

Empathy and Transformative Experiences without the First Person Point of View (a Reply to LA Paul)¹

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1. Introduction

According to L.A. Paul, appeals to ‘the first person point of view’ and ‘subjective experiences’ play an important role in understanding empathy (Paul, this volume, page numbers to come). We are skeptics about the first person point of view, but we are not skeptics about empathy. In this paper we thus investigate these claims of connections among these notions. We conclude:

- (1) that the philosophically important property of empathy has nothing to do with any ‘first person point of view’
- (2) that talk of ‘subjectivity’ in discussions of empathy (and in many other philosophical areas) equivocates between an *experiential* notion that does play an important role in empathy but which is not implicated in anything distinctively first personal or perspectival and a *perspectival* notion which we find philosophically objectionable, but which plays no important role in empathy
- (3) that the lessons thus learned from the discussion of empathy extend to Paul’s views on transformative experience, which are also *best* articulated without appeal to the ‘first person point of view’.

Our goal is thus a *disentangling* goal. We think Paul’s discussion of both empathy and of transformative experience has been unnecessarily entangled with a philosophically heavyweight, mysterious, and objectionable view of the first person. We want to point out the sources of that entanglement, and suggest how valuable discussion of empathy and transformative experiences can proceed without the use of contentious philosophical tools

Some background: In our book *The Inessential Indexical* we argue that appeals to *the de se* and *the first person point of view* play no important explanatory role in philosophy. We consider alleged explanatory tasks in action theory, semantics, epistemology and

¹ This paper should be a reply to LA Paul’s paper in this volume.

perception. In all those case we argue that, contrary to orthodoxy, there's no explanatory role for appeals to the first person point of view. We articulate our long-term goal ambitious goal as that of *proving that perspective and indexicality are philosophically shallow: they play no important explanatory roles in philosophy*. We recognize, however, that this one book fail to establish the ambitious goal: "The ambitious goal is too ambitious to be fully achieved in a single work—it concerns foundational issues across large swaths of philosophy. No one or two philosophers can claim full expertise and competence in all those areas."

In the light of this, we welcome Paul's proposal that we have looked for the philosophical significance of perspective in the wrong place. She suggests that, "One reason why it is important to develop the metaphysical and epistemological structure of the first personal perspective is because it can connect to interesting philosophical questions in moral psychology and social choice theory. A place where some of these interesting questions come up is the debate about empathy." (Paul xx: xx TO BE FILLED IN AT PROOF STAGE)

The plan for the paper is as follows:

1. In section 2, we outline one source for the view that empathy requires first-person perspectives, drawing attention to some of Paul's commitments.
2. We then go on to give a deflationary reconstruction of Paul's account of empathy, presenting an account of empathy that doesn't appeal at all to the first person point of view (section 3), followed by a discussion and defense of our reconstruction (4 and 5)
3. In section 6, we discuss the meaning of 'subjective experience' and its relation to 'first person perspective'. We propose a deflationary account of 'subjective experience' (and claim that's what Nagel had in mind in his paper 'What is it like to be a bat?' (Nagel:1974))
4. In the final section 7 we suggest that the view Paul defends in her book 'Transformative Experiences' is also best articulated without use of 'the first person point of view', 'subjective experience' or cognate expressions.

2. Empathy and the First-Person Point of View

Empathy, it is said, is the ability to take on the perspective of another individual. It follows that if there is empathy, there are perspectives to be taken on. What are these perspectives?

Some perspectival talk is wholly unmysterious. Jones and Smith are both watching *Tosca*, but they have different perspectives on the opera, because Jones watches from the north wing of the auditorium, and Smith watches from the south. *Spatial* perspective is simply a matter of the angle of perception an observer has on a scene. If Smith wants to take on Jones' perspective, it's an easy matter of moving to the north. Or: Jones thinks that Colonel Mustard committed the murder with a lead pipe in the drawing room. Smith has a different perspective on the crime – based on a different body of evidence, Smith thinks that Professor Plum was the killer, with the revolver in the library. *Cognitive* perspective is simply a matter of the beliefs that an agent has on a topic. If Jones wants to take on Smith's perspective, it's only necessary to start regarding Professor Plum as the murderer.

But not all perspectival talk is so innocent. There is a rich philosophical tradition, springing especially from works by Castenada, Lewis, and Perry, suggesting that we need a much bolder notion of perspectivity – a notion on which there are distinctively *first-personal* or *de se* states. These distinctive states are (on different versions of the tradition) either beliefs (desires, etc) with a special kind of first-personal content, or beliefs (desires, etc) held in a special first-personal way. Either way, the bolder notion of perspective takes an agent's perspective to be the collection of their first-personal states, and holds that perspective in this sense plays an essential role in accounting for the actions and rationality of the agent.

