12 Bridging the Divide
Imagining Across Experiential Perspectives

Amy Kind

Can one have imaginative access to experiential perspectives vastly different from one's own? Can one successfully imagine what it's like to live a life very different from one's own? These questions are particularly pressing in contemporary society as we try to bridge racial, ethnic, and gender divides. Yet philosophers have often expressed considerable pessimism in this regard, a pessimism that is mirrored in non-philosophical contexts throughout popular culture and public discourse. It is often thought that the gulf between vastly different experiential perspectives cannot be bridged. In this chapter, I explore the case for this pessimism. As I will suggest, the case is considerably weaker than it is usually thought.

12.1 Pessimism: The Basic Idea

To flesh out the pessimistic position, I want to start with its expression in popular culture and public discourse. Expressions of pessimism about one's ability to understand experiential perspectives vastly different from one's own are commonplace in these contexts and occur in a variety of media about a variety of experiential perspectives.

Consider, for example, the song "Til It Happens to You" by Lady Gaga. The song's narrator is a sexual assault survivor who powerfully conveys the sense that you can't know what it's like to be such a person unless you have been sexually assaulted yourself:

> 'Til it happens to you, you don't know
> How it feels
> How it feels
> 'Til it happens to you, you won't know
> It won't be real (how could you know?)
> No it won't be real (how could you know?)
> Won't know how I feel
> 'Til your world burns and crashes
> 'Til you're at the end, the end of your rope

'Til you're standing in my shoes, I don't wanna hear nothing
  from you
From you, from you, 'cause you don't know

Among the many arresting images in the video for the song is one of a woman's arms with "Listen" and "You Will Hear Me" written across them.

Another example comes in the musical *Hamilton*. After Philip Hamilton is killed in a duel, his parents Alexander and Eliza must cope with tremendous grief. In the musical number, "It's Quiet Uptown," parental grief is portrayed as both indescribable and unimaginable to those who have not experienced it:

There are moments that the words don't reach
There is suffering too terrible to name
You hold your child as tight as you can
Then push away the unimaginable

These first two examples focus on differences in experiential perspective – what it is like to be a sexual assault survivor, what it is like to be a grieving parent – that arise from a formative event or series of events. But differences in experiential perspective also may arise from social positionality. Here too, the standard treatment of these differences in popular culture and public discourse sees them as unbridgeable. Consider discussions of racial relations in America. In an audio story published by *The New York Times*, black poet Claudia Rankine (Rankine 2015) notes the limitations that face white people when trying to understand what it is like to be black:

Though the white liberal imagination likes to feel temporarily bad about black suffering, there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black.

A similar idea is often expressed in philosophical contexts as well. For example, Paul Gilroy notes in *Postcolonial Melancholia* that "Racial difference obstructs empathy and makes ethnocentrism inescapable. It becomes impossible even to imagine what it is like to be somebody else" (Gilroy 2005, 63).

Note the strength of the claims here briefly surveyed. What it's like to occupy an experiential perspective different from one's own is

something that can't be known (as in Lady Gaga's question, "how could you know?") or even imagined (as in the claim of unimaginability in *Hamilton* and even more explicitly in Gilroy). The unknowability and unimaginability are meant to be *in principle*, not merely in practice. I call this the *Epistemic Inaccessibility* claim.

> **Epistemic Inaccessibility**: Any experiential perspective vastly different from the one a person occupies is epistemically inaccessible to that person.

While this claim may seem plausible on its face, and while it is certainly widely accepted as plausible, I'm not sure that we should be so easily convinced of its truth. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore the case for Epistemic Inaccessibility in an effort to determine whether and to what extent we have good reason to believe it.

Here it may help to put some of my cards on the table. As a general matter, I am an optimist about imagination. I am optimistic that it can play a role in justifying our beliefs, for example, and I am also optimistic that we can (at least in principle) imagine a wider range of things than is typically recognized (e.g., Kind 2016, Kind 2018, Kind 2020). But this chapter is not meant to make a general case for the optimist position, nor is it even meant to make a specific case for optimism with respect to bridging experiential divides. I won't try to establish the conclusion that a person can have epistemic access to experiential perspectives different from their own. Rather, I will attempt something considerably more modest – namely, to make room for the denial of pessimism, or at least, the particularly deep form of pessimism associated with the Epistemic Inaccessibility claim.

The first part of this consists in exploring the case that can be made for Epistemic Inaccessibility. As I will suggest, once this case is fleshed out, it cannot stand up to close scrutiny. But if this is right, then a question immediately arises. Why would so many people, philosophers and non-philosophers alike, assume that Epistemic Inaccessibility is obvious, so obvious perhaps that it needn't even be argued for?[1] The answer is straightforward: A commitment to Epistemic Inaccessibility appears to be required by plausible principles about respect and humility. Thus, the second part of making room for the denial of pessimism consists in showing why this is mistaken. As I will suggest, the denial of Epistemic Inaccessibility does not entail that one is either disrespectful or inappropriately arrogant.

Though the examples given above were drawn mainly from popular culture and public discourse, in what follows I'll turn to the philosophical literature. I'll start by considering arguments that might be adduced in support of Epistemic Inaccessibility. Though these arguments are often not made explicit, I think we can identify two different strands of

thought implicit in philosophical discussions of these issues. I call these the *Epistemic Arrogance* argument and the *Too Big a Gulf* argument. In the following two sections, I'll consider these in turn. As I'll suggest, neither of these arguments is successful in making the case for pessimism. Though this opens the door to a more optimistic approach, I conclude by reflecting on the need to proceed with caution in this regard.

12.2 The Epistemic Arrogance Argument

To start, it would be helpful to clarify how I'm understanding the notion of experiential perspective. On the one hand, we sometimes talk of individual experiential perspectives – what it's like to be Christine Blasey Ford, or to be Alexander Hamilton, or to be Serena Williams. On the other hand, we sometimes talk of broader experiential perspectives – what it's like to be the survivor of sexual assault, or to be a parent who has lost a child, or to be black in America. In talking the latter way, though one need not assume that the perspectives are monolithic, one nonetheless treats the experiential perspective as a broad and shareable type. It's this latter, broad notion of experiential perspective that I'll be working with in what follows.

