

ARTICLE

The Paradox of Empathy

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Abstract

A commitment to truth requires that you are open to receiving new evidence, even if that evidence contradicts your current beliefs. You should be open to changing your mind. However, this truism gives rise to the *paradox of empathy*. The paradox arises with the possibility of mental corruption through transformative change, and has consequences for how we should understand tolerance, disagreement, and the ability to have an open mind. I close with a discussion of how understanding this paradox provides a new explanation for a certain kind of standoff between the believer and the skeptic with regard to religious belief.

Keywords: Transformative experience; empathy; religious conversion; religious disagreement; evidence; testimony; epistemology; belief in God; lived experience; phenomenal hypotheses; direct acquaintance

Introduction

It's important to have an open mind. There is value in considering new ideas, in having new kinds of experiences, in discovering new ways of thinking.

If you are open-minded, you'll assess potential evidence in an unbiased way. Ideally, you will entertain the possibility that it is evidence without prior bias and be open to belief revision in response. The mark of being closed-minded is to take a biased approach: before it is evaluated, new input is treated as a potential threat to existing beliefs and thus downgraded as possible evidence.¹

Open-mindedness stems from a commitment to truth. It requires that you be open to receiving new evidence, even if that evidence contradicts your current beliefs. When faced with possible evidence, then, it seems that we should always be open to assessing it. One should be open to the possibility of belief change, even fundamental belief change, in response to new evidence.

But this assumption is false. Opening yourself up to receiving a new kind of information or to assessing a new kind of potential evidence can be epistemically dangerous.² If so, you might reasonably fear that what you need to do in order to assess potential evidence could change you in a damaging way. In particular, it could corrupt you, changing your ability to make evidential assessments by your current lights.

¹There are many caveats one could make here involving practical constraints on time and attention, and many subtle considerations concerning the nature of open-mindedness. In an effort to keep the focus on the problem I'm exploring, I'm not rehearsing these caveats and considerations, since, in the end, I do not think they are directly relevant to the problem I am going to raise.

²This is a sense in which the Principle of Total Evidence admits of counterexamples.

This paper is about this problem. The possibility of mental corruption raises a problem for the assessment of evidence in certain contexts. This, in turn, creates a paradox of empathy, with consequences for how we should understand tolerance, disagreement, and the ability to have an open mind. The paradox arises in (potentially) transformative contexts where there is no independent observer or universally agreed upon arbiter of the truth.

1. The epistemic argument

If you are open-minded, you value information, and are open to revising your beliefs in response to getting new information. You do not assume that your epistemic states are privileged in a way that entails your beliefs must be true or your knowledge is complete. You practice epistemic humility, recognizing that, with regard to your understanding of some particular fact or event or worldview, you might not know everything. In particular, you might not know something important: you might have something to learn that could change or add to what you believe, something that could bring you closer to the truth.

Epistemic humility is especially important when we attempt to assess and evaluate beliefs or other epistemic commitments that are alien to us. When we must consider beliefs that we are deeply opposed to, or testimony grounded by the lived experience of another that is decidedly counter to our own experience, we can be prone to bias and closed-mindedness.

Practicing epistemic humility means, in this context, you allow yourself to be open to the possibility that some opposing beliefs and testimony could be true. In order to fairly assess the alien beliefs and testimony, you quarantine your own beliefs, especially when the experience described by the other person's testimony in support of their beliefs does not reflect your own experience.³ This does not mean you uncritically accept another person's testimony – far from it. It means that you do your best to evaluate their testimony without prejudice. Part of such an evaluation involves collecting evidence, including evidence about whether their lived experience grounds their testimony. If their lived experience grounds their testimony, their testimony is true (and true, at least in part, in virtue of their experience).

To assess the evidence for whether their lived experience grounds their testimony, you represent the nature, character, and content of their lived experience, and compare this representation to their testimony about it. If their testimony accurately represents the nature, character, and content of their lived experience, it is grounded by the experience.

Thus, to determine whether their testimony is grounded, you need to be able to represent their experience.⁴ If their experience is different from yours, you'll need to use your imagination in order to construct a representation of what their experience is like. In order to avoid bias, you'll need your representation to be accurate.

The natural way to discover and accurately represent someone else's lived experience is to empathize with them. Metaphorically, you attempt to mentally “stand in the other person's shoes” or “walk a mile in their shoes”. As Harsanyi writes,

Simple reflection will show that the basic intellectual operation in ... interpersonal utility comparisons is imaginative empathy. We imagine ourselves to be in the

³Fricker (2007). See Lackey (2008) for a comprehensive discussion of the epistemological issues involved with taking testimony to be a reliable source of knowledge.

⁴You might be able to avoid the need for this type of representation if you have excellent evidence showing that their testimony provides an (uncontroversial) guide to the truth. However, as will become apparent below, I'm interested in contexts where you do not have this kind of evidence, so you have to perform the evaluation for yourself.

shoes of another person, and ask ourselves the question, “If I were now really in his position, and had his taste, his education, his social background, his cultural values, and his psychological make-up, then what would now be my preferences between various alternatives, and how much satisfaction or dissatisfaction would I derive from any given alternative? (Harsanyi 1977: 638)⁵

When you empathize with another person in this way, you imaginatively represent the way they experience their situation, experiences, feelings, beliefs, and other attitudes through the lens of your own conscious point of view, in order to understand and experience the world in the way they understand and experience the world.⁶

It’s the cognitive analogue of visual representation. You have a representation of another person’s visual point of view when, for example, you watch the feed of a GoPro camera mounted on the helmet of a skier as they ski down a mountainside. With the GoPro, you see the world the way the skier sees the world. When you cognitively empathize with someone you construct an imaginative analogue of their visual point of view: you simulate their cognitive “point of view” by imaginatively simulating what it’s like to be them.

This cognitive act involves the exercise of imaginative capacities where you understand or grasp the nature of another person’s lived experience as they experience it from their conscious perspective.⁷ You imaginatively simulate their first person perspective. Accurately simulating their first-person perspective teaches you “what their (lived) experience is like”, and in this sense teaches you what it is like to be someone else.⁸ This, of course, is why Harsanyi describes it as the basic exercise needed in order to determine someone else’s preferences.

Knowing what a person’s lived experience is like gives you the ability to evaluate their testimony about the nature of their experience and to discover the values they’d assign to various alternatives. This, in turn, can provide evidence and justification for the content of their beliefs and attitudes, allowing you to discover their preferences regarding these potential alternatives.⁹ It allows you to *understand* their point of view, in a distinctive way that *explains* their point of view. I’ll describe this type of open-minded, empathetic, imaginative representation of what it is like to be someone else as *taking their epistemic stance*.