Only a conception of empathy that involved taking on this bolder notion of perspective would be a threat to our ambitious skeptical goal in *The Inessential Indexical*. And it is this bolder conception that Paul calls for when she says that we need a form of empathy that is richer than 'feeling what another feels':

... we can identify a richer kind of empathy, "cognitive empathy", where you perform a cognitive act **that allows you to first personally represent some element of another person's experience.**" She adds that empathy so understood, "...a normative role to play in moral assessment and decision-making, and is also routinely explored in the psychological literature. (Paul xx:xx)

If this is right, then the first person point of view has an important role to play - a role we didn't explore in *The Inessential Indexical*. The central question is thus: *does a philosophically adequate account of empathy require an appeal to a substantive notion of first person perspective?*

We begin with two points about the structure of the dialectic. First, the term 'empathy' is used in many ways in the literature. Daniel Batson in "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related But Distinct Phenomena" (Batson 2009) identifies eight different abilities or capacities that get called 'empathy':

1. Knowing another person's internal states, including his or her thoughts and feelings.
2. Adopting the posture or matching the neural responses of an observed other.
3. Coming to feel as another person feels ("emotional contagion")
4. Intuiting or projecting oneself into another's situation
5. Imagining how another is thinking or feeling
6. Imagining how one would think and feel in the other's place
7. Feeling distress at witnessing another person's suffering
8. Feeling for another person's suffering

Some of these eight are clearly unproblematic for our skeptical project. Empathy as emotional contagion (conception #3) calls for no special first-person perspective -- it merely requires that the empathizer be in the same phenomenal states as the empathized. Empathy as an epistemic faculty (conception #1) calls for no special first-person perspective -- it merely requires that the empathizer be able knowledably to form judgements such as 'the empathized is in pain'. Others of the eight (perhaps conception #4) are problematically implicated in first-personal perspectival talk. Our claim is not that there is *no way* of thinking about empathy that is problematically perspectival. Rather, it is just that there is no *philosophical need* for these problematic ways of thinking about empathy. Below we will sketch a picture of empathy that is both (a) deflationary with respect to the role of

perspectival talk and (b) nevertheless philosophically rich and interesting. Our suggestion is that this picture does everything that genuinely needs to be done.

Second point: a proponent, such as Paul, of the importance of the first-person perspective to empathy must thus think that the unproblematic conceptions of empathy, including the one we give below, are philosophically unsatisfactory. Making that negative case carefully would require having a clearly defined theoretical role for empathy, so that we would know what it took for a conception of empathy to be satisfactory. (Similarly, our making carefully the positive case that our conception of empathy is philosophically adequate would require us to have a philosophical job description for empathy.) As far as we can tell, no one in the literature on empathy has a clearly articulated view on what the philosophical job of empathy is, from which criteria of adequacy for an account of empathy could be extracted. We aren't going to try to remedy that void here. Without a clear job description, no use of empathy as an objection to our *de se* skepticism can be fully persuasive, but we will attempt to show that on any plausible rough-and-ready picture of the role of empathy, our deflationary empathy does the job.

3. Deflation: Empathy without the first person point of view

Here is the core of our deflationary conception of empathy:

- To empathize with someone is to build a model of the person's cognitive and emotional state, for the purposes of understanding, explaining, and predicting that person.

This is at heart an epistemic conception of empathy, but one which places special emphasis on the detail and utility of the knowledge obtained. Talk of building a model is vague and on some construals far too weak. Suppose I built a physical model of A's state - a little physical structure with pieces inside representing various 'parts' of A's mental states. This could be a quite elaborate model. It could also have an arrow to a picture of A (to represent that this is A's mental state) or it could say in big letter 'A REPRESENTATION OF A'S MENTAL/EMOTIONAL STATE'. This isn't enough. Just as imaginings can be too cheap, model building can be too cheap.

So what kind of model is needed? To empathize with the depressed person, we need to *get at* what it's like for them to be depressed. What does that amount to? It amounts to *having a grip* on lots of the small details of depression. We need to *understand*, for example, that there's a constant flatness of affect, that things don't excite them. We need to understand that they constantly question why other people say nice things about them. So maybe by doing something like reading and absorbing David Foster Wallace's story "The Depressed Person", we're put in a position to really empathize. We read an anecdote like this:

The former acquaintances and classmates who composed her Support System often told the depressed person that they just wished she could be a little less hard on herself, to which the depressed person responded by bursting involuntarily into tears and telling them that she knew all too well that she was one of those dreaded types of everyone's grim acquaintance who call at inconvenient times and just go on and on about themselves. The depressed person said that she was all too excruciatingly

aware of what a joyless burden she was, and during the calls she always made it a point to express the enormous gratitude she felt at having a friend she could call and get nurturing and support from, however briefly, before the demands of that friend's full, joyful, active life took understandable precedent and required her (i.e., the friend) to get off the telephone. (Foster Wallace:2011)

In reading this, we put ourselves in a position to build a better model. We don't just stick on a label saying, "depressed". Now we can do some more fine-grained predictions about what kinds of things the depressed person will be thinking and doing in particular situations.

Above we have introduced a number of notions:

- We talked of *Getting a grip* on and *understanding* the others mental state
- We have also talked of being able to make sufficiently fine-grained predictions
- We have talked of building a sufficiently complex/detailed model

There is going to be a great deal of context sensitivity in how these notions are spelled out. There will be at least two dimension of context sensitivity: a) what counts as a sufficiently complex and detailed cognitive model for will depend on the context, b) what relationship the empathizer has to stand in to the model will depend on context: in general it requires 'getting it' or 'understanding', but these are cover terms for a variety of relations and which one is required will depend on context.