To many, the problem with optimism about bridging the divide between two types of vastly different experiential perspectives seems deeper than mere falsity. If we think as a general matter that experiential divides *can be bridged*, then we are likely to think in at least some particular cases that an experiential divide *has been bridged*. But this latter thought is taken to embody a certain kind of arrogance. Perhaps it's even offensive. We saw a hint of this reaction in the lyrics from Lady Gaga, above: "I don't wanna hear nothing from you." A more detailed development of this concern can be found in the philosophical literature in connection with what I'm calling *the Epistemic Arrogance argument*.

The Epistemic Arrogance argument has its root in the idea that the attempt to imagine someone else, particularly someone in a vastly different experiential perspective, is fraught with danger. Sometimes this danger is cast as a kind of insensitivity. Consider, for example, this passage from Laurence Thomas:

> If a woman has been raped, it is clear that the last thing in the world that a [...] man should say to her is 'I can imagine how you feel.' [...] Few actions could be more insensitive to victims of rape than a man's supposition that via a feat of imagination he can get a grip on the pain that a female victim of rape has experienced.
>
> (Thomas 1998, 361)

Thomas also casts this danger more specifically as a kind of moral failing. If someone who is not a Holocaust survivor were to think they could

grasp the experiences of a Holocaust survivor by way of "rational imaginative role-taking," this would, he says, be "moral hubris of the worst sort" (Thomas 1998, 360). For Iris Marion Young, the moral failing is cast as a failing of humility. On her view, when one shows moral humility,

> one starts with the assumption that one cannot see things from the other's perspective and waits to learn by listening to the other person to what extent they have had similar experiences. If I assume that there are aspects of where the other person is coming from that I do not understand, I will be more likely to be open to listening to the specific expression of their experience, interests, and claims. Indeed, one might say that this is what listening to a person means.
>
> (Young 1997, 49)

In contrast, when one starts with the assumption that one does have imaginative access to a different experiential perspective, one does not show this kind of moral humility. Starting with this kind of assumption, on her view, is more likely to impede communication than to facilitate it, for you will be disinclined to listen to the other person and will likely become defensive if they confront you about any misunderstandings (see Young 1997, 48–9).

In what follows, I'll use "epistemic arrogance" as a relatively broad catch-all that also captures issues of insensitivity, disrespect, and lack of moral humility. We can thus capture the sentiments expressed by Thomas and Young with something like the following argument:

1   The imaginative project of trying to imagine experiential perspectives vastly different from one's own displays a certain kind of epistemic arrogance.
2   This kind of epistemic arrogance is morally problematic.
3   Thus, individuals should refrain from engaging in the imaginative project of trying to imagine experiential perspectives vastly different from their own.

Let's take this schematization as a canonical statement of the Epistemic Arrogance argument. Later, I'll return to the question of whether this is a good argument. For now, however, what's important to note is that even if the argument is wholly successful, it doesn't get to the conclusion that the pessimist is looking for. This argument tells us that attempting to cross experiential divides via imagination is something that we *shouldn't* do, not something that we *can't* do. As such, it doesn't present us with an argument for Epistemic Inaccessibility.

Perhaps we can tease out a related argument in the vicinity that is lurking behind these sorts of concerns about epistemic arrogance. We can see it expressed, perhaps, in this passage from Elizabeth Spelman:

> If we reflect a moment on why imagination may seem necessary in this situation – where a member of an oppressor group is trying to learn about a member of the oppressed group – we can see why it is also dangerous […] If we already knew a lot about each other, I wouldn't have to use my imagination in this way to enter into your world, any more than I would have to, to understand my own. But if I only rely on my imagination to think about you and your world, I'll never come to know you and it.
>
> (Spelman 1988, 179)

Like Thomas and Young, Spelman takes this kind of imaginative project, i.e., the project of attempting to cross experiential divides via imagination, to be dangerous. And I take it that she would endorse the Epistemic Arrogance argument outlined above. But unlike the above passages from Thomas and Young, this passage from Spelman moves from a claim about this danger to a claim that sounds closer to an expression of Epistemic Inaccessibility. In claiming that someone engaged in this imaginative project *will never come to know* the experiential perspective of another, Spelman seems to be endorsing the claim that this kind of imaginative project cannot, in principle, be successful.

This itself is not Epistemic Inaccessibility, as it leaves open the possibility that there are other ways to learn about a different experiential perspective. But can we get there from what's already been said? Let's leave aside the question of whether Spelman herself would endorse Epistemic Inaccessibility, as sorting this out would require a longer discussion of her work than can be accomplished here. Instead, let's just explore how we might use the considerations Spelman has offered to mount a defense of Epistemic Inaccessibility. As best as I can determine it, the argument would have to go something like this:

1   Imagination can only enable us to understand an experiential perspective that we already know a lot about.
2   Experiential perspectives vastly different from our own are not ones we already know a lot about.
3   Thus, imagination cannot enable us to understand experiential perspectives vastly different from our own.
4   But since those perspectives are vastly different from our own, there is no other way for us to gain this knowledge.
5   Thus, experiential perspectives vastly different from one's own are epistemically inaccessible.

But note something interesting here: Considerations about epistemic arrogance don't seem to be doing any work in this argument. Rather, what's doing the work seems to be the thought that when it comes to some differences between experiential perspectives, there is just too big

a divide to cross imaginatively. But that's a different argument – in fact, it's the kind of argument that, as I mentioned earlier, I call the Too Big a Gulf argument.