⁵Harsanyi (1977). Compare, also, Rawls (1971), who endorses an idea drawn from Sidgwick: “[A rational life plan is thus determined by] careful reflection in which the agent reviewed, in the light of all the relevant facts, what it would be like to carry out these plans and thereby ascertained the course of action that would best realize his most fundamental desires.”

⁶I will use the term “imagine” in a broad sense that is consistent with the way many contemporary psychologists would use the term. So while visual imagination is covered by my use of the term, I am taking “imagining” to be an act that involves simulation understood as a type of active cognitive modeling of possible situations that could include representations lacking explicit visual imagery. The simulation involved is likely to occur only at the level of detail needed to make the intended projective assessment (Saxe 2005).

⁷The possibility that the experience might be transformative (Paul 2014) means that we can’t always do this as easily as we might think, thus we should recognize that being unable to empathize or sympathize with another might not be evidence of anything sinister or untoward. It might just be a fact about the epistemic alienation that comes out of transformation of one’s epistemic viewpoint. I’m going to set this possibility aside in what follows.

⁸The philosophical arguments for the importance of imaginative simulation of another’s subjective experience for value assessment start with Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics* (1874). See also Sobel (1994), Rosati (1995) and Langton (2019).

⁹Empathizing with a person by attempting to imaginatively represent the nature of their lived experience should be distinguished from mere “affective empathy”, an immediate, emotive, and often unmoderated affective response that simply mirrors the feelings of another person. Affective empathy can bring its own epistemic threats. See, for example, Maibom (2009), Prinz (2011) and Bloom (2016).

For example, if you are an Israeli who finds Palestinian beliefs about the West Bank to be alien, taking the epistemic stance of a Palestinian person could help you to understand their beliefs. Through taking their epistemic stance, you learn what the nature of that person's lived experience is like. This gives you the ability to evaluate whether their experience grounds their testimony and beliefs. It also teaches you what they care about, explaining their reasons for acting and believing the way they do. Your understanding provides knowledge and explanation. Once you discover this new information, you may use it to revise and update your beliefs. You might change your mind about certain Israeli actions and government policies.

Taking another person's epistemic stance can be necessary to accurately represent and assess the nature and character of their lived experience. Through your imaginative empathetic act, you learn what it is like to be them by simulating qualitatively similar lived experiences for yourself.¹⁰ You acquaint yourself with their subjective point of view.

Why is this necessary? Direct acquaintance gives you abilities you couldn't have otherwise.¹¹ What kinds of abilities? Abilities to evaluate whether, from their cognitive point of view, their lived experience grounds their testimony. Does the nature and character of their lived experience support their testimonial claim about what their life is like?

It also teaches you phenomenal hypotheses that you couldn't know otherwise. – What kinds of hypotheses? Hypotheses about the nature and character of their lived experiences. (For example, what it's like to see color after a life of blindness.) You can use these hypotheses to (accurately) imaginatively represent a person's values for various scenarios they've experienced in order to discover their values. Once you discover how they value their experiences and possible alternatives, you can make inferences about their affective attitudes and valences concerning these experiences and alternatives.

The list continues. For example, taking another's epistemic stance gives you direct acquaintance with (a simulation of) the worldview of another, which can be necessary for the ability to projectively simulate or forecast their values and preferences for new, unexpected, or counterfactual scenarios. This may include scenarios that they themselves might not be able to predictively assess or imagine.¹²

Learning what another person's lived experience is like, then, unlocks the door to important kinds of new content, content involving subjective facts that play a substantive role in our psychological lives.¹³

It may even unlock the door to the discovery of new non-subjective facts, and to other new kinds of information. But we needn't assume this. We've got enough already to show how open-minded, empathetic engagement with the beliefs, attitudes, and

¹⁰At least, you get this sort of direct acquaintance if your empathetic response is factive, that is, it accurately captures their lived experience. At the very least, when you simulate, you have an experience that acquaints you with what you *think* is their lived experience.

¹¹There's a real and pressing question here about whether and to what degree it's possible to accurately simulate the experienced perspective of another person. Perhaps each person's conscious perspective has a *de se* content or character that makes it metaphysically impossible for another person to grasp. Or perhaps, just as a matter of fact, there is so much heterogeneity between individuals that it is practically impossible to imaginatively simulate the lived experience of a different person. You can only factively grasp someone's epistemic stance if your imaginative, empathic, representation accurately captures the content, nature, and character of their lived experience. If we cannot factively grasp another person's epistemic stance, we face an epistemic wall with respect to that kind of experience (Paul 2014).

¹²For related discussion, see Williamson (2016) and McCoy *et al.* (2019).

¹³Crane (2014).

worldview of another person has epistemic value. It gives you abilities to evaluate their experience as the ground for their testimony, to understand and explain their point of view, and to make informed judgments and accurate predictions about their values and preferences. For our purposes here, such open-mindedness means you are open to discovering this new content, even when it could change some of your most fundamental beliefs.

This is the epistemic argument for taking another person's epistemic stance.

2. The moral argument

Empathetically understanding what it is like for someone else to confront hardship or to grapple with difficult events can help you to understand why they believe and act the way that they do. This can motivate changes in your behavior and moral judgment. Sometimes changing your beliefs in response to grasping another's worldview is morally important.¹⁴ You discover more information about how others experience the world and educate your moral opinions. You gain moral understanding, and perhaps a distinctive kind of moral expertise.¹⁵

It can be particularly important for those in positions of authority. If you have power over another person, with empathy, the decisions you make for and about them will be better informed. The empathetic understanding involved in occupying the epistemic stance of another leads to tolerance, and tolerance leads to justice.

A moral principle supporting the value of empathic understanding is that all people deserve compassion. Each of us should try to develop an informed understanding of others, as best we can. We are even supposed to try and empathize with those whom we despise, for example, the moral reprobate or the sociopath. To pass judgment, we need to know the truth about what it is like to be the person whom we are holding morally responsible for their actions. What did they know, and what didn't they know? Why did they act as they did, and what were they capable of? What can we hold them responsible for, and how should we treat them? Criminals who were abused as children deserve our compassion and understanding, even if we deny that they made the right choices and we think they deserve punishment.

Open-minded empathetic engagement with the beliefs, attitudes, and worldview of another person has moral value.¹⁶ This is the moral argument for taking someone's epistemic stance.

