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# Concurrent Emotions, Affective Empathy, and Phenomenal Understanding

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## Abstract

According to an optimistic view, affective empathy is a route to knowledge of what it is like to be in a target person's state ("phenomenal knowledge"). Roughly, the idea is that the empathiser gains this knowledge by means of empathically experiencing the target's emotional state. The literature on affective empathy, however, often draws a simplified picture according to which the target feels only a single emotion at a time. Co-occurring emotions ("concurrent emotions") are rarely considered. This is problematic, because concurrent emotions seem to support a sceptical view according to which we cannot gain phenomenal knowledge of the target person's state by means of affective empathy. The sceptic concludes that attaining the epistemic goal of affective empathy is difficult, in practice often impossible. I accept the sceptic's premises, but reject the conclusion, because of the argument's unjustified, hidden premise: that the epistemic goal of affective empathy is phenomenal knowledge. I argue that the epistemic goal of affective empathy is phenomenal understanding, not knowledge. Attention to the under-explored phenomenon of concurrent emotions clarifies why this is important. I argue that this is the decisive epistemic progress in everyday cases of phenomenal understanding of another person.

**Keywords:** Emotions, Empathy, Affective Empathy, Interpersonal Understanding, Phenomenal Concepts

## 1. Introduction

According to an optimistic view, empathy is a route to knowledge of other people's mental states. This could be propositional knowledge. Many philosophers also claim that empathy can be a route to knowledge of what it is like to be in a target person's state. This article focusses on the question of whether empathy can be a source of the latter type of knowledge. Roughly, the idea is that the empathiser gains this knowledge by means of empathically co-experiencing the target person's emotional state.

In a first step, I identify affective empathy as an obvious candidate of a mental process that provides knowledge of what it is like to be in the target's situation. I understand knowledge of what it is like as knowledge of the phenomenal character of conscious states and use the term "phenomenal knowledge."

In a second step, I show that the literature on affective empathy, however, often draws a simplified picture according to which the target feels only a single emotion at a time. Co-occurring emotions (labelled here as "concurrent emotions" in order to avoid confusion between the emotions a subject feels simultaneously, on the one hand, and emotions which are empathically co-experienced, on the other hand) are rarely considered. This is problematic, because concurrent emotions seem to support a sceptical view according to which we cannot gain phenomenal knowledge of the target person's state by means of affective empathy.

The sceptic could argue as follows: first, the phenomenal character of a single mental state, like that of fear, is different from the phenomenal character of an overall mental state comprised of more than one emotion. Plausibly, the latter is not merely the additive result of the respective concurrent emotions, but involves their reciprocal modification. I will introduce the notion of an "atomic conscious state" for a single mental state, and a "complex conscious state" for a person's overall mental state, comprised of a set of simultaneous states, some of which are emotional states. Second, if we want to know what it is like for the target to be in her situation, it is phenomenal knowledge of her complex conscious state that we are after. Third, although not metaphysically impossible, it is psychologically far more difficult to empathically experience the target's complex conscious state than just a single emotion. The sceptic concludes that attaining the epistemic goal of empathy is difficult, in practice often impossible.

Ultimately, I accept the sceptic's premises, but reject the conclusion, because of the argument's unjustified, hidden premise: that the epistemic goal of affective empathy is phenomenal knowledge. I argue that the epistemic goal of affective empathy is phenomenal *understanding*, not knowledge. Attention to the under-explored phenomenon of concurrent emotions clarifies why this is important. The phenomenal complexity of the target's complex conscious state is one important reason why affective empathy comes in degrees: the empathiser's empathic experience can match the target's complex conscious state more or less precisely. Even if the empathizer cannot recognise and empathically experience the full range of the target's concurrent emotions, the empathiser can gain selective phenomenal knowledge or phenomenal beliefs that are close to the truth. Here phenomenal understanding comes into play, which, in contrast to phenomenal knowledge, is not factive and, like affective empathy, comes in degrees. Hence, understanding the target on the basis of selective phenomenal knowledge, and even on the basis of false phenomenal beliefs, is possible, if they are close enough to the truth. This is epistemic progress, because the empathiser is in an epistemically better position than a person who completely fails to empathise with the target, or makes no attempt to empathise. I argue that this is the decisive epistemic progress in everyday cases of phenomenal understanding of another person.