I thus propose to proceed as follows. In the next section, I'll look more closely at the Too Big a Gulf argument. As I'll suggest, that argument cannot succeed in establishing the kind of deep pessimism that motivates Epistemic Inaccessibility. In the course of that discussion, however, the kinds of concerns that motivate the Epistemic Arrogance argument will return to the fore. Though I do not think these concerns give us reason for pessimism, they do give us good reason to worry that the denial of Epistemic Inaccessibility might conflict with other values that are important to us. Thus, in the final section of this chapter, I will attempt to address those concerns.

12.3 The Too Big a Gulf Argument

One clear expression of the Too Big a Gulf argument comes in Thomas Nagel's famous paper, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" (Nagel 1974). Though both humans and bats are mammals, our species are very different from one another in all sorts of ways. Some of these ways are fairly superficial, but some are considerably more fundamental. For example, while humans navigate the world primarily by way of our senses of sight and hearing, bats navigate the world by way of their sense of echolocation. As Nagel notes, we can't really experience what a bat does when it is using its echolocation to navigate the world.[2] Given how central one's sensory capacities are to one's experiential perspective of the world, Nagel takes this difference to be of critical importance.

The fact that we can't have this kind of experience, or even anything close to it, leads Nagel to conclude that the bat's experiential perspective is also closed off to us in imagination. The problem, he says, is that our own experiential resources on this matter are too impoverished. We don't have what we need to latch on in imagination to the bat's experiential perspective:

> Our own experience provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited. It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one's arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one's mouth; that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends the day hanging upside down by one's feet in an attic. In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind,

and those resources are inadequate to the task. I cannot perform it either by imagining additions to my present experience, or by imagining segments gradually subtracted from it, or by imagining some combination of additions, subtractions, and modifications.

(Nagel 1974, 439)

Thus, since we can't experience what it's like to be a bat, and we can't imagine what it's like to be a bat, we have no epistemic access to what it's like to be a bat. There is just too big a gulf between the bat and the human.

Now the gulf between a human and a bat is wider than the gulf between any one human and any other human, no matter how different the experiences the two humans have or how different the experiential perspectives the two humans occupy. But Nagel is also explicit that the same kind of unbridgeable gulf that exists between the human and the bat exists in some cases between two different humans. In particular, he suggests we consider the imaginative gulf between someone who has the capacities for both hearing and seeing and someone who lacks these capacities:

The problem is not confined to exotic cases, however, for it exists between one person and another. The subjective character of the experience of a person deaf and blind from birth is not accessible to me, for example, nor presumably is mine to him.

(Nagel 1974, 440)

In this way, Nagel seems to endorse Epistemic Inaccessibility. But some of his further comments muddy the waters. For Nagel explicitly cautions us against overgeneralizing this point: "It is often possible to take up a point of view other than one's own, so the comprehension of such facts is not limited to one's own case" (Nagel 1974, 441–2). To sort this out, it will be helpful to be clear about what the proponent of Epistemic Inaccessibility is (and is not) committed to. As stated, the principle that we are working with restricts the epistemic inaccessibility to perspectives that are vastly different from one's own. One could, however, make an even stronger claim than this:

Unrestricted Epistemic Inaccessibility: All experiential perspectives different from the one a person occupies are epistemically inaccessible to that person.

It's this stronger principle that Nagel's remarks suggest he would reject.

To my mind, the fact that he limits his conclusion this way is often underappreciated. Yes, in discussing this chapter with students in philosophy of mind classes we might note how important it was for Nagel to

find just the right sort of example from the animal kingdom to make his point. If he had chosen an example from too far down the phylogenetic chain, his claims might have been met with skepticism that the animal in question even had an experiential perspective. If he had chosen an example from too far up the phylogenetic chain, his claims might have been met with skepticism that the animal in question had a sufficiently different experiential perspective such that access to it was ruled out. But in my own teaching experience, even after this point is made and seemingly appreciated, students are still very quick to leap from Nagel's claim that what it's like to be a bat is inaccessible to anyone (i.e., to anyone who is not a bat) to the claim that what it's like to be anyone other than oneself is inaccessible. More generally, there often seems to be a kind of amnesia about the restricted nature of Nagel's claim when the issue of epistemic accessibility is directly discussed.

Why might someone like Nagel choose to endorse the more restrictive Epistemic Inaccessibility principle over Unrestricted Epistemic Inaccessibility? Here it helps to return to a point we saw earlier. For Nagel, imagination works by operating on material provided by experience. Imagination performs various kinds of transformations on this material – combining it with other material, adding or subtracting elements, and modifying it in various other ways. This means that if we want to understand experiential perspectives different from our own, we have to find some way to leverage the experiences that we've had to get to experiences that we haven't. In my own previous work, I've referred to this process as *imaginative scaffolding* (see Kind 2020, 137). We scaffold out from experiences we've had to experiences that we haven't. On Nagel's view, when the experiences we haven't had are similar to the ones we have had, this imaginative work is tractable. But, as he notes, "The more different from oneself the other experiencer is, the less success one can expect with this enterprise" (Nagel 1974, 442) – and, as we've seen, he thinks there are some cases in which success is impossible. Presumably, this is also what Spelman has in mind when she claims that imagination can only enable us to understand an experiential perspective that we already know a lot about, i.e., it's only in the cases of perspectives that we know a lot about that we have the materials needed for successful imaginative scaffolding. On this line of reasoning, then, what matters for imaginative access is how different we are from each other, how big a gulf there is.

This line of reasoning can be roughly schematized as follows, a schematization that I'll take as the canonical statement of the Too Big a Gulf argument:

1 One cannot have direct experiential access to an experiential perspective other than one's own.
2 Thus, to have epistemic access to an experiential perspective other than one's own, one must do so by way of imaginative access.

3   To achieve imaginative access to an experiential perspective other than one's own, one must perform various imaginative operations on material provided by past experiences.
4   When an experiential perspective is vastly different from one's own, one's past experiences do not provide sufficient material for this imaginative work.
5   Thus, one cannot imaginatively access an experiential perspective vastly different from one's own.
6   Thus, experiential perspectives vastly different from one's own are epistemically inaccessible.