3. Pre-commitment and the risk of transformation

Both arguments come into play when we consider the relationship between open-mindedness and fear of mental corruption. The moral argument is supported by the epistemic argument: what we discover through taking the epistemic stance of another person can be relevant to our moral judgments. In both kinds of situations, when we are faced with possible evidence, we need to be open to assessing it.

Refusing to do what's needed in order to be able to assess some evidence could be framed as a kind of precommitment.¹⁷ Such a pre-commitment amounts to refusing to

¹⁴Railton (2017).

¹⁵For interesting, related discussions about testimony, moral expertise, and moral understanding, see Holton (1994), Jones (1999), Hills (2009), Enoch (2014) and Cath (2019).

¹⁶Medina (2013). Another important argument concerns the relationship between a person's lived experience and the good. It is essential to take the subjective nature and character of one's lived experience into account when determining the overall goodness (both subjective and objective) of one's life.

¹⁷Elster (1985).

entertain possible evidence or refusing to consider new information in order to avoid potential epistemic change.

Jon Elster famously discussed the way we can use precommitment or “self-binding” to prevent psychological control, using as an example the case of Ulysses and the Sirens. In the story, as Ulysses’ ship approaches the island of the Sirens, he desperately wants to hear their song in order to experience the beauty and discover the new knowledge about the world that hearing the song would bring.¹⁸ Yet hearing their song will temporarily derange him, causing him to issue destructive commands, ultimately resulting in all hands lost. So, Ulysses blocks the ears of his crew and binds himself to the mast of his ship. This way, he can hear the Sirens, but his crew cannot, nor will they be able to hear him giving them orders. After they pass the island, he recovers and is freed.

Precommitment can be rational in certain types of situations where you want to keep yourself from temptation, since you know that you have or will have a desire or urge to do something, but your metapreference (what you prefer to prefer, despite your baser urge or simple lower-order preference for a particular alternative) is to not to do that thing.

For example, perhaps, when faced with some delicious ice cream, you feel yourself inevitably gripped by the desire to gobble it down. You simply can’t help but to eat it up. But you know this about yourself, you know what ice cream can do to you. So you quite rationally refuse to put yourself in this position. Ice cream is banned. It’s not allowed in the house.

In Elster’s case, and in other standard discussions of precommitment, the character and nature of the urge is known to be destructive and the experience involved has disvalue and is known or judged to have disvalue.¹⁹ If an agent pre-commits, in effect controlling their response to the experience before being faced with it, it is because it is mandated by their current preferences about their future preferences. They know enough about the experience involved to know how it would affect them, and their overall, considered preference is to either avoid it or control it so that it does not permanently change them. The problems for rational decision-making in these cases concern the adjudication of the norms for higher order comparisons between preferences, and concern what an agent should precommit to given their current highest order preferences.

The sort of mental corruption I’m worried about raises a different problem: it concerns a distinctively different phenomenon from something like keeping yourself away from ice cream. It stems from combining the fact that assessing potential evidence could provide important information with the fact that what you need to do in order to assess that potential evidence could be permanently psychologically transformative with respect to your highest-order preferences.

Normally, receiving and assessing potential evidence is not destructive in this way, nor is it negatively valenced. Ordinarily, open-mindedly receiving and assessing potential evidence is valuable, and so avoiding such evidence is not justified. However, when the assessment itself could be transformative, a special problem arises.

Transformative experiences create a special problem because they are experiences that are radically new while also being life-changing. In cases involving transformative experience, the type of experience is new to the agent, and the experience will change some of the agent’s core future values and preferences, including their highest order preferences. As such, the experiences are both epistemically and personally transformative.

¹⁸Book XII, Homer’s *Odyssey* (Homer 1919).

¹⁹See, for example, Parfit’s discussion of the Russian Nobleman (Parfit 1984).

An epistemically transformative experience transforms what you know or understand. It is an experience of a kind that you've never had before, such that you have to have that kind of experience in order to know what it's like. It teaches you something you could not have learned without having it. When the experience teaches you what it's like, it gives you new abilities to imagine, recognize, and imaginatively model possible states involving its nature and effects.

This draws on a familiar point from the philosophy of mind (Jackson 1986; Lewis 1990). The experience of seeing red, if you've never had it, is epistemically transformative. You have to actually have the experience in order to know what it's like to see red: just try to explain what it's like to see red to someone who is congenitally blind, or to someone who is colorblind, and compare it to what someone learns when they discover for themselves what it's like to see red. Relatedly, radically new, life-changing experiences like becoming religious after a life of skepticism, or becoming a parent, can be epistemically transformative.²⁰

Transformative experiences, however, are not merely epistemically transformative. They are also personally transformative: the epistemically transformative experience transforms what you care about. It does this by changing or replacing a core preference, or through changing something deep and fundamental about your values. (It need not change all, or even most of, your values and preferences. A small but central change can be sufficient.) Core preferences vary from person to person, but many people take their preferences about moral or religious issues to define who they are (Strohmingner and Nichols 2014; Moulaki *et al.* 2020). Another core preference may simply be the preference to keep your current mental abilities, that is, you prefer not to change the way you reason about and assess facts and evidence.

A change in your core preferences and values generates a change in you. If the change is personally transformative, it changes who you are: who you used to be is replaced with a new self. That is, through your response to the new experience, a new self is created. The self that realizes you after the transformation (the "ex post self") is different from the self that realized you before the transformation (the "ex ante self").

The metaphysics of this is straightforward: a person who persists through self-change over time is realized by a series of (appropriately related) selves. The person is composed of this chain of selves, and we can take the selves to be realized in turn by a chain of appropriately related, more fine-grained, temporal parts. If we define selves by their core preference and value profiles, replacing a core preference or value replaces the self. In this sense, "changing who the person is" can happen by creating a new self that is a new realizer of the persisting person. (This gives us a preferred reading of familiar, highly ambiguous ordinary language phrases like "I became a new person" or "I'm not the man I once was".) In decision contexts, transformative changes in what you know and in who you are affect the way we should regard certain life-changing choices (Paul 2014, 2020).

Ordinarily, when we are deliberating about something important and life-changing, and we are unsure about what we want to do, we engage in model-based reasoning. This type of reasoning:

generates a forward-looking decision tree representing the contingencies between actions and outcomes, and the values of those outcomes. It evaluates actions by searching through the tree and determining which action sequences are likely to produce the best outcomes. (Crockett *et al.* 2014)

²⁰Paul (2014, 2015).