## 2. Empathy

Empathy is often spelled out in terms of simulation. The idea is, very roughly, that the empathiser engages in a process of simulating the target person's mental state. It is very common to distinguish between so-called cognitive and affective empathy (see e.g. Batson 2009, Hoffmann 2011, Kaupinnen 2017, Maibom 2017, Spaulding 2017). These terms can be misleading in at least two ways. First, they are misleading because both the target and the empathiser herself can play host to both cognitive and affective states. I will understand the

latter term as picking out qualifications of the empathic process. Second, the terms can be misleading because it is not the case that affective empathy is a process without any cognitive elements. Thus, I understand cognitive empathy as a process of non-affectively, merely propositionally imagining or simulating the target's state. Affective empathy, in contrast, is a process during which the empathiser simulates the target's states in such a way that she feels or co-experiences the target's affective states. This process can of course also involve cognitive elements.

Empathy, understood as a process of mental state recognition, has an epistemic value. One idea is that by means of empathy an empathiser learns the target person's mental state. This knowledge can be spelled out in terms of propositional knowledge. There is, however, also the idea that empathy is a way of gaining knowledge of what it is like ("phenomenal knowledge") for the target to be in her state. According to Steinberg, for example, empathy is "the affective apprehension of the mental state of another, a way of gaining insight into what it is like to be another person." Some philosophers claim that knowledge of what it feels like, or how one feels, is even the primary epistemic function of empathy (see Smith 2017 and for discussion Stueber forthcoming). We find the idea that empathy is a way of gaining knowledge of what it is like for the target of empathy to be in her specific state in various places in the literature (for example Coplan 2011, Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo 2021, Wiltsher 2021).

It seems that affective empathy is the obvious candidate we should start with in trying to find out whether empathy can be a source or way of gaining knowledge of what it is like for somebody else to be in a specific mental state. Because emotions play an important role in a person's psychology, philosophers are mainly interested in empathy as a source of phenomenal knowledge of another person's emotional or affective states. The question is then whether affective empathy can be a source of phenomenal knowledge of the target person's emotional states.

It seems that affective empathy could be a source of phenomenal knowledge, if the empathiser simulates the target's emotional state so that the empathiser herself co-experiences this state and thereby learns what it is like to be in that state.

In the following I provide several examples which suggest that the target's emotional state is understood as a single emotion, rather than concurrent emotions. Heidi Maibom gives this definition:<sup>1</sup>

Person S empathizes with person O's experience of emotion E in situation C if S feels E for O as a result of believing or perceiving that O feels E, or imagining being in C. (Maibom 2017, 22)

Whereas this definition leaves open whether the underlying process or state is imaginative, perceptive, or a (set of) beliefs, the word "feel" indicates that the empathiser herself is in an affective state. Thus, this empathic process is not a mere a state of "cold" recognition of the target's state. According to Maibom, the empathiser feels the same emotion "E" as the target.

Amy Coplan names an affective matching whose formulation indicates she also thinks of a single emotion as the target's state: "The empathizer must therefore experience the same type of emotion (or affect) as the target." (Coplan 2011, 6).

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<sup>1</sup> Later in this paper Maibom (23–24) specifies that the empathiser's experience can be an emotion similar to the one the target's experiences, and need not be exactly the same.

Similarly, Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo argue for the epistemic significance of knowledge of what it is like to be in the target's state (they use the term "phenomenal insight") in empathically understanding other people. They accordingly hold an optimistic view on empathy as a route to this type of knowledge:

It is because we are aware of what it feels like to be in the grip of an emotion that our empathizing will be successful. . . . It is because the interpreter can imagine what it feels like to be in a state of anger that she is able to understand why Jane tore Joan's photo. Empathizing with Jane provides her with a phenomenal insight into the way anger can motivate one to act irrationally. (Boisserie-Lacroix and Inchingolo 2021, 7107)

And Olivia Bailey writes:

In certain critical respects, the emotional experience of the one who empathizes closely resembles the emotional experience of the target of empathy. . . . The widower apprehends his loss through the lens of grief. We as the widower's empathizers also allow our thoughts to be directed in the ways characteristic of grief . . . the isomorphism between this empathetic experience and the original grief of the widower strongly recommends the conclusion that when we empathize, we do not merely imagine that we are feeling some emotion. Rather, we actually experience an emotion. (Bailey 2022, 4)

All these quotes support in slightly different ways the idea that there is a process of co-experiencing the target's state. For this reason, such a process is a good candidate for a source of phenomenal knowledge of another person's affective state. However, these quotes also support the supposition that many philosophers in the debate about empathy consider only a single emotional state of the target person.

Before we can proceed to the problem of concurrent emotions and investigate whether empathy can be a source of phenomenal knowledge of others' affective states, we need to specify this type of knowledge.