The key premise here seems to be premise 4. The basic thought seems to be that whatever kinds of past experiences one has had, they aren't derived from the relevant experiential perspective, and since that experiential perspective is vastly different from one's own, those past experiences can't adequately support the imaginative work that needs to be done. Considerable weight is being put on the notion of "vastly different," a notion that remains largely undeveloped. We know that for Nagel the experiential perspective of a bat is meant to be taken as an example of one that is vastly different from the experiential perspective of a human, and that the experiential perspective of a person born without the capacity for sight or hearing is meant to be taken as an example of one that is vastly different from the experiential perspective of a person with these capacities. But, to return to the examples from popular culture and public discourse offered at the start of the chapter, what about the experiential perspective of someone who has been sexually assaulted, or someone who is grieving the loss of a child, compared to the experiential perspective of someone who has not undergone the relevant experience? Or what about the experiential perspective of a black person in America compared to the experiential perspective of a white person in America?

   Though it's not clear how Nagel would answer these questions, these do seem to be the sorts of examples that philosophers like Thomas and Young have in mind when they offer the Epistemic Arrogance argument and discuss matters relating to Epistemic Accessibility. More generally, it seems commonplace in discussion of these issues in both philosophical and public discourse to treat as unbridgeable the experiential divides owing to factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability, alone or in combination, along with experiential divides owing to certain kinds of experiences such as trauma (sexual assault, grief, war).[3] Though I won't here attempt a principled delineation of what counts as "vastly different," I'll assume going forward that it is meant to capture at least these kinds of experiential divides. We'll thus be working with what might be thought of as a more expansive interpretation of the notion of "vastly different."

Interestingly, despite the importance of premise 4 in the argument, very little is typically said on its behalf. Perhaps the main line of defense that is offered concerns considerations of embodiment. For example, in an insightful discussion of moral imagination, Catriona Mackenzie and Jackie Leach Scully argue that "imagination is fundamentally an *embodied* capacity of mind" and thus that our specific forms of embodiment thereby place significant constraints on our abilities to "imaginatively put ourselves in the place of others" (Mackenzie and Scully 2007, 342; see also Clavel-Vázquez and Clavel Vázquez, ms). While their discussion is focused on considerations about disability, and about the limitations facing non-disabled people when they attempt to imagine what it's like to be disabled, these considerations presumably extend to other factors relating to embodiment as well. Whether they would extend more broadly to all kinds of "vastly different" experiential perspectives would depend on the extent to which these differences depend on differences in embodiment. But while their focus is on embodiment, Mackenzie and Scully also suggest that there are further limitations on our capacities for imaginative projection, namely those arising from "our social and cultural context, specific histories, relationships with others, and patterns of emotional response" (Mackenzie and Scully 2007, 344). It's my sense that it's considerations of roughly this sort – i.e., the idea that our imaginative capabilities are limited by our specific circumstances, both bodily and cultural – that are generally taken to undergird premise 4. If what one can imagine is significantly limited by who one is, then we would have reason to think that experiential perspectives vastly different from one's own are imaginatively out of reach.

12.4 Pushing Back Against the Pessimism

The Too Big a Gulf argument strikes many as intuitively plausible, as do the considerations adduced in its favor. But despite this intuitive plausibility, I want to try to push back against it, in an effort to show how pessimism might reasonably be questioned.

First, consider a widely shared attitude about literature and literary non-fiction, namely, that one of its values is precisely to acquaint readers with a variety of experiential perspectives that they might not themselves occupy.[4] One philosopher who has consistently argued for this view is Martha Nussbaum. As she's suggested: "Narrative art has the power to make us see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist's interest—with involvement and sympathetic understanding" (Nussbaum 1997, 88).

But it's not just philosophers who take this kind of attitude toward literature and literary non-fiction. Former President Barack Obama, reflecting on his friendship with the novelist Marilynne Robinson, notes that in reading her books he was able to draw connections between the

people he was seeing everyday – the people whom he was shaking hands with and making speeches to – and his grandparents, who were from Kansas and ended up journeying all the way to Hawaii, but whose foundation had been set in a very similar setting. It was Robinson's descriptions of interior life that enabled this. As he put it:

> I think that I found myself better able to imagine what's going on in the lives of people throughout my presidency because of not just a specific novel but the act of reading fiction. It exercises those muscles, and I think that has been helpful.

In the wake of the brutal murder of George Floyd in May 2020, just one in a long line of horrific incidents in which unarmed black men and women have been killed by the police, articles containing lists of relevant book recommendations flooded news sites and social media feeds. While many of these books are non-fiction works that are being put forward as a way to help white people better understand the workings of structural racism, many are memoirs or works of fiction that are suggested as a way of helping whites better understand what it is like to be a black person in the United States. From recent books like *The Hate U Give*, *Between the World and Me*, and *The Underground Railroad* to classics like *Native Son* and *The Invisible Man*, the suggestion seems to be that it is worthwhile for whites to engage with these books that present experiential perspectives different from their own, and moreover, that it is worthwhile at least partly because it may enable a better understanding of these perspectives.[5]

Philosopher Susan Brison provides an especially clear statement of this kind of sentiment in connection with her discussion of the autobiographical essay *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* by Patricia J. Williams. Describing this work as "groundbreaking," Brison notes that Williams' descriptions of the experiences of her great-great-grandmother, as well as her descriptions of the racism that she herself has experienced in ordinary life, provide us "imaginative access to what it's like to be the victim of racial discrimination" (Brison 2003, 6).[6] Elaine Scarry, who is generally skeptical about our ability to imagine other people, mentions *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Passage to India* as playing a similar function of enabling imaginative access, though she thinks these are exceptional cases (Scarry 2002, 104–5). If literature can do this, then we should reject the Too Big a Gulf argument.

This quotation from Brison – and more generally, the quotations we have just seen in our discussions of the value of literature and literary non-fiction – typically describes this value in terms of imaginative access to an experiential perspective. I take it that imaginative access is meant to be a success term, i.e., the relevant imaginings are meant to succeed in providing epistemic access to the experiential perspective in question.