At least ideally, you use model-based reasoning to carefully assess novel alternatives, and, in particular, when you want to form higher order preferences about those alternatives. To reason this way, you prospectively imagine how you'd respond to different events, simulating yourself acting in different ways to bring about different hypothetical actions and outcomes and assigning them values. (In real life, we rarely reason this carefully. But it's a normative ideal to try to approximate this approach in contexts when careful and balanced rational assessment is the goal.)

By imaginatively simulating and assessing your actions and outcomes, you can compare them and determine, at least roughly, which act you prefer. (Ideally, the one that will maximize your expected value.) This type of reasoning can allow you to discover your preferences about an outcome if you already know what it is like. It can also be used to *create* your preferences about a possible outcome. For novel experiences where you need to imaginatively simulate yourself embedded in various scenarios to form value judgements, you can perform something approximating model-based reasoning to discover or construct preferences.

Now we have all the tools we need to see how the possibility of having a transformative experience when assessing new evidence creates a distinctive sort of problem.

When you need to decide whether to have a new experience that could change you, the natural response is to prospectively model having this experience and the change it brings, in order to see if it's something you'd prefer to its alternatives. So, ordinarily, if you were concerned about what could happen if you assess some potentially dangerous evidence, you'd use this type of reasoning to decide whether to take the epistemic risk. The problem arises because, here, prospective modeling is not available.

In the cases at issue, there are moral and epistemic reasons for assessing some potential evidence, yet to do so entails the risk of transformative change. The risk arises because the experience of performing the assessment can be transformative, and by the time you discover the way that opening your mind transforms you, it's too late. The act of assessing the potential evidence has changed the way you evaluate it, because the experience of assessment was transformative in a particular way: in virtue of making the assessment, the way your mind assesses the evidence was altered.

How might this happen? Return to Ulysses. Consider a version of the story where, first, it's an open question whether the song of the Sirens is destructive. It doesn't entail something as obvious as loss of a ship. Those who hear the song are changed forever, but there's vociferous debate about whether these effects are destructive or constructive. Perhaps those who have heard the song advocate in its favor. They testify to its beauty and claim that the information it brings changes their lives in a deeply meaningful way. However, those who haven't heard the song regard these advocates as mentally corrupted, unable to see for themselves how their intellectual capacities have been destroyed. There is no decisive, observer-independent way to determine the facts of the case. Each individual must make up their own mind about whether they will hear the Sirens' song or not.

Ulysses is desperate to hear the song of the Sirens, but he is worried. He isn't sure how he will respond to their song, and he fears it will change him in ways he wants to resist. In particular, he fears that he will be irreversibly altered, such that once he's had a taste of the Sirens' song, ordinary life (life out of earshot of the Sirens) will never again satisfy him.

If he is altered, the self who has heard the song (call him "Ulysses *ex post*"), would enthusiastically testify that he does not regret who he has become. He would believe that his experience with the Sirens put him into contact with a deep and meaningful truth, a truth that he could never have grasped otherwise. Nevertheless, Ulysses as he is now (*ex ante*, before he hears the Sirens' song) does not want to become dissatisfied with

ordinary life. Ulysses *ex ante* wants the information that hearing the song could bring. But he does not want to risk becoming the restless, dissatisfied Ulysses *ex post* that he fears the experience could make him into.

In this version of the story, as Ulysses considers whether to let himself listen to the Sirens, the most natural approach for him would be to prospectively model his response to their song. That is, he'd prospectively model his experience, in order to discover his *de se* preferences for the possible selves that could result, in order to make his decision based on an informed comparison of the expected outcomes. But here's the catch: he can't prospectively assess the nature and character of the experience he is considering in order to determine the effect the song is likely to have on him. Even if he were able to accurately simulate or imagine the nature and character of this lived experience in order to prospectively model it, he couldn't allow himself to do so – because simulating the nature and character of this experience is itself an experience that is transformative. Having an experience with this nature and character, whether virtually, imaginatively, or in reality, exposes him to the irreversible self-change he fears.

In short, Ulysses cannot accurately simulate the experience of hearing the Siren's song in order to assess it without risking the very change that he is afraid of. In order to grasp the character of the experience well enough to determine whether it would psychologically alienate him from his current self, he has to open his mind to the possibility of this irreversible change. He must risk mental corruption.

This problem for the evaluation of evidence in transformative contexts is a general one. It stems from the combination of discovery and change that transformative experience brings. First, in such cases, you cannot prospectively know what the experience will be like, and without it you can't gather the relevant evidence in order to decide. Second, the prospective transformation of self involves a violation of act-state independence. That is, as the result of the action, the agent *ex post* would not be the same as the agent *ex ante*, destroying simple counterfactual assessments of the change. This is because the act involved does not simply change an isolated or independent property of the agent: the act also changes the core preferences and abilities of the agent. Given the way the agent's preferences and abilities change, their *ex post* testimony and *ex post* evaluation of their state are not independent of the change.

4. The paradox of empathy

Opening yourself up to assessing evidence, when it involves an experience that could transform the way you evaluate the evidence, creates the possibility of *ex post* change in your critical capacities. The problem is especially pressing for the role of empathy in gathering information, updating beliefs, and making decisions when you empathize with others (or with your other possible selves).

If your doctor cannot empathize with your pain, if your lover cannot empathize with your hopes and fears, if your mother cannot empathize with your dreams, they have fallen short. They cannot occupy your epistemic stance, and as a result, they fail to understand crucial features of your cognitive point of view. Similarly, if a politician cannot empathize with her constituents, if a teacher cannot empathize with his students, or an actor cannot empathize with their character, their abilities are lacking.

The power of experiencing a different cognitive point of view is why art, film, narrative, and technological tools like virtual reality can be so valuable.²¹ Art brings us into a kind of experiential contact with ideas, teaching us something new. It allows us to experience ideas directly, through our own imaginative response to it, and through

²¹Kind (2020) and Riggle (2020).

the ideas it calls forth in us. Virtual reality does this in a different way. It brings us into a qualitative kind of experiential acquaintance through immersion into a virtual environment similar to the experience of the real thing. Doing this can call forth important responses that couldn't be evoked otherwise.

However, opening your mind to the experiences of others, even through artistic representation or virtual immersion, carries a risk. Becoming acquainted with the lived experience and cognitive point of view of another person can be powerful. Some corrupt ways of making sense of the world that others employ might be so seductive, so compelling, that they could draw you in.