### **3. Phenomenal Knowledge and Phenomenal Concepts**

There are different physicalist and dualist approaches to explaining the peculiar sort of knowledge we gain exclusively from experience. For our purposes here, we don't need to assume that it is for metaphysical reasons that it is not possible to have phenomenal knowledge of a conscious state we have not yet experienced. Instead, a much weaker claim is sufficient: although it might be metaphysically possible to gain phenomenal knowledge in other ways than by means of experience, in practice, people have to experience a conscious state in order to gain phenomenal knowledge of this state.

According to a widely used strategy, the epistemic progress provided by experience is best explained in terms of phenomenal concepts. Experiencing a certain state with phenomenal qualities for the first time generally enables the acquisition of the phenomenal concept of the state in question. At least in practice, we only gain a phenomenal concept of a certain state by experiencing that state. Hence, we have no phenomenal concept of a state we have so far not experienced. This will be true even when the differences between the phenomenal character of some state we have already experienced and the unexperienced state are fairly minimal.

The deployment of phenomenal concepts allows us to explain the difference between phenomenal and non-phenomenal beliefs. We find the idea of this distinction expressed by Peter Goldie (2002), who describes the thought experiment of Irene, the icy-cool ice-scientist, a thought experiment that concerns the phenomenal qualities not of perception, but of the emotional state of fear. Irene experiences fear for the first time when she slips and falls on the ice. Goldie argues:

Before, when she thought of someone being afraid, her thought was restricted, roughly, to the causal role that that person's experience played—its typical causes and effect; and this way of thinking is one that might be available to, say, a Martian who was incapable of feelings of fear. Now, when she judges that someone else is afraid, she can deploy in the thought her newly gained phenomenal concept of fear. (Goldie 2002, 246)

According to many philosophers of mind (for example Papineau 2002), we need to distinguish psychological concepts from phenomenal concepts. Both are expressed through everyday terms for psychological states such as pain. Phenomenal concepts can be deployed in different ways, such as in a propositional structured belief.

Following Papineau, we can say that, prior to her first fear experience, Goldie's Irene had a psychological concept of fear, but no phenomenal one. Assuming that Irene knew the facts about fear that most of us know, such as its typical facial expressions, behaviours, and fear-inducing situations, we can also assume that she was able to recognise and believe that another person was afraid. This means that Irene had a concept of fear, but it was a mere psychological concept. Before her own experience of fear, she had no phenomenal concept of fear to deploy in, for example, believing that someone was afraid. Once she has gained the phenomenal concept and recognised that her experience was an experience of fear, she is able to deploy the phenomenal concept so that she can phenomenally believe that someone is in a mental state such as being afraid (see Nida-Rümelin 1998).

We are now able to further specify why having a phenomenal belief about another person's emotional state is epistemically better than just non-phenomenally knowing that the person is in that state: having a phenomenal concept is an epistemic benefit, because it is only then that we are able to recognize that, e.g., a mental state falls under both a physical and a psychological concept and a specific phenomenal concept, or compare a phenomenal concept with another one.<sup>2</sup>

## 4. Atomic and Complex Conscious States

In this section I will introduce a distinction between atomic conscious states and complex conscious states. This distinction will help to clarify what an empathiser can simulate within the process of affective empathy. In order to do so, we need to draw attention to details of Frank Jackson's seminal thought experiment in

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2 A proper account of phenomenal belief and phenomenal concepts would have to say more about how phenomenal concepts are integrated into propositions. This task in turn requires further specification of phenomenal concepts' nature. There are a number of different accounts of phenomenal concepts (for overviews see Balog 2009, Sundström 2011), which have different implications for how to conceive phenomenal beliefs. Such accounts have to answer various questions: what, for example, is the precise relation of the phenomenal concept to its referent? And does a thought with a content which includes a phenomenal concept necessarily involve the relevant experience, as is suggested by quotational accounts of phenomenal concepts (Papineau 1993, chap. 4; 2002, chap. 4; 2007; Balog 1999, Melnyk 2002), or is the connection to the experience better conceived in dispositional terms? In this paper, I have to leave these and other related question unanswered.

formulating the so-called knowledge argument. In the thought experiment, the scientist Mary knows all physical facts about colours and colour perception. But she has spent her whole life trapped in a black-and-white room and thus has never seen any colours (Jackson 1982). Jackson claims that Mary learns something when she leaves her room and perceives red for the first time, namely what it is like to see red. Since she knows all physical facts, the argument goes, Mary learns a non-physical fact about colours or colour perception. Thus, there are non-physical facts.