This is a massively non-unified account of what counts as being empathetic. What that term picks out shouldn't be stable between contexts of use. In the context of this paper what is important is that this admittedly vague picture *leaves out all talk of perspective - first person or otherwise*. That's the sense in which it is deflationary. Our working hypothesis is that if we took out all uses of 'first person perspective' (and cognate terms) from Paul's description and replaced those with talk of model building and understanding, what remain would capture the core ideas.

The Experiential Requirement

One thing that has been left out of our modelling picture of empathy is any requirement that the empathizer *feel the same way* as the empathized. Some of our ordinary talk about empathy suggests that there is some such requirement. People sometimes suggest that without relevant experiences, it is impossible to perform certain acts of empathy. Perhaps the person never depressed can't actually empathize with the depressed person, or the person who has never experienced racism can't empathize with the target of racism. Along these lines, Paul says:

To have the capacity for empathy seems to require a certain amount of shared experience, and to adopt an empathetic perspective one needs to try and view the world from the experienced perspective of the other. You don't have to have had all the same experiences, but you have to somehow "try on" the beliefs and attitudes of the person you are trying to empathize with. This act of "trying on" involves an experience where one attempts to experience or take on the perspective of the other, perhaps by attempting to partially cognitively model their perspective, or by attempting, in some properly attenuated sense, to grasp the belief or emotional structure of another through the lens of one's own perspective.(Paul xx:xx)

Similarly, Darwall says: "Empathy consists in feeling what one imagines he feels, or perhaps should feel (fear, say), or in some imagined copy of these feelings, whether one comes thereby to be concerned for the child or not." (Darwall 1998:261).

There are stronger and weaker versions of a 'shared feeling' requirement. We might ask:

- That the empathizer be having the same mental states as the empathized.
- That the empathizer be having an imagined copy of the mental states of the empathized.
- That the empathizer be remembering what it is like to have the mental states of the empathized.
- That the empathizer have in the past have had the same mental states as the empathized.
- That the empathizer knows what it is like to have the mental states of the empathized.

It isn't our goal here to make careful sense of these different versions of the shared feeling requirement. Rather, there are two points we want to make about the requirement.²

First, there are natural ways of understanding our modelling conception on which some sort of shared feeling requirement follows from it. Consider a toy argument in favor of a shared feeling requirement:

It's not enough merely to imagine that you feel (say) anger. You can be entirely happy, but imagine that you feel angry. Imagining is cheap: you just say to yourself, "Suppose I were angry". In particular, you can imagine that you are angry even if you have no idea what it's like to be angry. But we want (for example) someone who empathizes with a depressed person to have some idea what it's like to be depressed.

On this picture, lack of shared feeling is a barrier to empathy because lack of shared feeling interferes with formation of a detailed model of the empathized. If you have no idea what depression is like, it will be very hard for you to form a detailed model of a depressed person. (Perhaps as well you will be incapable of *understanding* such a model even if you were somehow to form one.)

It's too strong to say that to empathize with the depressed person you have to be depressed. Empathizing with someone who has a horrific headache doesn't require that one have a horrific headache. On the other hand, it's too weak to say that to empathize with the depressed person, you have only to imagine that you are depressed. Imaginations are too cheap. So we need something in between. Paul's claim is that this more substantive requirement is to "...partially cognitively model their perspective." Our modelling view of empathy is intended to pick up on this claim.

Second, even if a shared feeling requirement doesn't *follow* from our modelling picture of empathy, it can simply be added on. A requirement that the empathizer feel the

² Another potential requirement on empathy along the lines of the shared feeling requirement is that the empathizer in some sense *care about* the empathized, and understand how the empathized feels to the end of better the situation of the empathized. We are inclined to agree with Darwall that this is not in fact a requirement for empathy:

Empathy can be consistent with the indifference of pure observation or even the cruelty of sadism. It all depends on why one is interested in the other's perspective.

For those who don't share this view, though, we note again that a *caring* requirement can also be added to empathy without invoking any problematic first-person perspective.

same way (in some sense) as the empathized just doesn't entail any sort of *perspectival* component to empathy. We are skeptics about the *de se* and first person perspectives, but we are not skeptics about feelings and phenomenology. There really are feelings, and there really are ways of feeling. (it's just that these things aren't implicated in any problematic notion of perspective.) It's thus fine to require for empathy that some of these things get invoked. In section 4, we make a first step to making good on this claim by outlining a 'first person perspective'-free way to understand a shared feeling requirement.

There remains the worry that, despite our assertions above, *understanding how someone feels* does require a philosophically problematic notion of first-person perspective. In section 6 below we engage in a bit of conceptual history to try to disentangle these two notions and show that it is straightforward to have one without the other.

More on Modeling

Before we turn to those issues, we give a few more illustrations of how this deflationary picture fits with some standard views of empathy. Carl Rogers, a psychologist who did much of the important early work on empathy, says empathy enables us:

to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but without ever losing the "as if" condition. Thus, it means to sense the hurt or the pleasure of another as he senses it and to perceive the causes thereof as he perceives them, but without ever losing the recognition that it is as if I were hurt or pleased and so forth. (1959:210-211)

What work is "internal frame of reference of another" doing in this passage? Our hypothesis is that it's not significantly different from talking about "mental states of". We can also reasonably assume that 'Perceive' is overblown -- surely 'come to know' is all that's really meant. As above, the 'as if' clause looks like a potential trouble spot. What does it mean to sense the hurt of another, while having the recognition that it is 'as if I were hurt'? Our hypothesis above is that there's no unified answer to that question: roughly speaking it requires that the empathizer be able to make sufficiently fine-grained predictions about what the subject will be thinking and doing in particular situation (where what counts as sufficiently fine-grained will vary with context).