In particular, there is risk in taking a person's epistemic stance. When you take the epistemic stance of another, you open yourself up to experiencing how they feel or understand the world. Such experience has the power to teach you. It can motivate you to help, support, and engage, and it can change your mind. It's the power of this experience that is at once so important and yet potentially so dangerous. If you allow yourself to experience the way another person feels and thinks the way they do in order to understand why they believe and act the way they do, the way you think about the world might be affected.²²

The benefits, as well as the risks, of taking another's epistemic stance apply to the possibility of taking the epistemic stance of a different self just as well as to the possibility of taking the epistemic stance of a different person. To empathetically understand yourself as a subject, you represent the perspective of yourself in a situation by imaginatively simulating the first person perspective you'd have *as* that self. The ability to empathize with your different selves, especially your different possible future selves, can be especially important when contemplating high-stakes, difficult decisions. Knowledge of self-involving (or *de se*) truths about ourselves plays an important role in many kinds of reasoning involving self-involving propositions, such as self-involving counterfactuals and self-involving projections about the future, and in decisions that depend on accurately assessing such self-involving truths and the preferences they entail.²³

Moreover, we seem to have privileged access to these sorts of truths. Even if true empathy is impossible with regard to other people (because of the problem of other minds), it seems that it should be possible with regard to your other selves. That is, the mind of a possible self of yours should be much more imaginatively accessible than the mind of another person. After all, this possible self is a version of you. It's someone whose mind you know rather well.

The special intimacy we expect to share with future versions of ourselves is presumed when we assess possibilities for ourselves by imaginatively modeling prospective scenarios. The whole point of prospectively modeling such possibilities assumes that we have enough insight about ourselves to accurately create and discover preferences about them.

Recall: when reasoning in a model-based way, you prospectively imagine how you'd respond to different events, simulating different hypothetical actions and outcomes and assigning them values. To make a model-based decision involving the possibility of self-change, you imaginatively represent yourself in the new situation as having the relevant experience or having changed in the relevant way, and assess the experiences, feelings, beliefs, and other attitudes that you'd have. You take the epistemic stance of a possible self of yours. It's a version of the task that Harsanyi described, where you imaginatively put yourself into the shoes of another, except that this time, you imaginatively empathize with another self of yours rather than with another person.²⁴

²²For related arguments, see Betzler and Keller (Forthcoming).

²³Paul (2018).

²⁴The existence of this sort of reasoning in situations when people face high stakes, novel, potentially life-changing decisions is documented in McCoy *et al.* (2019).

We rely on our ability to empathize with our possible selves when we make decisions based on this sort of reasoning, when we reason and judge ourselves in a self-aware way, and when we attempt to see past our own self-deception.

The problem comes when what's cognitively necessary for model-based reasoning – accurately simulating the lived experience of a possible self (or of another person) – could be transformative. This is precisely the problem that Ulysses, in our modified version of the example, faces when he contemplates the possibility of listening to the song of the Sirens.

In such a situation, you might be rationally averse to having the experience of open-mindedly evaluating the epistemic stance of an alien possible self, because you fear the mental corruption that a fully open-minded evaluation of that possible self could bring.²⁵

The delicate epistemic question with regard to empathetic, imaginative simulation involves the question of where one draws the line. Even if you have the ability to open your mind to this experience, where and how do you draw the line? How open can you be to this new experience? How fully can you allow yourself to occupy the perspective of an alien other, including an alien possible self? How much can you allow yourself to discover before the experience changes you, such that you lose control of your preferences, or even lose access to your original self's perspective? These questions relate to rationality, justice, fairness, and tolerance as well as to self-knowledge, self-deception, self-control, and self-manipulation.

Note that the trouble arises in two ways. First, when attempting to take the epistemic stance of another person. Second, when attempting to take the epistemic stance of another version of yourself, for example, when you attempt to truly understand a merely possible version of whom you might become. This second type of attempt can be central in prospective reasoning for the proper evaluation of your *de se* preferences in modal contexts and the discovery of various related propositions.²⁶

Two paradoxes arise in these transformative types of contexts, contexts where empathetic engagement with a potentially dangerous alien self (or a potentially dangerous alien point of view of another person) is needed to gather information, to update your values, or to increase your knowledge or understanding in some other way.

First, there is an epistemic paradox of empathy: a commitment to truth requires being open to the possibility of receiving information that you should regard as new evidence. Opening yourself up to the experience needed for you to take an alien epistemic stance could change you cognitively, changing your capacity to understand and evaluate the nature of the world. You seem to be rationally obligated to assess the potential evidence, yet rationally obliged to avoid its assessment.

Second, there is a moral paradox of empathy: a commitment to compassionate understanding requires being open to the possibility of evidence that could change your moral judgment. Opening yourself up to an alien epistemic stance could change you morally, changing your capacity to make moral judgments. You seem to be morally obligated to assess the potential evidence, yet morally obliged to avoid its assessment.

These paradoxes suggest that the value of open-minded, empathetic engagement needs to be critically re-evaluated.

5. Religious transformation and fear of mental corruption

To demonstrate the epistemological structure that gives rise to the paradox of empathy, I will examine a test case in some detail: a certain sort of standoff between the skeptic

²⁵This can be classed as a type of imaginative resistance. See Gendler (2000, 2006).

²⁶McCoy *et al.* (2019). The problem isn't just forward-looking. It can also raise difficulties for the retrospective assessment of oneself.

and the believer with respect to belief in God. This standoff is not mediated, at least not in the first instance, by rational deliberation.²⁷

The believer exults in the rich satisfaction of his faith, in the revelation which attends the experience of opening his mind to God. His belief in God is not arrived at by rational deliberation or by making any sort of Pascalian wager. Rather, he allows the full and generous exercise of his capacity to grasp the divine majesty of a Supreme Being. When he opens his mind to God, belief flows in, a natural response that is unmediated by the rational calculation of expected utility and its careful assessment and weighing of different possible outcomes.

The skeptic has no such experience. He sees no physical evidence for the existence of God, and reasons that, if there were a God, there'd be some sort of evidence of his existence. He concludes that belief in God amounts to indulging in a psychological need for comfort. He doesn't begrudge the believer for having such a need, but has no desire to engage in what he takes to be an exercise in self-deception. From his perspective, he is the clearer thinker: in the cold hard light of day, he reasons to the most likely conclusion.