As mentioned in previous section, the metaphysical dimensions of the thought experiment are not central for the aim of this paper. It is, however, important to draw attention to one feature of the thought experiment and its discussion: Jackson's example of a conscious state, and many other examples we find in the literature on the knowledge argument, are of colour perceptions, as well as some other sensual experiences or states of pain.

These examples are of conscious states which can be distinguished by their phenomenal character. For the purposes of this paper, I assume that there are psychological states with a unique phenomenal character, such as colour perceptions or other perceptual states. Their character has no further phenomenal components or they are "undifferentiated wholes" (Kind 2020, 144). For this reason, I call these states "atomic conscious states." I assume that not only colour perceptions, but also many affective states, are atomic states in this sense. In Jackson's thought experiment, the scientist Mary gains knowledge of such an atomic state. In terms of phenomenal concepts, Mary gains – in addition to the physical concept "red," which she already possessed – the phenomenal concept "red."

Most of the time, we are not only in one single atomic conscious state. For example, we do not only perceive the colour red, but perceive several objects with shapes and different colours. Beside this visual experience, one could have other sensual experiences, such as hearing a song from the radio and smelling the flowers in the vase on the desk. And besides these sensual experiences, a person can have occurrent beliefs and desires, all more or less at the same time. That means that people often—or even normally—are in a conscious state that is multi-layered.<sup>3</sup> In the following I will refer to this conscious total temporary state by means of the term "complex conscious state."

## 5. Concurrent Emotions

The aim of this section is to see how emotions fit into this picture drawn in terms of a distinction between atomic and conscious states.

Prima facie, it is an open question whether emotions are atomic states in the sense mentioned above at all. Different theories of the emotions answer the question about the ontological nature of the emotions differently. So-called belief-desire theories of the emotions (Green 1992) suggest that emotions are not mental states *sui generis*, but have to be analysed in terms of beliefs and desires (see also Marks 1982, Searle 1983). In contrast, more recent theories of the emotions claim that emotions are mental states *sui generis* (see for example Roberts 2003, Prinz 2004, Döring 2007, Tappolet 2016). If the assumption of these theories—that emotions are mental states *sui generis*—is true, emotions are atomic conscious states. For the sake of simplicity, I will work with this assumption in the following.

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<sup>3</sup> Grice uses "the same total temporary state" or "t.t.s." to refer to the simultaneous state of a person at a given time (Grice 1941, 88).



We usually experience an emotion whilst playing host to other mental states, for example beliefs and desires, which can intensify or attenuate the phenomenal character of that emotion. If I am afraid of a dog in front of me, the belief that it is leashed can attenuate the phenomenal quality of my fear, and the observation that it is suddenly free can have the opposite result. The phenomenal quality of the happiness a child feels on the last day before the summer holidays can be intensified because she hears that the weather will be sunny for the next couple of weeks, or attenuated if the opposite is the case.

It is important to acknowledge that emotions occur in conjunction with other emotions, too. We often find this described in literature. Here is an example taken from the novel *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides, where the protagonist's grandmother finds her husband (who is also her brother) dead on the kitchen floor:

Desdemona had found Lefty on our kitchen floor, lying next to his overturned coffee cup. She knelt beside him and pressed an ear to his chest. When she heard no heartbeat, she cried out his name. Her wail echoed off the kitchen's hard surface: the toaster, the oven, the refrigerator. Finally she collapsed on his chest. In the silence that followed, however, Desdemona felt a strange emotion rising inside her. It spread in the space between her panic and grief. It was like a gas inflating her. Soon her eyes snapped open as she recognized the emotion: it was happiness. Tears were running down her face, she was already berating God for taking her husband from her, but on the other side of these proper emotions was an altogether improper relief. The worst had happened. This was it; the worst thing. For the first time in her life my grandmother had nothing to worry about. (Eugenides 2002, 244–45)

Eugenides describes the mental state of Desdemona in this terrible situation with great richness. In my terminology, Desdemona's complex state has several emotional states as components: panic, grief, happiness, and relief. The appearance of happiness is described in a remarkable way: Desdemona feels an additional emotion beside panic and grief, but it takes her a while to recognise which emotion this is. Although it is not mentioned in Eugenides' description, readers could assume that surprise could be another emotion Desdemona feels when she realises that there is a positive emotion among the negative ones.

Bayne and Chalmers claim that if a person is in more than one conscious state simultaneously, there is something it is like (Bayne and Chalmers 2003) for the person to be in these states simultaneously. The phenomenal quality of the experience of two or more concurrent conscious states is different from the phenomenal quality of each state individually. It seems hard to deny that the experience of being, for example, tired and hungry, is different from being tired and in pain. We can assume that we cannot only have phenomenal concepts of atomic conscious states, but also of complex conscious states.