Here is another passage from Rogers - one that puts particular pressure on our kind of deflationary reading. Rogers says that empathy involves

..entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever, that he/she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in his/her life, moving about in it delicately without making judgments, sensing meanings of which he/she is scarcely aware...It includes communicating your sensing of his/her world as you look with fresh and unafraid eyes at elements of which the individual is fearful. It means frequently checking with him/her as to the accuracy of your sensings, and being guided by the responses you receive...to be with another in this

way means that for the time being you lay aside the views and values you hold for yourself in order to enter another world without prejudice.(Rogers 1975:142)

On our view, this would all need to be cashed out in terms of ability to a) build and manipulate a sufficiently detailed model, b) use this to gain understanding and be in a position to make sufficiently detailed predictions, where what counts as satisfying both a) and b) will vary between contexts. This deflationary reading has left out a great deal of suggestive metaphors and rhetoric, but captures, we propose, the core ideas. So, we predict that if pushed on what it means to say empathizer is “temporarily living” in the other subjects life or ‘moving about in it’, that will be cashed out in talk of a building a sufficiently detailed model that enable understanding and ability to make sufficiently fine-grained predictions.

Or consider Batson’s description of the role ascribed to empathy by some of the psychologists who first introduced the term:

Imaginatively projecting oneself into another’s situation is the psychological state referred to by Lipps (1903) as *Einfühlung* and for which Titchener (1909) first coined the English word *empathy*. Both were intrigued by the process whereby a writer or painter imagines what it would be like to be some specific person or some inanimate object, such as a gnarled, dead tree on a windswept hillside. (Batson 2009:6)

It’s interesting that the focus here is on *what it is like* to be the object of empathy. This creates obvious echoes of Nagel’s discussion in ‘What Is It Like To Be A Bat?’ (Nagel: 1974). In the next section, we turn to discussing where this notion of ‘what it is like’ fits in a theory of empathy, and how it relates to talk of the first person.

4. Are we leaving out something essential to empathy, e.g. ‘the subjective mode of presentation’ or the first person of others?

Our deflationary reading leaves out all talk of ‘the first person perspective’ and makes no appeal to ‘subjective modes of presentation’. What does Paul require that we want to leave out? Let’s look closely at how Paul uses these terms in some important passages. Here, first, is a passage where her view seems close to ours:

To have the capacity for empathy seems to require a certain amount of shared experience, and to adopt an empathetic perspective one needs to try and view the world from the experienced perspective of the other. You don’t have to have had all the same experiences, but you have to somehow “try on” the beliefs and attitudes of the person you are trying to empathize with. This act of “trying on” involves an experience where one attempts to experience or take on the perspective of the other, perhaps by attempting to partially cognitively model their perspective. (Paul xx:xx).

Let’s imagine, insofar as this is possible, a person - call her Third - who is doing everything third-personally. She thinks of others as we have described above: builds models (you can even think of these as physical models, if you will). The question, now, is whether Paul

wants to argue that Third is incapable of having empathy. Third can certainly 'try on' the beliefs and attitudes of the person she is trying to emphasize with in the sense Paul gestures at: she can build a partial cognitive model of what it would be to have those experiences and beliefs. What is she lacking? Paul continues the passage above by saying:

...or by attempting, in some properly attenuated sense, to grasp the belief or emotional structure of another through the lens of one's own perspective. (Paul xx:xx, paper in this volume)

First note that this is an added disjunct, so not a necessary condition. But what does it really add? There is an clear and non-mysterious sense in which Third is doing things from her perspective: she, Third, is the one building the model of beliefs and experiences of someone else. She is the one doing it so, in a very clear and non-mysterious sense, it's done from Third's perspective (in the sense that it is Third building the model). What's missing?

Let's look at a related passage. Paul says:

On the cognitive understanding of empathy, the empathetic task involves grasping some relevant feature of another person's first personal perspective. (Paul xx:xx, paper in this volume)

Third can do this. Suppose Third is trying to empathize with Second. Here is simple way to understand claim in the passage above: Second has certain experiences, call them E. In that deflationary sense, E are had from Second's first personal perspective: It's her, i.e. Second, who has the experiences. Third is trying to grasp that. Paul then goes on to say:

This grasp is understood first personally: that is, you have another person's first personal perspective, or some salient part of it, subjectively presented to you. (Paul xx:xx)

So far we have not introduced the requirement that Third must present Second's experiences in a 'subjective' way - using a 'subjective' mode of presentation. We have, however, a way to capture at least an aspect of that idea: It's Third who is engaging with E (i.e. with Second's experiences) - she is the one doing the cognitive modeling of E. What more should we ask of Third? We think that can be enough for Third to count as having empathy.

Paul says:

You understand some dimension of what it is like to be that person, or how that person understands a given situation from her first personal perspective. This gives you a distinctive sort of information (again, maybe not information in Herman and Josh's sense) and the ability to make certain ethical and moral judgments. (Paul:xx.xx)

In the spirit of the deflationary proposal, here is how we propose that Third can satisfy this condition: the modeling she engages in enables her to understand what it is like to be Second - it enables her to understand a given situation in many respects as Second would.