But it may be important that these claims are not put in terms of *knowing* what it's like to occupy that experiential perspective. This brings me to a second point. In resisting the case for pessimism and leaving the door open for people to have epistemic access to experiential perspectives vastly different from their own, one might try to differentiate epistemic access from knowledge. Epistemic access may well consist in a different kind of epistemic state.

Perhaps it's when the claim is put in terms of knowledge, e.g., when it's claimed that someone who hasn't been sexually assaulted can *know* what that experience is like, that the claim seems particularly callous or arrogant, and when it seems most open to the charge that it's been overstated. It also opens the door to more general worries about skepticism that it might be better to avoid. But someone who wants to resist pessimism need not make the claim this way. One possibility, for example, would be to describe the relevant epistemic state in terms of understanding, where understanding is meant to be importantly different from knowledge. For example, while knowledge is typically taken to be all-or-nothing, understanding is thought to come in degrees (see, e.g., Kvanvig 2003, Elgin 2009). This allows for to the following line of resistance to pessimism: For someone to count as having epistemic access to an experiential perspective vastly different from their own, what matters is that they have deep or significant understanding of it, even if that understanding is not complete.[7]

Third, it's important to note that Epistemic Inaccessibility, even in the restricted form that we've been considering, makes a very strong claim. What's claimed is not just that it is hard to imaginatively cross certain kinds of experiential divides, or that we should be less confident in our ability to imaginatively cross certain kinds of experiential divides. Rather, what's claimed is that it's in principle *impossible* to cross such experiential divides. Thus, one can resist Epistemic Inaccessibility without committing oneself to the claim that crossing such experiential divides is easy or commonplace. One might insist, in fact, that in many cases, the epistemic work is likely to be exceptionally difficult.[8] Once we recognize that distinction, I think we can come to see that many of the expressions of pessimism that we find in the literature are better understood as expressions of this weaker form of pessimism, namely, that actually bridging these epistemic divides is extraordinarily difficult and likely quite a rare achievement.

Consider, for example, Cliff Sosis's interview with George Yancy as part of the What Is It Like to Be a Philosopher series. Throughout the interview, Yancy points to various failures of understanding across the racial divide, in particular, failures by white people to understand the experiences of black people. In response, Sosis worries that Yancy may "underestimate our ability to empathize with each other a bit […]. We don't all have the same struggles, but we can understand the struggles of

others. I mean, I'm not a bat." Yancy's long response is well worth reading in its entirety, as is the whole interview, but I'll just quote the section of it that is especially important for our purposes:

> you don't need to be a bat to fail to understand what it is like to be Black or a person of color. Being white in America will do the trick. […] Your question is a good one, but I don't think that I'm underestimating the extent to which white people *can't or don't* empathize with Black people or people of color. Again, this might also be linked to the ways in which so much of our culture (visual or not) requires Black people and people of color to empathize with white people. This is because it is necessary for Black people, for example, to have a kind of dual cognitive skill where we are forced to understand what goes on within the white world and what goes on within our own worlds. White people, can, for the most part, avoid our world, avoid Black children's literature (the very few books out there dealing with Black children and their lives), avoid serious Black characters playing serious roles in movies. I don't think the imagination and intelligence of white people under white supremacy help them to empathize with Black people or people of color. White history has proven that; it isn't just my pessimism.
>
> (Yancy 2016, my emphasis)

In describing this empathetic understanding as something white people "can't or don't" do, Yancy seems to remain agnostic between the two forms of pessimism just distinguished. Moreover, in pointing to white supremacy as at least partly responsible for this failure, Yancy seems to leave open the possibility that things might in principle be different – if somehow we were to eradicate white supremacy, for example. In fact, the references to black literature and black film suggest one thing that could be done in an effort to make things different (a point that underscores our above discussion of the value of literature). Yancy's suggestion that black people are capable of achieving an understanding of white people suggests that this kind of gulf between experiential perspectives – that is, a racial gulf – is not the kind of gulf that Epistemic Inaccessibility should rule out. Granted, Yancy does offer reasons to think that the gulf is not a symmetrical one, reasons that show why white-to-black understanding should be treated differently from black-to-white understanding. This point is also familiar from discussions of W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness. (See also the discussion of the insider-outsider in Wylie 2003.) But even in this forceful expression of pessimism, the case made seems to favor it's-extraordinarily-difficult pessimism rather than it's-impossible-pessimism.

Another forceful expression of pessimism comes in a paper by Janine Jones addressing similar issues about white-to-black understanding.

Jones focuses on the class of white people she calls "goodwill whites." Whereas some white people who harm blacks know that they're doing so and mean to be doing so, goodwill whites do not realize that this is what they're doing. Jones argues that goodwill whites are often unable to articulate what they are, since they are unable to articulate their identity in terms of whiteness. They see race as "something that others possess. Whites are just 'normal'." As she goes on to argue:

> Whites' inability to form the belief that they are white skews the nature of the relationships that exist between whites and blacks. It affects their ability to empathize because they are unable to import an ingredient essential to empathy: an appreciation of their own situation.
>
> (Jones 2004, 70)[9]

Jones speaks of inability here, but I don't think she means this to be an inability *in principle*. Later in the paper this becomes clear when she takes up the question of whether it would be possible for a goodwill white person to "see into [the] heart" of a black person, even though they often don't. In a passage addressed to a young black child, she answers this question in the affirmative:

> I would say that in some instances they may not be able to do so because they do not possess a retrievable source analogue to match your experience. Moreover, unable to appreciate either your situation or their own, they are unable to map a *constructed* source analogue of their experience onto yours. And yet in some cases I think they can see in your heart. They can empathize with you because as human beings living in a society with at least some important shared lived experiences and shared stories, they can either retrieve or construct experiences that map onto some of your experiences.
>
> (2004, 78)

Jones' description here of the process that a goodwill white person might undertake looks to be a form of imaginative scaffolding mentioned earlier. Though Jones' essay undoubtedly puts her in the pessimistic camp, her pessimism too looks to be a form of it's-extraordinarily-difficult pessimism rather than of it's-impossible-pessimism.[10] To my mind, however, this former kind of pessimism is really a kind of optimism – or at least it gestures in the direction of optimism. If one comes to recognize that something thought to be impossible is in fact possible, even though it's really, really hard, that might give one some reason for hope. I won't here quibble over how exactly this position should be classified. But insofar as I'm pushing back in this chapter against pessimism, my target is it's-impossible-pessimism.