The claim that there is something it is like to be in a complex conscious state leaves the question open of how the phenomenal character of this complex state is constituted. We could think of the phenomenal character of the components as simply added to each other in line with a building block model. According to this model, the phenomenal character of the complex state would be merely the sum of its components.

However, I think this view is oversimplified. Concurrent mental states can plausibly reciprocally influence each other's phenomenal character, for example in their intensity. Some conscious states may be foregrounded, others more in the background. This structural feature will have an influence on the overall experienced state. Therefore, the composition of the components is, or at least can be, more than the sum of its components.

Desdemona's complex state in this situation has, then, several emotional states as components. The phenomenal character of her complex state must be intense and characterised by the fact that her concurrent emotions mix opposed hedonic tone and valence: panic and grief are emotions with negative or unpleasant hedonic tone, in contrast to happiness and relief, which are both positive or pleasant.

We can think of other examples of concurrent emotions which pull in different directions and display mixed valences: we can pity someone who had a minor accident, whilst simultaneously feeling amused by the slapstick of the event; we can feel bored in a waiting room and at the same time angry because we have to wait; we can be afraid of a scary looking dog, but also feel pity for the animal because we can see that it has to live under terrible conditions<sup>4</sup>.

Simultaneously experienced atomic states can mutually influence their phenomenal character. This can be observed, for example, in colour perception: one colour can take on different appearances when it is surrounded by different colours. A similar phenomenon occurs when we ordinarily perceive a square as white, but when it is surrounded by black squares it appears grey to us. Similar changes happen in experiences of other sensual states, such as taste and smell.

I assume that concurrent affective states can also influence the phenomenal character of an emotion. In the same way that a colour appears to have a different tone when perceived in differently coloured surroundings, the phenomenal character of an affective state can change. There can be an influence on the affective state's intensity, but also on its hedonic or otherwise felt tone. Anger, for example, can be experienced as less sharp when one is at the same time slightly amused<sup>5</sup>.

There are phenomena which we experience as a whole, but which seem to be partly constituted by concurrent emotions, as in the case of nostalgia. Jesse J. Prinz (2004) explains nostalgia's bittersweet character through the simultaneous experience of happiness and sadness.

Moreover, there is most likely a difference in your overall complex experience if you are, in the one case, besides other non-affective states simply relieved about something or, in another, both relieved and worried about something else.

As we have seen that concurrent emotions can mutually influence and determine the phenomenal character of a complex conscious state of a person, we have arrived at a stage where we can discuss the influence of concurrent emotions on our ability to gain phenomenal knowledge of another person's state by means of affective empathy.

## 6. Affective Empathy and the Affective Matching Condition

So far we have taken note of the prominent idea that affective empathy is a source of phenomenal knowledge of a target person's mental, and in particular emotional, state. We have specified that a subject can acquire a phenomenal concept by means of experiencing a corresponding conscious mental state. In practice, people only gain phenomenal concepts of conscious states by means of experiencing them. Hence, we have only

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview in psychological literature on mixed emotions see Larson 2017.

<sup>5</sup> For more examples and empirical data see, for example, Heavey et al. 2017, Roseman 2017.



phenomenal concepts of states we have experienced and no phenomenal concepts of states we have so far not experienced.

Since it is highly unlikely that any empathiser has been in the same complex conscious state as her target—including all its conscious components, such as concurrent emotions, desires, beliefs and sensual states—we can now see the supposed role of affective empathy more clearly: if an empathiser simulates the target's complex state correctly, she can then acquire the phenomenal concept of the complex state. In a second step, she could entertain a thought about the target's complex state by deploying the correct phenomenal concept. This shows why the empathiser needs to simulate the target's exact experience. It is only then that the empathiser can gain the correct phenomenal concept and, as a result, can form true phenomenal beliefs about the target's state.

Some authors argue that affective congruence between the target's emotion and the empathic emotion is sufficient for successful empathy. This means that there need only be a qualitative similarity between the target's affect state and the empathiser's state. If, for example, the target person is in an emotional state with a positive hedonic tone and valence, the empathic emotion needs to be of a positive hedonic tone and valence as well (Hoffmann 2000). Others argue for a stronger condition. According to the quotation from Maibom presented in the previous section, affective empathy is successful only if the empathiser feels the same emotion as the target person (Maibom 2017, 22). Amy Coplan argues similarly, but distinguishes between emotion type and the intensity of the experiential character of the emotion (Coplan 2011, 6).