This is a distinctive sort of information (since it is information about how how Second understands a situation - as opposed to Fourth or ...).

How can that enable us to make certain ethical and moral judgements? We turn to that issue in section 5 below, but before turning to that issue a brief summary of where we are and one side note. Here is where we are: We have suggested that talk of 'the first person perspective' or 'subjective mode of presentation' can be eliminated. They are metaphors and the underlying view is better captured without relying so heavily on these expressions. Keep in mind that the following natural reply isn't available here: *Those expressions can't be metaphorical, because they play very important roles in other theoretical domains, as we have learned from Perry, Lewis and others.* That reply isn't available in this dialectical situation because we're now considering the proposal that reflections on the nature of empathy and related phenomena provide *independent* evidence that appeal to 'the first person perspective' is theoretically significant.

Before we turn to the issue of how empathy, as we have understood it, can play a role in helping understand tolerance, one brief side note on whether there's more to be said about the idea of 'talking on' another's perspective.

Side Note on Another Option: The Perspectivity of 'Taking On'

We have been arguing that when we talk of empathy as the ability to take on another's perspective, the notion of perspectivity is shallow. It's not that there is a philosophically substantive thing, a perspective, which we come to grasp. Rather, taking on another's perspective is just a matter of knowing, in enough detail to allow fluent and specific predictions and explanations, the mental states of the other, plus perhaps an experiential requirement that the empathizer have had similar experiences herself.

But perhaps we're looking for perspective in the wrong place. One thought is that the proprietary first-personality lies in the notion of 'taking on'. What is it to 'take on' the perspective of the other? As we've mentioned, to empathize with the depressed person, there's no requirement that one *be depressed* oneself. It suffices to have an 'imagined copy' of the depression. But what is an 'imagined copy'? Perhaps an imagined copy of depression is just a mild version of depressed phenomenology. Or perhaps an imagined copy of depression is just the imagining of depressed phenomenology (which is then compatible with the absence of *any* real phenomenology, in the way that imaginings of X are compatible with the absence of the actuality of X). But both of these senses can seem too thin-blooded.

Another option, then, is that what's called for is *imagining being depressed*. But some might suspect that the *de se* enters in here. 'Imagining being depressed' is a PRO-control construction – what's being imagined is that *one oneself* is depressed, and we might think that that sort of imagining requires a special first-personal way of thinking about oneself.

For comparison, it's often been suggested that there is a contrast between remembering that PHI and remembering PHI-ing. Remembering that PHI is mere objective factual remembering, and doesn't require any special *de se* contents. But remembering PHI-ing is remembering *oneself* PHI-ing, and is a kind of remembering that has to be done 'in a

first-person way'. Perhaps similarly with the imagining of co-experiencing that genuine empathy requires.

We've already argued in *The Inessential Indexical* that the view just sketched about remembering is wrong, and that remembering PHI-ing does not, in fact, impose any special first-personal requirement. If we're right about that, then things will go the same for imagining, and there's no special call for the *de se* presented by empathy. (In any case, then, there's no *new* argument for the *de se* here – there's just a re-emergence of an argument we've already considered.)

But we also think that this picture of 'taking on' a perspective gets things wrong. The right thing to say is that *imaginative depression* is just its own experiential state. It's a state with *some* similarities to depression, but with a number of important differences, as well. One important difference is that *imaginative depression* has a phenomenology of voluntariness and control which real depression lacks. The bigger project here would be to connect the *imaginative experiences* that empathy calls for with the *assumed emotions* that are characteristic of engagement with works of art. What one undergoes when watching a horror movie is *imaginative fear*. Imaginative fear isn't the same as imagining being afraid, so even if imagining being afraid requires a *de se* conception, it doesn't follow that imaginative fear does. Imaginative fear is just another kind of phenomenology, similar to fear in some ways and different in others. So to 'take on another's perspective' just is to have certain kinds of phenomenology. But having phenomenology doesn't require a philosophically objectionable notion of a 'first person perspective'. It requires a person, of course, but nothing more than that.

5. Why is Empathy Important: Tolerance and Understanding?

We have offered a deflationary conception of empathy that makes no appeal to the first person perspective. Perhaps our deflationary empathy leaves out something of importance, though. (Of course, *merely* to observe that it leaves out the first person perspective isn't yet to show that it leaves out something of importance. We agree that it leaves this out, because we think there is no such thing to include.) To figure out whether deflationary empathy leaves out something of importance, we can ask why empathy was important in the first place, and then see if deflationary empathy is able to play those important roles.

Paul says that "cognitive empathy is often used to establish a basis for our tolerance or understanding of another's perspective'. Can deflationary empathy establish such a basis? We first need to be more careful about what we are trying to tolerate or understand. Paul says that it is *another's perspective*. Perhaps *X's perspective* is the same thing as *the first-person perspective of X*. Then the argument goes: the goal of empathy is to produce tolerance and understanding of first-person perspectives. That goal can't be realized without the existence of first-person perspectives. (Maybe that's because an empathic capacity that didn't itself involve first-person perspectives couldn't produce tolerance and understanding of first-person perspectives; maybe it's for the simpler reason that without Ys, there can't be

tolerance and understanding of Ys). Therefore there are first-person perspectives, and deflationary empathy fails to capture everything that's important about empathy.