So where does all this leave the Too Big a Gulf argument? In my view, the argument as it stands should be rejected. The problem, as our discussion has made clear, is with the fourth premise:

4   When an experiential perspective is vastly different from one's own, one's past experiences do not provide sufficient material for this imaginative work.

Given the intended sense of "vastly different," one that takes the class of experiential perspectives thereby captured to be an expansive one, the premise is false.

One option to salvage the argument, then, would be to adjust this premise. Perhaps one might find a different way to categorize the relevant class of experiential perspectives that are imaginatively inaccessible, or perhaps one could develop a less expansive understanding of what counts as "vastly different." Either way, though some version of the Epistemic Inaccessibility principle might then be supported, it will not be a version that excludes, in principle, the possibility of one person having epistemic access to an experiential perspective different from her own with respect to race and gender, for example. Though it may turn out to be true that some experiential perspectives are indeed epistemically inaccessible to someone who does not occupy that perspective, these will be much fewer than has been thought, and it will not include many of the kinds of experiential divides that people have often claimed to be unbridgeable. Absent another kind of argument, one that does not simply rely on the kinds of considerations that allowed Nagel to draw his conclusions about the in-principle unbridgeable divide between humans and bats, we are not entitled to draw the same conclusion about in-principle unbridgeable divides between humans occupying these kinds of experiential perspectives.

12.5 Epistemic Arrogance Reconsidered

At this point, however, the concerns we looked at earlier in the context of discussing the Epistemic Arrogance argument return with even more force. The upshot of those considerations, recall, was that individuals should refrain from engaging in the imaginative project of trying to imagine experiential perspectives vastly different from their own; engaging in this project is taken to be morally problematic. If this is right, then successfully resisting pessimism is a kind of Pyrrhic victory for the optimist about imagination. Thus, in this section I want to push back against the Epistemic Arrogance argument. Though the attempt to imagine across experiential perspectives may indeed be fraught with danger, there are ways to do so while avoiding moral vice.

Behind the Epistemic Arrogance argument are concerns about respect, or, perhaps better put, disrespect. Recall the points we saw above. When we engage imaginatively with someone's experiential perspective rather than listening to them, we fail to treat them with respect. When we tell someone that we know how they feel rather than listening to them, we fail to treat them with respect. Moreover, to extend the points we saw above, when we take the deliverances of our own imaginings to outweigh what others are telling us, we also fail to treat them with respect. Thomas puts this last point especially clearly, noting the wrongness inherent in "discount[ing] the feelings and experiences of persons in diminished social category groups simply because their articulation of matters does not resonate with one's imaginative-take on their experiences" (Thomas 1998, 375). To avoid this wrongness, Thomas advises that we adopt an attitude of moral deference, an attitude that requires that we really listen to the stories that others tell – where really listening requires not only that we pay close attention to the nuances of what's being said and to the emotions being expressed, but that we also understand the vulnerabilities in play and are appropriately moved on account of all of these things.

All of these points, however, seem to presuppose a certain incompatibility between imagining and listening. The assumption seems to be something like the following: When we engage with someone else, we can either listen to them or we can engage imaginatively with them – where the "or" here is meant to be exclusive. But this strikes me as a false dichotomy. Why can't we do both? And moreover, why shouldn't we do both? In particular, suppose we were to do both as part of an ongoing practice where what we learn from listening to someone else – from *really listening* to them, in Thomas' sense – helps inform our imagination. Perhaps it's precisely what we learn from listening that enables us to make sure that our process of imaginative scaffolding is an effective one. In fact, I'm inclined to think that part of what makes someone a good imaginer – what makes them able to have broader and better imaginative access – is that they are a good listener.

As a general matter, imagining that operates in a vacuum is unlikely to be helpful to us epistemically. We know this to be true when we're putting imagination to epistemic use in a wide variety of other contexts – whether we're trying to plan a vacation or problem-solve or make an important decision. So it's no surprise that it's true in this context of epistemic use as well. Successful uses of imagination will be informed by the world, informed by what we're hearing, informed by what we're seeing, and informed by what others are telling us they are hearing and seeing.

Sometimes, as Thomas notes, there will be conflicts between what others are telling us and what we imagine. And, as he says, it would be problematic were we to discount what they are telling us simply because

their articulation of matters does not resonate with our imaginative take on their experiences. But I take there to be some importance to the fact that this rough principle is put in terms of *simply because*. Thomas thus leaves open the possibility that there may be times when, given other factors that may be in play, our imaginings do allow us to discount what others are telling us. Determining whether, and if so when, such discounting might be appropriate is an extremely complicated matter. But we might recognize these complications, and recognize that there are many hard questions here unanswered, without taking these facts to entail that we have no imaginative access to the experiential perspectives of other people.[11]

Clearly there are important insights behind the Epistemic Arrogance argument. Moral deference and humility are important. Imagining cannot be a substitute for listening. We need to listen to other people and to take seriously what they are saying – if we don't, our imaginings are likely to be inaccurate, uninformative, and of little value. We need to be humble about what our imaginings are telling us. But none of this suggests any in-principle limits on imagination.

To my mind, the main upshot of the Epistemic Arrogance argument is that we must proceed with caution – in fact, with extreme caution. This general upshot can be made more specific in various ways. Let me give two examples.