It is important to note that such conditions concern the question of whether a mental process counts as (successful) empathy. The condition of affective congruence, for example, would not guarantee that empathiser and target feel the same. Hence, empathy with affective congruence would (typically) not be a source of phenomenal knowledge about the target person's state. For this reason, conditions for successful empathy have to be distinguished from a condition which guarantees that the mental mechanism named is a source of phenomenal knowledge of the target's state.<sup>6</sup>

In order to know how another person feels, we need to have phenomenal knowledge of the phenomenal character of her state. If successfully empathising is a way of experiencing the same emotional state as that of a target person, there has to be an identity of phenomenal character between the two. Type identity between the empathic emotional state and the target's state is not sufficient for such phenomenal character identity. For this reason, Coplan's affective matching condition is still too weak for empathy to be a source of phenomenal knowledge of the target's state. Consider the following example:

Stacie feels deep sadness (because a close relative died). Robert tries to empathise with her. He tries to simulate Stacie's mental state. The affective state he experiences during the simulation process is sadness, but only a mild feeling of sadness (like the sadness he experienced when he finished a book he enjoyed a lot).

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<sup>6</sup> Simulation is an imaginative process and thus faces a general problem with imagination as a source of knowledge: it might be that an imaginer forms beliefs as result of her imagination or simulation. It is, however, far from clear whether imagination or simulation is, or can be, a context of justification. In other words, if an empathiser simulates the target's state, it can of course happen that this simulation mirrors exactly the target's state. It is however unclear how the empathiser, on the basis of a mental simulation process, might be justified in believing that the simulated state is type-identical with the target's state. In general, in debates about empathy philosophers tend to assume that it is possible to gain knowledge by means of empathising with a target person. Here I will ignore the problem of justification and discuss only the question of whether empathy is a source of true phenomenal beliefs.

As we can now see, affective empathy comes in degrees. Robert's empathic state is phenomenally not exactly like Stacie's emotional state, but it might be closer than the empathic state of an empathiser who simulates an even milder state of sadness.

In the example, the condition of affective matching is met, because the difference between Stacie's state of sadness and Robert's empathic state is only a matter of degree. However, intuitively we doubt that Robert really knows what it is like for Stacie to feel her grief on the basis of his empathic engagement. Because Robert and Stacie's states differ phenomenologically in this example, Robert does not gain phenomenal knowledge of Stacie's state by means of experiencing his empathic emotion.<sup>7</sup>

## 7. Affective Empathy and Phenomenal Knowledge of Concurrent Emotions

Concurrent emotions are problematic for the optimistic view according to which we can learn what it is like to be in a target's state. An empathiser can try to gain knowledge of only one of the target's atomic states, or of the target's complex state. In the following, I argue that both enterprises face problems which result from concurrent emotions and the fact that they mutually influence each other's phenomenal character.

First, if it is correct that concurrent emotions mutually influence one another's phenomenal character, it is at least extremely likely that the phenomenal qualities of two people's type- and even content-identical emotional states will differ because of their different concurrent emotional states. Thus, an empathiser who simulates only one of the target's atomic (emotional) states is unlikely to acquire phenomenal knowledge of this atomic state, because of the possibility that the empathic emotion will have a different phenomenal character from the target's emotion. Hence, it is at the very least highly improbable that the simulated atomic emotional state of one person can be a source of phenomenal knowledge of the other person's atomic emotional state.

Second, for interpersonal understanding, it seems that, *ceteris paribus*, phenomenal knowledge of a complex conscious state is epistemically more relevant than phenomenal knowledge of a state which is only a part or constituent of this overall state. If a target person feels simultaneously sad and relieved, then phenomenal knowledge of the experience of simultaneously felt sadness and relief is epistemically better than phenomenal knowledge of either individual experience. Even if an empathiser who simulates each emotional state separately can have phenomenal knowledge of both token experiences, this empathiser would not necessarily have phenomenal knowledge of the state of a target who is simultaneously in both states, as the phenomenal character of the complex conscious state is more than its experiential parts.

Third, a simulation of a target person's complex conscious state is obviously more demanding than a simulation of an atomic affective state. I don't think that there are metaphysical reasons why a skilled empathiser could not simulate a target's complex state. However, the chances of achieving an exact simulation of the target's complex state with all its conscious components are extremely low. As a result, the simulated state will have fewer or different components than the target's complex state. Because the phenomenal character is a composition of its conscious components, it is then very likely that the phenomenal character of the empathiser's simulated state will differ from the phenomenal character of the target's complex

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<sup>7</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I ignore questions concerning sufficient conditions for gaining phenomenal knowledge of a target's mental state.

state. Hence, it is highly improbable that empathisers gain phenomenal knowledge of the target person's complex state.