But *that* can't be the right way to proceed. We can't establish the importance of Y by presupposing the importance of understanding Y, and then observing that the existence of Y is a necessary condition for any faculty for achieving that understanding. (Compare: Unicorns must exist. For unicorn detectors play the important role of telling us when there are unicorns nearby, and unicorn detectors wouldn't be able to play that important role were there no unicorns. The right response is that those who don't believe that there are unicorns also rightly don't believe that the role of telling us when there are unicorns nearby is an important role.) The skeptic thinks that there are no first-person perspectives. If there are no first-person perspectives, then it's impossible to understand or tolerate another's perspective, because there's just nothing there to understand or tolerate. But if empathy is the putative tool for achieving that tolerance and understanding, then empathy is utterly insignificant, because it's an attempted tool for trying to do what can't be done. The skeptic's inability to produce such a tool shouldn't bother the skeptic in the least.³

So if there's going to be an argument from the importance of empathy here, we need a non-question-begging understanding of *another's perspective*. Here's an obvious suggestion: again, the word 'perspective' is simply superfluous here. The important goal of empathy is to produce understanding and tolerance of *others*. Empathy, directed at Second, lets one understand and tolerate *Second*. (We suspect that Second would rather have Second than just Second's perspective tolerated. 'Hate the sinner, love the sinner's perspective' doesn't sound like a very appealing agenda.) But if it's just Second we are trying to understand and tolerate, then deflationary empathy seems like a perfectly suitable tool. Deflationary empathy allows us to form detailed beliefs and predictions about Second, and to have phenomenal states (or the ability to have phenomenal states) suitably similar to the ones Second is having. What more could be asked for? (That's not a rhetorical question. We genuinely want to know what the 'more' might be, but everything that's been offered so far seems like either something we already have, or something we don't think exists.)

6. Some Genealogy and Conceptual Connections: 'First Person Point of View', 'Subjective experience', 'subjectivity', and phenomenology

As should be clear from the discussion above, the literature Paul draws on in her discussion makes extensive use of a cluster of notions consisting of terms like 'the first person perspective', 'the first person point of view', 'subjectivity', 'subjective experience', and 'the *de se*'. In this section we want to both do some genealogy and use that to disentangle various

³ Of course, if the skeptic is wrong, then the skeptic really is missing out on something of importance with their deflationary empathy. But the point isn't that this shows that the skeptic is right -- the point is that if someone is trying to persuade or show that skeptic that they are wrong because they can provide only deflationary empathy, this can't be the way to do it, because to convince the skeptic that they are missing something important, you *first* have to persuade them that skepticism is wrong.

ways those terms have been used. In what follows we first flesh two different sources for this terminology then use it in the next section to diagnose the ways this terminology is used in Paul's book *Transformative Experiences*.

'De se', 'self-locating attitudes', and 'essential indexicality' in the Perry/Lewis Tradition: One important source of this cluster of terminology is the literature on 'essential indexicality' originating in Lewis, Perry, and Castenada. In his seminal 1979 paper, "The Problem of the Essential Indexical," Perry introduced the terms "essential indexicality" and "locating beliefs."⁴ The problem with this tradition is that it has proved very hard to spell out what the various theses of essential indexicality are. The aim of *The Inessential Indexical* is to show that there is no way to make sense of it. Hence, the efforts above to show that the phenomenon of empathy, for example, can be understood without appeal to any of the Perry/Lewis ideology.

'Subjective Experience' in The Nagel Tradition: At least some uses of expressions like 'subject experience' traces back to Thomas Nagel's paper 'What Is It Like To Be A Bat?'. Nagel says:

.. fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is to be that organism—something it is like for the organism. We may call this the subjective character of experience. It is not captured by any of the familiar, recently devised reductive analyses of the mental, for all of them are logically compatible with its absence. (Nagel 1974:436)

In the light of this, what does it mean to say that 'S has a subjective experience of E'? We think it means something very simple: it means *that S has the experience of E, or that S experiences E*. So, on our deflationary construal, S has the subjective experience of E just in case S experiences E. The general talk of 'subjectivity' is just a way to talk about 'having experiences'.

On this construal there's a sense in which two agents can share subjective experiences and a sense in which they cannot: A and B can have the same type of experience - they can both have the type-E experience. Then they have had the same (type of) subjective experience, ie they have had the same (type of) experience. There's another sense of 'shared subjective experience' in which it's less obvious that A and B can share subjective experiences: they can't share token experiences. Insofar as A's token-experience, E, must be different from B's token-experience of the type E, then there will be no sharing.

On how the terminologies are mixed together in unfortunate ways: These two traditions are, unfortunately, often mixed together. They have nothing significant to do with each other. The Perry/Lewis terminology in our view picks out nothing, but even you disagree with our arguments, what it does pick out is not what the Nagel terminology picks out. Nagel usage is

⁴ He says, for example, "I shall use the term 'locating beliefs' to refer to one's beliefs about where one is, when it is, and who one is. Such beliefs seem essentially indexical" (5). David Lewis's paper "Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*" was published the same year as Perry's paper "The Problem of The Essential Indexical," but Lewis (1979: 521) acknowledges a debt to earlier work by Perry (in particular Perry 1977) and points out that Perry was indebted to Hector-Neri Castañeda.

considerably more innocent - it's just an unfortunate, slightly clumsy, way to describe a very important phenomenon.