The believer, when confronted with the reasoning of the skeptic, argues that the skeptic has missed the point: in order to be properly receptive to the evidence, one must first be open to detecting it. He encourages the skeptic to set aside his resistance, at least for the sake of unbiased evaluation of the situation. To properly assess the case for and against belief, the skeptic should open his mind to the possibility of divine creation, to see if, in fact, he detects evidence that would be relevant to his assessment. One should "apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."²⁸

One way to open one's mind to possible evidence might be to participate in religious activities, such as attending a local church and participating in worship and celebration. Another way might be to read Scripture. Or one could have long conversations with believers about whether God exists. All of these activities can aid the pursuit of the real goal: seeing things from the perspective of the believer. That is, the skeptic should try to take the epistemic stance of the believer as part of assessing the case for and against the existence of God.

But our skeptic refuses to do any such thing. Why? To refuse to take the epistemic stance of the believer smacks of intolerance and irrationality. If the skeptic is truly interested in unbiased assessment of both sides of the question, how can he refuse to engage in this way? Isn't it the skeptic who is really engaging in an act of self-deception?

What is going on here?

There is a deeper structure to the situation, because religious experience is just the sort of transformative experience that can radically revise one's epistemic perspective and personal commitments. If having a religious experience is transformative, then fear of mental corruption comes into play.

In particular, we can understand the skeptic's response as a rational aversion to assessing the evidence, for fear of preference change due to mental corruption. Right now, he is sure he is right – he does not believe God exists, and he does not think he *should* believe that God exists. That is, he endorses and embraces his current preferences and his current evaluative capacities.

²⁷Religious belief and religious transformation are not usually chosen. Rather, it simply happens: one is transformed, without first deciding to be transformed. Nevertheless, as my discussion here suggests, one's mental attitudes can affect whether or not such a transformation is permitted to occur.

²⁸James (1902: 31).

And he fears that, if he truly imagined or engaged with the perspective of the believer, it might change his judgment in a way that, from his current perspective, he cannot sanction. He is not afraid that he will gain new evidence that, given his current preferences, will change his assessment of the situation. He is afraid that having the experience of taking the stance of the believer will change him in a way that will make him psychologically alien to his current self, that is, will make him into a self that is irrational from his current perspective. His fear is that this alien, irrational self will find what it (the alien self) takes to be evidence to believe in God.²⁹

6. The *sensus divinitatis*

What sort of experience gives rise to belief in God? According to some theologians, it is the spiritual experience of recognizing the divine. John Calvin defended the existence of a quasi-perceptual faculty, the *sensus divinitatis*.

The knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God, but also grasp what befits us and is proper to his glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know of him. (Calvin 1960: 39 (tr.))

According to Calvin and his intellectual descendants, the *sensus divinitatis*, or the sense of the divine, involves one's capacity to know God. It has a cognitive, quasi-perceptual component, and when exercised, endows one with a grasp or understanding of God's divine majesty. Exercising this sense is not merely knowing or conceiving of some proposition. Rather, it is grasping the Divine in some quasi-perceptual and experiential sense.

Alvin Plantinga describes sensing the divine as analogous to experiencing the world in sensory ways, where cognitive capacities are enriched through experience of the divine just as they are enriched by sensory experience more generally.

But (to take an Edwardsian example) think of the taste of honey. You know what honey tastes like, and that knowledge crucially involves a certain kind of phenomenology. You wouldn't know what honey tastes like unless you actually tasted it (or in some other way experienced that taste). You can't have knowledge (more exactly, sensible knowledge) of the taste of honey or of its sweetness, without undergoing that phenomenology – without having that simple idea (as Edwards would think of it). There is a certain kind of experience that normally goes with seeing something red, and there is a certain kind of knowledge, namely, knowledge of what it's like to see something red, that you aren't able to have unless you have that experience. (Maybe this experience is a little like hearing the sound of a trumpet; still, that kind of analogy can take us only so far.) One who has never tasted sweetness or perceived red can know a good deal about the sweetness of honey and the look of something red (e.g., that both are experienced by many people, that people find the first pleasant and the second mildly exciting); there is also something she doesn't know, namely, what honey tastes like and what a sunset looks like. Now according to Edwards, one kind of experiential knowledge is spiritual knowledge; more exactly, there is such a thing as spiritual knowledge, and spiritual knowledge is experiential knowledge. This is knowledge of God's 'moral' qualities,

²⁹Note the interesting connection between epistemic transformation and the story of Eve in the garden, tempted by the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge: it brings out how the possibility of epistemic transformation (and its version of the knowledge argument) are rooted very deeply in western culture. There is a fundamental role for experience-based knowledge at the center of religious thinking.

as Edwards puts it – knowledge of his holiness, loveliness, beauty, glory, and amiability. Like knowledge of the taste and sweetness of honey, this knowledge requires that one have a certain characteristic phenomenal imagery, “a certain kind of ideas or sensations of mind,” as he puts it. ... There is little to say by way of describing this new experience except to say that it is the experience of God’s moral qualities; and one who doesn’t have this new simple idea – one in whom the cognitive process in question has not been regenerated – doesn’t have spiritual knowledge of God’s beauty and loveliness. Such a person may know, in a way, that God is beautiful and lovely (perhaps she takes this on the authority of someone else), but there is a kind of knowledge of this loveliness she doesn’t have (experiential knowledge), and it is precisely this kind of knowledge that is the spiritual knowledge of which Edwards speaks. Spiritual knowledge is experiential knowledge, and a necessary condition of having the latter is having the right phenomenology, the right imagery, the new simple idea. (Plantinga 2000: Ch. 9)

The *sensus divinitatis* is triggered in us by engaging with the world in appropriate ways, and when one senses the divine, the response is natural and immediate.

Paul Helm describes the Calvinist idea:

The *sensus* is thus not immediate awareness, as the awareness of a physical sensation is immediate; rather it is a judgment of a highly unself-conscious and automatic kind, ‘natural’ in yet another sense of that term, based upon an experience of certain features of the physical world, upon its beauty and orderliness and other features. This judgment is accompanied by a feeling of obviousness or naturalness in the way in which it is natural for us to believe that there has been a past, or that there are minds other than our own minds, or that $2 + 2 = 4$. One might even say that the judgment or awareness that there is a God supervenes upon experiences of the natural world in that whoever has a properly functioning *sensus* would, when brought to experience data of a certain kind, immediately, without the need for conscious ratiocination, form the belief that there is God, or have that belief sustained or reinforced. (Helm 1998: 92)

Plantinga has defended and enriched the discussion of the *sensus divinitatis*, arguing that, just as perception can give you defeasible evidence of the nature of the external world, exercise of the *sensus* can give you defeasible evidence of the existence of God, and belief in God can be reliably formed by exercise of this capacity.