There is a further problem: if simultaneous conscious states have an influence on each other's phenomenal character, as I have assumed, then the empathiser's awareness that she is simulating another person's state will also have an influence on her overall state as well. If this assumption is true, the phenomenal character of simulated complex states is also influenced by the empathiser's awareness that she is simulating. The phenomenal character of the empathiser's state in all cases involving awareness of the simulation is then phenomenally different from the target's state. It is also quite plausible to assume that the empathiser's awareness that she is simulating has an influence on the phenomenal character of each of the complex state's components. If this is true, even the simulation of an atomic state is phenomenally different to the target's atomic state. Thus, the simulation of either an atomic state or a complex state is not a source of phenomenal knowledge of the target's atomic or complex state.

## **8. Approaching Phenomenal Understanding: Propositional Knowledge and Explanatory Understanding**

The empathy sceptic's claim that the epistemic goal of affective empathy is difficult, and sometimes even impossible to attain, is supported by the problem of concurrent emotions: if it is indeed massively unlikely that we can have phenomenal knowledge of another person's complex conscious state, this raises the question of whether phenomenal knowledge can play a decisive role, or indeed any role at all, in interpersonal understanding. It also raises the question of whether affective empathy is epistemically relevant.

An account of interpersonal understanding that answers these questions affirmatively has two options. One involves rethinking the standards of phenomenal knowledge. I have been assuming that we gain phenomenal knowledge of some mental state only by experiencing exactly this state. One could challenge this claim on the basis of the intuition that it seems implausible that a person who has experienced fear is likely to have no phenomenal knowledge at all of another's fear, merely because the two states are likely to have at least minimally differing phenomenal characters.

In this paper I will, however, adopt a different strategy: I will uphold the demanding standards I have set for phenomenal knowledge. For this reason I accept the sceptic's premise that affective empathy is indeed very often not a source of phenomenal knowledge. In contrast to the empathy sceptic, I will, however, claim that the epistemic goal of affective empathy is not phenomenal knowledge, but understanding. The idea is that phenomenal beliefs can have epistemic value even where they don't count as knowledge. This claim is grounded in a distinction between understanding and knowledge. In particular, it draws on arguments according to which (explanatory) understanding, in contrast to propositional knowledge, is not factive. The aim of the following section is to argue, in line with this non-factivist account of understanding, that there can be epistemic progress based on false phenomenal beliefs when these beliefs are relevantly close to a true belief. I call this epistemic progress "phenomenal understanding," and in the following take first steps toward an account of this variant of epistemic progress.

There have been intense philosophical debates on the relation between understanding and knowledge, debates which typically focus on explanatory understanding and propositional knowledge. While some authors argue

that understanding is a kind of knowledge (Kitcher 2002, Lipton 2004, Grimm 2006; 2012, and Khalifa 2012), others argue for the opposite claim (Zagzebski 2001, Kvanvig 2003, Pritchard 2009; 2010, Elgin 2004; 2017, Hills 2016). In these debates, understanding is typically compared with what can be taken to be the standard conception of propositional knowledge, according to which knowledge is (1) factive, (2) inconsistent with different types of luck, (3) cannot be formed on the basis of defeated evidence, and (4) can be passed on via testimony (see e.g. Hills 2016, 662).

Philosophers who argue that understanding is to be distinguished from knowledge do so on different grounds. In the following, I will focus on the fact that understanding, unlike knowledge, comes in degrees: that we can understand something better or worse, in more or less detail. This fact is arguably explained by two further features of understanding.

Firstly, many philosophers argue that understanding requires what Alison Hills calls cognitive control relative to the relevant set of beliefs about the object of understanding, i.e., that an understander possesses a set of cognitive abilities, such as drawing conclusions and giving or following explanations (Hills 2016). Degrees of understanding can be explained with reference to these abilities. That someone understands something better can mean that she is better in exercising one of the relevant cognitive abilities.