With this in mind, let's look at how talk of perspective and subjectivity are often combined. Here are our proposal for how to charitably interpret some of the standard ways these terminologies are mixed together:

- *A has a subjective experience from a first person perspective*: this is *not* a good way to speak, but it might be a way to try to say *that A has an experience*.
- *A understands B's subjective experience* = A understands what B experiences.
- *A understands B's subjective experience from a first person point of view*: has two readings: 1. A understands what B experiences, 2. A has the same or relevantly similar experience as B.
- *A's subjectivity*: we take this to be an unfortunate way to talk about A's experiences.

Nagel is fairly clear on most of this as the following passage makes clear:

"I am not adverting here to the alleged privacy of experience to its possessor. The point of view in question is not one accessible only to a single individual. Rather it is a type. 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. There is a sense in which phenomenological facts are perfectly objective: one person can know or say of another what the quality of the other's experience is. They are subjective, however, in the sense that even this objective ascription of experience is possible only for someone sufficiently similar to the object of ascription to be able to adopt his point of view -- to understand the ascription in the first person as well as in the third, so to speak. (Nagel 1974 :441)

He adds 'so to speak' because, as we have argued, the first person isn't essential: the requirement is that for you to understand someone else in this sense, you need at some point to be in a position to be able to say 'I have an experience that's sufficiently similar'. The 'first-person'-talk is just garnish - but garnish that when hooked up to the Perry/Lewis tradition is easily take for substance.

7. L.A. Paul's 'Transformative Experiences' without 'the first person perspective' and 'subjectivity'

In this final section of the paper we turn to a brief discussion of how 'perspective' and 'the first person point of view' is used in Paul's book *Transformative Experiences*. The deflationary account of this terminology proposed above, can be extended to the extensive use of that terminology in Paul's book. One thing to keep in mind here: Our aim in what follows is constructive, not critical. We want to show how many (if not all) of the core claims

of that work can be made independently of any commitment to dubious assumption about the *de se*, centred worlds, or any other of the Perry/Lewis paraphernalia. Consider an early statement of the philosophical agenda of the book:

Transformative experiences are also philosophically important. For, as I shall argue, they constitute a class of experiences that raise a special problem for decision-making, at least, for decision-making made from the **subjective perspective** of the individual.(Paul 2014:18)

What work is the notion of perspective doing here? Some kind of contrast is made between *mere* decision-making and some richer notion of decision-making (which we take to be connected to Paul's talk of *authenticity*) that is made 'from the subjective perspective'.

We want to suggest that the perspectival talk in *Transformative Experience* plays two primary roles. One role is to impose the requirement that genuine decisions be made on the basis of the value function belonging to the deciding agent. The other role is to impose an *experiential* requirement, along the lines of the Nagelian sense of subjectivity discussed above. Put together, these two senses result in a requirement that *authentic* decisions be made on the basis of an agent's own value function, where that value function is either (a) placing value on experiential, rather than non-experiential, outcomes, or (b) known by the deciding agent (or effective in shaping the deciding agent's decisions) by way of outcomes being *experienced as valuable*.⁵ When this requirement is coupled with the possibility of novel experiences, the problem of transformative experience results.

Our interest in all of this is then to suggest that both of these roles can be understood in wholly deflationary terms that require no philosophically interesting notion of perspectivity, and thus that moments when Paul starts to speak in the Lewisian terminology of centered worlds – a manifestation of the Perry/Lewis/Castenada sense of 'the first person point of view' - are an unnecessary addition to the tools she needs to talk about transformative experience.

Paul speaks to the importance of *the first-person perspective* when she says:

if we eliminate the **first personal perspective** from our choice, we give up on authentically owning the decision, because we give up on making the decision for ourselves. We give up our authenticity if we don't take our own reasons, values, and motives into account when we choose. To be forced to give up the first person perspective in order to be rational would mean that we were forced to engage in a form of self-denial in order to be rational agents. We would face a future determined by Big Data or Big Morality rather than by personal deliberation and authentic choice.(Paul 2014:130)

Here it looks like the role of 'the first person perspective' is to pick out the value function of the deciding agent. To choose *from one's own perspective* is to choose based on one's own

⁵ Thanks to Paul for helpful discussions on this point that drew our attention to the importance of option (b).

value function, rather than the value function of others. An agent choosing in this way pursues an outcome because *she values it*, not because *others tell her it is valuable*. That's an important notion, of course, but it doesn't look like it's a notion that requires a distinctive conception of perspectivalty. Rather, all that's needed here is the notion of the owner of a mental state. Talk of a value function being an agent's value function is much like talk of a pain being an agent's pain, or a belief being an agent's belief. None of this talk seems to require anything like the Lewis/Perry/Castenada *essential indexicality* or *proprietary de se content*.