First, even if there do turn out to be cases in which we can imagine an experiential perspective different from our own, cases in which it turns out that we do know what it's like to have an experience that we haven't had, it doesn't mean that it will be acceptable in those cases to say to someone who has had the relevant experience: "I know how you feel." There are all sorts of reasons that, in many circumstances, this is an inappropriate response.[12] Indeed, this is often a problematic response even when you do share someone's experiential perspective or when you have been through the same type of experience that they have been through. To say something like this may seem to rob the person of their dignity and of their sense of the uniqueness of their own experience. Moreover, saying something like "I know how you feel" typically functions to shift the conversation. Now it's about you and your feelings rather than about them and their feelings. Thus, this kind of claim might be seen as a kind of conversational narcissism. But here again, we can recognize the importance of not saying this kind of thing, of listening, without denying the capabilities and reach of imagination.

Second, when one achieves understanding of a certain experiential perspective via imaginative projection, one might not have the same license to act as someone who has this understanding in virtue of occupying the experiential perspective. Consider the following analogy. Suppose a friend has an important insight about the current political situation and tells you about it. Later, when the two of you are with some

other friends, the relevant topic comes up, and you jump in to share your friend's insightful point instead of letting her share it herself. Even if you give her credit for the insight in the retelling, it seems perfectly reasonable for your friend to be annoyed. It was her point, and she wanted to be the one to share it. The fact that you have just as good an understanding of the point doesn't change things. A similar dynamic will be in play with respect to understanding of an experiential perspective that you've gained by imaginative projection. Given that it's not your experiential perspective, there will be various limits on your capacity to act on that understanding – representing that perspective in conversation, using certain pieces of language, and so on.

Finally, it's worth drawing out one last moral from our discussion of the Epistemic Arrogance argument. As we have seen, defenders of this argument point to problems inherent in the imaginative project of trying to imagine experiential perspectives vastly different from one's own. As we have also seen, they suggest that we would be better off listening to what people with vastly different experiential perspectives have to say. I have already pointed out that these projects need not be seen as oppositional to one another. But there's a further important point here to be made. The suggestion that we can learn about experiential perspectives different from our own by way of listening to what people tell us is itself reason to reject Epistemic Inaccessibility. To return to a passage quoted earlier, when Spelman says that "if I only rely on my imagination to think about you and your world, I'll never come to know you and it," this seems to imply that there *is* some way that I can come to know about you and your world – even if that way is not by imagination (or not *only* by imagination). These gulfs aren't too big to cross. Ironically, perhaps, consideration of the Epistemic Arrogance argument may thus give us a different sort of way to push back against pessimism.

12.6 Concluding Remarks

My goal in this chapter has been to make room for the denial of pessimism, or, at least, the particularly deep form of pessimism that sees an impossibility in bridging experiential divides. As I have suggested, the two arguments considered – the Epistemic Arrogance argument and the Too Big a Gulf argument – do not provide adequate reason for us to think Epistemic Inaccessibility is true. Even if the sorts of epistemic divides that we've been considering might be extraordinarily difficult to cross, we have not yet been given any reason to think that they are in principle unbridgeable. Perhaps there are additional arguments that might be given, but in the absence of any such arguments, there is no special reason to take pessimism as the default assumption, and the way seems to be cleared for a defense of optimism.

Of course, even with the way cleared for this defense of optimism, considerable work would need to be done to mount it. Much more needs to be said about how these imaginative projects might work and about how, precisely, the imaginative scaffolding might be built. Moreover, there are all sorts of good reasons to think that the scaffolding process will be difficult. For example, as noted above, our own situatedness – bodily, societally, and culturally – affects the experiences that we have to draw on. And even in cases where the situatedness of one experiential perspective shares much in common with the situatedness of another, there will still be all sorts of important differences, many of which are difficult to tease out. (For discussion, see Thomas 1998, 365.)

Several other hard questions still remain unaddressed. One was noted in passing earlier: What, exactly, is the epistemic state yielded via imaginative access? Is it knowledge, understanding, or something else entirely? Another especially hard question that I have not done justice to in this chapter concerns what, exactly, we are trying to access in imagination. As I noted at the start of Section II, the notion of experiential perspective in play throughout my discussion is one regarding broad types of experiential perspectives: What it's like to be the survivor of sexual assault, or to be a parent who has lost a child, or to be black in America. As I also noted, these perspectives are not monolithic ones. Not everyone who has been sexually assaulted, or every grieving parent, or every black American shares exactly the same perspective. Nor does every bat, for that matter – or at least, so I assume. I've treated the question before us as if it's a question about broad types largely because that is how it's often treated in the literature.[13] But whether this is the right way to pursue these imaginative projects needs further scrutiny, as do the related questions of what exactly this broad type is and what it would mean to access it. Any defense of optimism would need to grapple with all of these issues.[14]

Notes

1 See, e.g., Clavel-Vázquez and Clavel Vázquez (ms): "That it is not possible to fully know what it is like being someone else is an uncontroversial philosophical claim."

2 For the purposes of this chapter, I'm granting this assumption. But one might question this by pointing to blind people who have developed echolocatory skills, for example. The possibility of virtual reality simulations of bat-hood would also be relevant. One might also question how different echolocation is from audition. See Allen-Hermanson (2019).

3 See, for example, L.A. Paul's claim:

   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 a man like you. If you are a white businessman living

in San Francisco in 2013 you cannot know what it was like to be a black man involved in the Jamaican rebellion in 1760, hiding out in the forest in the dead of night while British troops comb the island trying to hunt you down, or know what it was like to be a slave in the American south.
(Paul 2014, 7)

4 I am focusing only on literature and literary non-fiction, but these considerations might be extended to other kinds of works ranging from music and art to virtual reality simulations and video games.

5 For example, in "A Year of Anti-Racism Work," a week-by-week list compiled by Michelle Panchuk, people are tasked not just to check out a book written by a black woman, or a book by and about Asian-Americans, but also to "make sure you are empathetically engaged with the book you are reading."