On this view, sensing the divine will naturally move you to appreciate and know God’s divine majesty and thus (perhaps with the support of the Holy Spirit) to believe in Him. Those who fail to sense the divine are somehow blocked from exercising their abilities, perhaps because their cognitive capacities are corrupted or deficient in some way. Belief in God, therefore, is the natural result of the exercise of one’s capacity to sense the divine. The right sort of experience causally generates the belief, in a basic, warranted, way.³⁰

³⁰According to the model, experience of a certain sort is intimately associated with the formation of warranted Christian belief, but the belief doesn’t get its warrant by way of an argument from the experience. It isn’t that the believer notes that she or someone else has a certain sort of experience, and somehow concludes that Christian belief must be true. It is rather that (as in the case of perception) the experience is the *occasion* for the formation of the beliefs in question, and plays a causal role (a role governed by the design plan) in their genesis ... On the model, the believer is *justified* in accepting these beliefs in the basic way

I do not propose to critique Plantinga's model of basic belief formation and warrant for belief in God. I'm interested in it as an exemplar. If we accept this sort of approach for how experience can cause us to believe in God, and we take the experience to be transformative, this gives us a model for how to understand a certain type of reluctance in the skeptic.

On Plantinga's picture, manifesting one's capacity to engage with the divine leads one noninferentially and naturally to belief in God. On this model, we can understand the reluctance of the skeptic as a kind of precommitment strategy.³¹

What is the precommitment designed to block? Perhaps the skeptic has something with the structure of the original version of the *Ulysses* story in mind: he thinks of awakening the *sensus divinitatus* as like hearing the song of the Sirens. He fears that the awakening could capture him epistemically and reprogram him into a believer. On this picture, awareness of the Divine is like a drug or hypnosis. Taking the epistemic stance of the believer means that the believer somehow exerts a kind of mind control.

But this is too crude. Many intelligent, thoughtful, and reflective people believe in God. They are not drugged or hypnotized. The argument from the awareness of the Divine is not that one's epistemic faculties are somehow seized or overcome. Faith is not a crude derangement of mental faculties.

A better way to understand the nature of the epistemic change is to recognize that, according to the theological approach, the experience of sensing the Divine and then forming belief in God is not a process that is hypnotic or straightforwardly epistemically disabling. It is – at least according to its advocates – educating, in the way that receiving perceptual evidence can be educating. The picture is that the experience one has, as one's *sensus divinitatus* is awakened, naturally leads one to form a belief in God, much as having an experience of wet drops on your head on a cloudy day lead you to form the belief that it is raining. So it's not about hypnosis or mind control. It's about the assessment of potential evidence. The relevant parallel is the modified version of the *Ulysses* story I told above, where, at least according to its advocates, hearing the song teaches *Ulysses ex post* how to appreciate reality in a richer, deeper, way.

There's another important thing to notice here. A way for the skeptic to be resistant to belief in God could stem from the skeptic's desire to avoid "being like that". In other words, the skeptic sees that the believer has different preferences from his own, and doesn't want to become that type of person. We might compare it to being politically conservative and not wanting to become the type of person who is a political liberal, or being fashionable and not wanting to become the type of person who dresses unfashionably. One might have emotional or other sorts of arational reasons for not wanting to be a certain type of person, or one might simply prefer to be the sort of person one is.

This involves a kind of bias, either bias against other types of people, or bias in favor of the status quo. As I suggested, sometimes this isn't rational. But in some cases the bias might be rational: for example, it can be perfectly rational for me to prefer to have the preferences I actually have. There are cases involving experience that lead to preference change where this issue comes up, and it isn't clear what to say.³² If you don't want to stealthily form preferences to be a daredevil then don't sign up for a

and is *rational* (both internally and externally) in so doing; still further, the beliefs can have warrant, enough warrant for knowledge, when they are accepted in that basic way" (Plantinga 2000: 258).

³¹For an alternative approach, see Stump (2014, 2018). Stump develops a Thomistic account of the conversion process as a kind of surrender, where a person allows themselves to be transformed by a benevolent power, leading them to discover and embrace their *ex post* self as their true self. The challenge here is that *ex ante*, the skeptic takes this *ex post* self to be an alien self.

³²Callard (2018).

parachute jump. If you don't want to try to make yourself into more of a homebody than don't have a baby, etc. (Callard 2018).

But the case of refusing to take the stance of the believer is different, because the skeptic is supposed to be clearly and open-mindedly assessing evidence in order to form preferences about what sorts of preferences he wants to have. On this approach, exercise of the *sensus divinitatis* is precisely what's necessary to give him the capacity to gather evidence about how he wants to think about the nature of reality.

The problem comes from the risk involved. The resistance from the skeptic comes from resisting any future that involves the real possibility of becoming someone who is not currently a "candidate self" for him, or becoming a self that, from his current perspective, is irrational.³³

How does this risk arise?

It stems from the possibility of the transformation that the skeptic faces, the transformation that taking the stance of the believer could bring about. The problem is that, *ex hypothesi*, the skeptic can't know, without taking this stance, what it's like to have the sort of experience that the believer describes as "sensing the Divine". Without knowing this, he can't (by the lights of the believer) evaluate the evidence for the existence of God. But if he takes the stance of the believer, he risks (by his own lights) a kind of mental corruption of his reasoning faculties. What the believer takes to be the awakening of a latent sense of the divine is what the skeptic takes to be an awakening of a corrosive inability to think clearly about the nature of reality. Such corrosion would make him, by his current lights, mentally unrecognizable.

So, for the skeptic, taking the epistemic stance of the believer jeopardizes who he is, by making it possible that he could be transformed into an alien self. Such a change would create a fundamental breach of psychological continuity in how he reasons about the nature of reality and how he makes sense of the world around him. That possible self is mentally alien to who he is now. If he risks becoming mentally unrecognizable to himself, he risks, in a deep and fundamental sense, losing himself. He is risking (by his current lights) replacing the self he is now with an alien, unknown self, a self that is not in any psychologically intuitive sense an eligible descendent of who he is now. This alien self is someone who the skeptic finds unrecognizable, just as Ulysses *ex post* becomes unrecognizable to Ulysses *ex ante*.

To see how threatening such psychological disruptions can be to one's sense of who one is, consider a Parfit-style case of branching.³⁴ You are scanned to create a perfect Replica, who then goes off to live a life somewhere else. But the scanning damages you, and two weeks later, you are facing death. Your Replica gets back in touch and says: "Don't worry, I'm you too. And I'll come back to town, and live in your house, and teach your classes, and look after your children. So don't worry. You still have a future!"