We see the same role for 'perspective' talk when Paul tells us that:

From the Deaf community's perspective, Deaf culture is just one among many intrinsically valuable world cultures, on a par with traditional cultures, and provides its members with shared experiences and support that is unavailable in any other way. (Paul 2014: 58)

We take it that a fully adequate translation of this begins "according to the value function of the Deaf community...". Other uses of 'perspective' talk in *Transformative Experience* clearly target the *experiential* sense. Thus consider:

What is it like to have the conscious experience or perspective of an animal who can 'see' in the dark in this way? (Paul 2014:6)

Here 'perspective' is explicitly equated with experiential features. Similarly in

All of these examples bring out the deep and familiar fact that different subjective points of view, as different conscious perspectives, can be fundamentally inaccessible to each other. Unless you've had the relevant experiences, what it is like to be a person or an animal very different from yourself is, in a certain fundamental way, inaccessible to you. It isn't that you can't imagine something in place of the experience you haven't had. It's that this act of imagining isn't enough to let you know what it is really like to be an octopus, or to be a slave, or to be blind. You need to have the experience itself to know what it is really like. (Paul 2014:8)

To grasp another's perspective here just is to know *what it is like* for that other, in the sense of having concepts for the phenomenal experiences that other is undergoing.

Having isolated these two aspects of the 'perspectival' talk (aspect #1: your perspective = your value function; aspect #2: your perspective = your phenomenal experiences), let's now look at some places where the two aspects seem to come together. First consider a description Paul gives of a decision procedure on which we could fall back in the face of transformative experience

You could change the way you decide, such that the new deliberation does not rely on your expectations about what it would be like for *you* to have the experience, or does not involve weighing advice and testimony from **your own personal perspective** and deciding how much of it applies to you personally, but rather, relies

solely on impersonal facts about how people, in general, respond to these kinds of expectations. (Paul 2014:3)

Paul here seems to see *two distinct* ways in which the decision making differs from 'authentic' decision making. First, the decider isn't relying on *their own* values on the outcomes – rather, they are relying on 'impersonal facts about how people in general respond'. That's aspect #1 emerging. But at the same time, Paul is imagining the decider either (a) deciding in the absence of a particular *kind* of information: experiential information, since the decider hasn't had the relevant experiences, and thus doesn't know what they are like, or (b) deciding based on a value function that is known testimonially rather than experientially. These two ways are severable – it's easy to build cases in which we get either without the other. But importantly, both of them are uses of 'perspectival' talk that are easily available to a deflationary *de se* skeptical who is non-skeptical about experiential talk.

And consider some of what Paul has to say about one of the central cases of the book: the case of deciding whether to have a child. Paul tells us:

In the absence of experience about what it is like to have a child, then, when you confront the choice of whether to have a child **from your first personal perspective**, you confront it from a position of deep epistemic ignorance. You cannot, in the relevant way, describe or represent the contours of the state space of the decision problem, nor the outcomes that make up the state space. You cannot describe these features of the state space in the way you'd need **to in order to assign them subjective values** in an informed way.(Paul 2014:83)

The absence of the first-person perspective is a problem here because it gives rise to an inability to have a 'first-personal' value function (that is, simply to have a value function, because the only way to have a value function is to have a value function that is one's own). That's aspect #1 emerging. But why does absence of experience stop one from having a value function? It's because it's being presupposed that the value function is placing values *specifically on experiential features*.

Thus consider Paul's discussion of Lisa, who makes the decision on whether to have a child based on 'objective' (that is, non-experiential) information about outcomes (presumably, information about likely child welfare for children of parents in circumstances like Lisa's, and so on). Paul says:

Even Lisa, who, let us suppose, never wanted to have a child, but decides not to have a child based solely on the empirical evidence, is not choosing in an acceptable way. Her choice, if rational, has nothing to do with her personal preferences to not have a child. Lisa does not have special insight into how she'd be as a parent: instead, she merely gets lucky. It just so happens that her preferences support the same alternative as the evidence does.(Paul 2014:88)

Note the slide here from the choice being *based solely on empirical evidence* to the choice *having nothing to do with her personal preferences*. This slide makes sense only if we are presupposing that preferences range only over experiential features. That's the

entanglement of the first and second aspect. None of this talk requires the Lewis/Perry/Castenada idea of special *de se* content.

Ownership of the value function and knowledge specifically of experiential features are separate features which for theoretical reasons Paul bundles under a single term of “perspective” or “first-person perspective”. The important thing to note for our purposes is that neither of these two features are objectionable, or require anything like the “de se” or Lewis/Perry sense of first personality. However, later in the book Paul invokes the Lewisian machinery of centered worlds in probabilistic decision theory:

When we think of ourselves as agents, we think of ourselves as located at a point in time and space, with a conscious, centered point of view that looks out from that point to the rest of the world. From this centered, first personal perspective, we consider the appeal of various acts we might perform by reflecting on our past, consulting the information we have in our present, and mapping our possible causal paths forward into the future. At each experienced moment, we generate a continuously updating map of possible futures for ourselves, a map that evolves over time, as we move from the present into the future, in response to input from our perceptions and decisions. As such, an agent’s point of view is a locus or centered personal perspective in a subjective present, from which she projectively models different possible futures stemming from different possible choices she could make. (Paul 2014:105)

But the invocation of the special machinery of centered worlds plays no essential role – all that Paul needs (and uses) here is the thought that the value function that drives decision-making for an agent is *that agent’s value* function. It’s again ownership of the value function and knowledge of experiential features that do all the heavy lifting.

And so it goes across the board, we suggest. The central theses in Paul’s ‘Transformative Experiences’ are all better formulated without use of any philosophically heavy weight notions of ‘first person perspective’ or ‘subjective experience’ - our suggested deflation of those terms strengthens the core-theses of that book.

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