6 Interestingly, Brison's own book *Aftermath* has also been described as one that provides imaginative access to an experiential perspective that many readers may not share, namely, that of the experience of a rape survivor. See the blurb on the publisher's website at https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691115702/aftermath.

7 Moreover, while knowledge is generally viewed as factive, some epistemologists have argued that understanding is not factive. Scientists might increase their understanding when they move from one false theory to another, better theory – even when that second theory is still false. See Elgin 2009 for an argument to this effect. That understanding need not be factive seems directly relevant to the debate about epistemic arrogance.

8 Perhaps one way to raise a worry for the "impossible in principle" claim would be to say something like this: Someone who isn't a survivor of sexual assault could come to know what it's like to be such a survivor if they were to be sexually assaulted; thus, it's not impossible in principle for them to come have this knowledge. This is not the kind of worry I mean to be raising. My worry about the "impossible in principle" claim of Epistemic Inaccessibility arises even if we keep fixed the fact that the individual in question does not occupy the relevant experiential perspective.

9 Though the point is put in terms of "empathy" in this quotation, Jones elsewhere talks of "empathetic understanding," and I think her overall discussion suggests that she has something very similar in mind to the kind of epistemic access we've been talking about.

10 Likewise for Mackenzie and Scully, discussed earlier (see Section III). In discussing whether someone with "normal" hands could imaginatively project themselves into the perspective of someone with ectrodactyly (a genetic condition that results in missing fingers and toes), they note that "it is likely to be extremely difficult" (Mackenzie and Scully 2007, 344). As should be clear, this is less pessimistic than Epistemic Inaccessibility.

11 Analogous issues arise, I think, in discussions within feminist standpoint epistemology about the epistemic privilege thesis. As many feminist theorists have pointed out, the claim of epistemic privilege here does not mean that such knowledge is automatic. Alison Wylie, for example, explicitly argues that feminist standpoint epistemology "must not be aligned with a thesis of automatic epistemic privilege; standpoint theorists cannot claim that those who occupy particular standpoints […] automatically know more, or know better, by virtue of their social, political location" (Wylie 2003, 28; see also McKinnon 2015).

12 That's not to say it will always be a problematic response. There might well be times when an acknowledgment that someone else understands how you

feel may be both helpful and reassuring. Along these lines, Adam Smith remarks that "nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast" (Smith 1759/2002, 17). Thanks to Adrienne Martin for helping me to see this point.

13 See, e.g., Nagel's claim that "The point of view in question is not one accessible only to a single individual. Rather it is a type" (Nagel 1974, 441). Or see Thomas's discussion of moral deference where he talks of perspectives in terms of "social category groups" (see, e.g., 1998, 364).

14 I am grateful to my students in the fall 2016 and fall 2017 iterations of my "Experience" course for sparking many of the ideas underlying this chapter. These ideas were first publicly aired in a talk called "Imagining Others" at the Claremont McKenna College Athenaeum in 2018. I subsequently presented this work in a version of the paper much closer to the present one at the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology in San Antonio, the University of Fribourg, California State University Long Beach, Institut Jean Nicod, and the London Aesthetics Forum. I am grateful to those audiences for their questions and helpful feedback. In preparing the final version of this chapter, I benefited greatly from comments by Christopher Badura, Peter Kung, Frank Menetrez, and Nick Wiltsher.

References

Allen-Hermanson, Sean. 2019. "So that's What It's Like?" In Kristin Andrews and Jacob Beck, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Animal Minds*. New York: Routledge, 157–68.

Brison, Susan. 2003. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Clavel-Vázquez, Adriana, and Clavel Vázquez, María Jimena. ms. "Embodied Imagination." Unpublished.

Elgin, Catherine. 2009. "In Understanding Factive?" In Duncan Pritchard, Allan Miller, and Adrian Hadock, eds., *Epistemic Value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 322–30.

Gilroy, Paul. 2005. *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Jones, Janine. 2004. "The Impairment of Empathy in Goodwill Whites for African Americans." In George Yancy, ed., *What White Looks Like*. New York: Routledge, 65–86.

Kind, Amy. 2016. "Imagining Under Constraints." In Amy Kind and Peter Kung, eds., *Knowledge Through Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 145–59.

Kind, Amy. 2018. "How Imagination Gives Rise to Knowledge." In Fabian Dorsch and Fiona Macpherson, eds., *Perceptual Memory and Perceptual Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 227–46.

Kind, Amy. 2020. "What Imagination Teaches." In Enoch Lambert and John Schwenkler, eds., *Becoming Someone New: Essays on Transformative Experience, Choice, and Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 133–46.

Kvanvig, John. 2003. *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mackenzie, Catriona and Jackie Leach Scully. 2007. "Moral Imagination, Disability and Embodiment." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 24 (4): 335–51.

McKinnon, Rachel. 2015. "Trans*formative Experiences." *Res Philosophica* 92 (2): 419–40.

Nagel, Thomas. 1974. "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review* 83 (4): 435–50.

Nussbaum, Martha. 1997. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Paul, L.A. 2014. *Transformative Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rankine, Claudia. 2015. "The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning." *The New York Times*. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html.

Scarry, Elaine. 2002. "The Difficulty of Imagining Other People." In Martha Nussbaum and Joshua Cohen, eds., *For Love of Country?* Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 98–110.

Smith, Adam. 1759/2002. *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Edited by David D. Raphael and Knud Haakonssen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Spelman, Elizabeth. 1988. *Inessential Woman*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Thomas, Laurence. 1998. "Moral Deference." In Cynthia Willet, ed., *Theorizing Multiculturalism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 359–81.

Wylie, Allison. 2003. "Why Standpoint Matters." In Robert Figueroa and Sandra Harding, eds., *Science and Other Cultures*. New York: Routledge, 26–48.

Yancy, George. 2016. Interview by Cliff Sosis: What it is Like to Be a Philosopher. Available at http://www.whatisitliketobeaphilosopher.com/george-yancy

Young, Iris Marion. 1997. *Intersecting Voices*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.