Parfit actually thinks that this should be just fine, because in some suitably impersonal sense, you are "the same person". But as Velleman (2005) persuasively argues, the reason why this is *incredibly obviously not just fine* is because, once the branching occurs, you no longer stand in the kind of first-person, shared point of view that you must share with anyone who you can regard as a possible future self of yours. Because of this breach of first-personal psychological continuity, you can't regard Replica as an eligible self, even if he is causally descended from you and psychologically somewhat similar in certain respects.

It's important not to be confused here by irrelevant claims about personal identity, because the metaphysics of personal identity is not the same as the metaphysics of

³³For related discussion, see Velleman (2008) and Paul (2020).

³⁴As discussed in Parfit (1984) and Velleman (2005).

selves, and it is the latter that matters here. That is, perhaps on some views, Replica is “the same person”, but he is not the same self, and it’s being the same self, or a self who is an eligible descendant of yours, who matters.

Velleman describes the shared point of view that is needed to tie selves together as involving “open channels of internal communication”. Such channels consist of the present self being able to imaginatively prefigure its future point of view and also being able to remember its past point of view. The sense in which I’m most interested in this involves the direction of internal communication towards the future. If my ability to prefigure my future point of view (from my first person perspective) is severed, then I cannot regard the future person who causally descends from me as my future self. That future person is merely a possible person who may be, in some sense, personally identical to me or count as a counterpart version of me, but is not *of* me. At least from my current perspective, they are not one of *my* future selves.

There’s a special dimension of this that I want to get at here with the question of transformation: the sense in which I regard my future self as alien with regard to the way I first-personally assess putative evidence. Not only does the skeptic not regard this transformed future self as an extension of who he is, but he regards the way that that self regards evidence as alien. That self’s way of assessing evidence isn’t *his* way.

What matters here involves the special, introspective intimacy that I share with my past selves and my future selves, in particular, with regard to the shared nature of my first-person perspective on the world. Normally, I can anticipate my future point of view and recall my past point of view, at least for close ancestor selves and close descendant selves. But if this connection is severed, for example, if I cannot share my point of view with a past self, especially because of a radical change in my rational or epistemic framework, such a past self is merely a realizer of a mere past person, just a past variant of me. I can regard such selves and reflect on them, but I am not of them, and they are not of me.

The same kind of severance is possible with my future selves. If I cannot imaginatively anticipate my future selves because we do not share a point of view, they are insufficiently intimately connected to me to count as descendant selves. (For example, if, in the future, I were to descend into Alzheimer’s disease and be unable to think about philosophy or discuss probability, I’d be unrecognizable to myself from my current perspective.) Such change would also affect my sense of my past, because if I cannot anticipate my future self’s point of view, I cannot anticipate how, in the future, I will look back and regard my past self. And in the future, my future self will look back and see a past self that I simply cannot introspectively connect to myself right now.

These reflections give us a better model for what is going on with the skeptic. The skeptic is confronted with the believer, and the believer argues that, in order to recognize the evidence of the existence of God, the skeptic should open his mind and allow himself to experience the *sensus divinitatus*. One cannot grasp the divine merely by considering the relevant propositions concerning divinity. And as the Calvinist argues, mere descriptions of this experience fall short, just as descriptions of what it is like to see red or what it is like to taste honey fall short. The skeptic must have the experience itself in order to understand. Just like knowing propositions describing what it is like to see red are not enough to grasp what it is like to see red, one must exercise the capacity to sense the divine in order to fully grasp the divine.

But the trouble is that, *if* the skeptic is deliberating over whether to allow himself to have the experience (I am assuming that he has control over whether he has the experience), he cannot cognitively model how he will respond to the experience before he has it. He simply has to have the experience to know what it is like and to know how he will respond.

So when the skeptic simply introspects about what to believe, he cannot fully grasp all the facts relevant to his belief. This means that the skeptic must decide whether to allow himself to have the experience without knowing, in the most salient respects, what to expect. Yet, if he opens his mind to see if he awakens the *sensus divinitatis*, he risks losing control of his preferences and becoming someone who is psychologically alien to him now (one is spiritually “reborn”). That is, he is in the very same situation as Ulysses *ex ante*, fearing conversion into Ulysses *ex post*, in the modified version of the story I told above.³⁵

This, then, provides the ground for the skeptic’s resistance to empathetically understanding the perspective of the believer.³⁶ The skeptic cannot first-personally model his response and his personal cognitive changes before he experiences the divine, much as Ulysses cannot simulate the song of the Sirens, without risking transformation and the possibility of mental corruption.

In particular, if the skeptic feels that his rational faculties are in order, and rejects belief in God, he may fear the loss of control that awakening the *sensus divinitatis* entails. For, after all, once he truly has the experience of the divine, he may be naturally and perhaps irresistibly led to belief in God. And not only will he believe in God, but he will personally transform as well, in a way that makes his future first person perspective inaccessible to who he is now. So the skeptic risks losing control of his preferences. By extension, he is epistemically alienated from the future self that would result from the change. And this is why the skeptic refuses to entertain the perspective of the believer or to explore the possibility of awakening the *sensus divinitatis*.

Transformations that might destroy our future selves as we know them are, in a real sense, not in our self-interest to undergo. The resistance of the skeptic, then, is based in resistance to transformation into an alien self. That this resistance requires one to avoid possible life-changing evidence is regrettable, but preserving one’s future first-person existence trumps mere evidence-gathering.

And what is surely obvious at this point is that the very same possibility, *mutatis mutandis*, faces the believer. She risks loss of her faith and corruption of the *sensus divinitatis* if she engages empathetically. The believer stands in the very same position as the skeptic. They both fear mental corruption, and – perhaps – legitimately so.

7. Conclusion

I close with disappointment. In particular, I am deeply disappointed with myself. I have developed an argument for the rationality of closed-mindedness, a result that I find repugnant. And yet, I have no plausible epistemological counter-argument to offer.

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³⁵For the skeptic who becomes a believer, the experience permanently alters him, and the future self is not (by stipulation) treated as objectively irrational or deranged. (Unlike the way we assume that (as in Elster’s (1985) version of the case), Ulysses in the grip of the Sirens is objectively irrational, or hypnotized, or drugged, so that we are allowed in that case to step back and apply a higher-order rule about what to do that justifies pre-commitment.)

³⁶Conversely, the believer might resist empathetically understanding the skeptic.

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