for developing good responses to it. Furthermore, I think the ideas developed in responding to our puzzle have the potential to contribute to various debates concerned with the limits of what we can know about experiences we have not had ourselves. In closing, I want to provide some support for this claim by briefly considering one particularly salient application.

Paul [2014; 2015a] argues that one cannot rationally decide whether to have an *epistemically transformative* experience on the basis of one's expectation of what it would be like to have that experience—where an experience is epistemically transformative just in case one cannot know what it is like to have that experience in advance of having that experience oneself. Paul's [2015a] argument is focused on the following example:

*Scenario:* You have no children. However, you have reached a point in your life when you are personally, financially and physically able to have a child. You sit down and think about whether you want to have a child of your very own. You discuss it with your partner and contemplate your options, carefully reflecting on the choice by

assessing what you think it would be like for you to have a child of your very own and comparing this to what you think it would be like to remain childless.

On the basis of this careful consideration, you then choose one of these two options:

Have a child.

Not have a child.

Paul grants that this way of deciding between these options ‘seems perfectly apt’ [ibid.: 2] and is widely encouraged in many cultures. However, despite its appeal, Paul argues that this decision process is not rational:

The trouble comes from the fact that, because having one’s first child is epistemically transformative, one cannot determine the value of what it’s like to have one’s own child before actually having her. This means that the subjective unpredictability attending the act of having one’s first child makes the story about family planning into little more than pleasant fiction. Because you cannot know the value of the relevant outcome, there is no rationally acceptable value you can assign to it. The problem is not that a prospective parent can only grasp the approximate values of the outcomes of her act, for then, at least, she might have some hope of meeting our norms for ordinary decision-making. The problem is that she cannot determine the values with any degree of accuracy at all. [ibid.: 159]

There are a number of steps in Paul’s full argument but, for our purposes, it will suffice to focus on just the following reconstruction of part of her argument:<sup>15</sup>

*The Knowledge Premise:* You can know what it is like to have a child only if you have had a child yourself.

*The Value Premise:* You can approximately determine the subjective value of what it is like to have a child only if you know what it is like to have a child.

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<sup>15</sup> See Krishnamurthy [2015] for a more complete reconstruction.

Therefore,

*Intermediate Conclusion:* You can approximately determine the subjective value of what it is like to have a child only if you have had a child yourself.<sup>16</sup>

Starting with the knowledge premise, our discussion suggests that there will be some, albeit non-stereotypical, contexts in which it will be appropriate to say that someone knows what it is like to be a parent solely in virtue of their possessing the relevant silver or bronze standard KoE. Or, at the very least, that such a subject thereby knows *to some degree*, or *in part*, what it is like to be a parent. For example, this might be the case for someone who has never been a parent but who has had one or more of the following experiences: reading books about parenting, babysitting, looking after younger siblings, talking to parents about their experiences as parents, etc. This accords with claims by critics of Paul like Krishnamurthy [2015] and Harman [2015], who suggest that by such means one could come to know *something* about what it is like to be a parent. And our discussion supports such criticisms by providing a detailed account of the different ways in which one could be said to possess partial knowledge of what it is like to be a parent.

At this point, however, Paul might appeal to another part of our discussion and simply stipulate that the embedded knowing-WIL ascription in the knowledge premise should be interpreted in the way that it would in a stereotypical context, where it attributes gold standard KoE. In which case, the premise will be true because on this interpretation it is stating the trivial truth that you have gold-standard knowledge, of some way  $w$ , that  $w$  is the way it feels to have a child only if you have had a child yourself. However, for the resulting

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<sup>16</sup> Paul can then argue that the decision process described in *Scenario* is not rational by appealing to this intermediate conclusion and the further idea that it would only be rational if you could approximately determine, and then compare, the respective subjective values of what it is like to have a child versus what it is like to remain childless.

argument to be valid, we would also need to interpret ‘you know what it is like to have a child’ in the value premise in the same way, giving us the following argument:

*The Knowledge Premise* \*: You can have *gold-standard* knowledge, of some way *w*, that *w* is a way it feels to have a child only if you have had a child yourself.

*The Value Premise* \*: You can approximately determine the subjective value of what it is like to have a child only if you have *gold-standard* knowledge, of some way *w*, that *w* is a way it feels to have a child only if you have had a child yourself.

Therefore,

*Intermediate conclusion*: You can approximately determine the subjective value of what it is like to have a child only if you have had a child yourself.

Similarly, if we replaced ‘You know what it is like to have a child’ in the knowledge premise with ‘You know *in full* what it is like to have a child’ this would make this premise more plausible but we would also need to make the same change to the value premise to ensure the argument is valid.

The problem now is that it is far from clear that one can approximately determine the subjective value of what it is like to be parent only if one knows *in full* what it is like to have a child, or only if one has *gold-standard knowledge* of a proposition which addresses the question ‘What is it like to have a child?’. Paul [2014: 13] thinks of the subjective value of an experience as a value ‘grounded by what it is like to have lived experiences’ and she suggests that ‘by having the experience, we gain the ability to assess [its] subjective value . . . by gaining the ability to grasp it using our first-personal imaginative perspective’ [ibid.: 12–13]. However, as we have seen, distinct experiences can still share many ‘what it is like’ properties. In which case, it seems plausible that sometimes one could assess the subjective value of an experience one has not had, in virtue of one’s special ‘first-personal’ grasp of the

subjective values of experiences one has had. Using the concepts developed here, the idea is that one could plausibly assess the approximate subjective value of what it is like to have a child on the basis of possessing a lot of *silver standard knowledge* of propositions of the form ‘that way is a way it feels to have a child’.

These points together suggest then that Paul’s argument is in danger of committing a fallacy of equivocation. It is true that there is an interpretation of each premise on which it is intuitively plausible. The knowledge premise is trivially true if we interpret its embedded knowing-WIL ascription as referring to gold-standard KoE, and very plausible if we interpret it as saying that one has to know *in full* what it is like to have a child. And the value premise seems plausible if we interpret it as referring to silver KoE, or knowing *in part* what it is like to have a child. However, there is no univocal interpretation of these premises on which both premises come out as being plausibly true.

There is a lot that Paul might say in response to this equivocation charge.<sup>17</sup> And even if this criticism applies to Paul’s parenthood argument it does not follow that it will apply to all instances of the general kind of argument Paul is interested in. A more detailed examination of these issues will have to be left to another occasion. But I think the points above suffice to indicate the *potential* of the ideas developed here in responding to our puzzle to be fruitfully applied to discussions of transformative experiences. The discussion in Section 3 suggests that whether someone knows what it is like to  $\Phi$  before having  $\Phi$ -ed themselves will very often be a matter of degree, along at least two different dimensions. In which case, whether a new experience will be epistemically transformative will also be a matter of degree in the

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<sup>17</sup> See Paul [2015b] for some indications of where such a debate might go.



same ways.<sup>18</sup> This discussion also helps us to identify a range of very specific differences and similarities that can obtain between one’s epistemic states before and after a new experience. These ideas have the potential to deepen and expand, if not transform, our understanding of epistemically transformative experiences.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Paul [2014: 104] acknowledges that “while there are experiences that are clearly and determinately transformative, there may also be experiences that are transformative to some degree”. But Paul [ibid.: 103–104] regards her main examples as belonging to the first category, whereas our discussion suggests that this may not be correct for the having children example. Paul also seems to suggest [ibid.: 104] that her arguments will apply equally as well to experiences that are only transformative to some degree, whereas our discussion suggests the opposite.

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