A second explanation of understanding's gradability refers to its belief component. Non-factivists claim that one's set of beliefs about the object of understanding do not need to be true in order to contribute to, or constitute, understanding. This is because the acquisition of false beliefs, they claim, can constitute cognitive progress. Elgin (2007) compares the cognitive status (1) of a person who believes that humans descended from great apes with (2) another person who believes that humans descended from butterflies, and (3) a person who believes that humans and great apes have a common ancestor who was, strictly speaking, not an ape. According to the state of the art, only the latter person has a true belief. However, Elgin argues that we should, and indeed do, distinguish the cognitive status of the first and the second person. The first person's belief is closer to the truth, and it would be fairly strange to say that this person does not understand anything about evolution at all. Hence, we should not only divide beliefs according to their truth and falsity, but also consider that a false belief can be closer or further away from the truth. If we accept that understanding can, and—according to Elgin—often does, involve false beliefs, degrees of understanding can be explained with reference to the degree of falsehood of its belief component. *Ceteris paribus*, an understander with a belief that is closer to the truth of a matter understands the matter better than an understander with a belief that is further away from the truth.

False beliefs not only play a role in individual understanding, but also in the sciences. In science, it is very likely that many of the current best theories will turn out to be false, even if the pessimistic view on scientific progress—according to which all of the current best theories may themselves be false—should be rejected. It is, however, consensus that some cognitive progress is being made in the sciences. By accepting that there can be cognitive progress on the basis of false beliefs, the non-factivity account of understanding allows that the sciences are able to attain a significant degree of understanding of their objects, and hence enables us to explain why talk of scientific progress is indeed correct (Elgin 2007; De Regt 2015).

Now, if understanding can be based on false beliefs, there is a certain danger that understanding will turn out to be a second-class cognitive state in comparison to knowledge. In particular, non-factivists need to explain understanding's epistemic value. This value is plausibly a result of the ability component of understanding:

although understanding is less demanding than knowledge, because the relevant beliefs are not subject to a truth requirement, it is more demanding, because it requires a set of cognitive abilities that operate on the relevant set of beliefs.

## 9. Non-Factivity: Phenomenal Understanding and its Belief Component

Debates on understanding and its relation to knowledge have focussed primarily on understanding why—i.e., explanatory understanding—and propositional knowledge. Clearly, though, if explanatory understanding can indeed be distinguished from propositional knowledge, for instance along the above lines, it certainly does not follow straightforwardly that all types of understanding and knowledge are distinct cognitive states. Hence, we need to have a closer look at the relation between phenomenal knowledge and what I am calling phenomenal understanding.

In analogy to explanatory understanding, I assume that phenomenal understanding has both a belief and an ability component. I will argue that phenomenal knowledge and phenomenal understanding are indeed distinguished by the latter's gradability, which, as in the case of explanatory understanding, results in turn from divergences relating both to the abilities involved and to the question of the states' factivity.

To begin with, it seems obvious that, like affective empathy, understanding another person comes in degrees, i.e., we can understand another person better or worse. Plausibly, this is not only true for explanatory understanding of another person; it is also true for interpersonal phenomenal understanding: it seems that even a false phenomenal belief can constitute cognitive progress, if it is close enough to a true phenomenal belief about the target's mental state. The basic idea is that an empathiser with a phenomenal belief about the target's state, which is relevantly close to a true phenomenal belief, understands the target, *ceteris paribus*, better than an understander with a non-phenomenal belief about the target's state. Take Peter Goldie's Irene, the icy-cold scientist, again. If we take the results of the discussion in section 7 of this paper into account, we have to assume that Irene is likely to form a false phenomenal belief about a target person's state. Nevertheless, she is in a better epistemic position to understand a target person who is afraid than she was before she had her first experience of fear.

Clearly, not every phenomenal belief about the target's state can bring epistemic progress. Think of the following (silly but coherent) comparison: understander A has only a non-phenomenal belief about the target's state. He recognises that the target is scared to death. The empathiser B has a phenomenal belief about the target's state. She also recognises that the target is scared to death and "connects" her phenomenal concept of joy. Obviously, understander B has a phenomenal belief about the target's state, and obviously it is a false phenomenal belief. With this false phenomenal belief, she is certainly not in an epistemically better position than understander A. There can be only epistemic progress on the basis of a false phenomenal belief if this belief is in a relevant sense close to a true phenomenal belief. What it means that a false phenomenal belief is in a relevant sense close to a true belief needs to be spelled out in more detail.

We gain phenomenal concepts by experiencing mental states with specific phenomenal qualities. Phenomenal qualities, or the phenomenal character of a state, can be more or less like the phenomenal qualities or character of another state. We can then assume, in an initial approximation, that the closer the phenomenal character

of the empathiser's state is to that of the target's state, the closer the empathiser's phenomenal concept is to the target's state. Hence, the empathiser's phenomenal belief about the target's state with the respective phenomenal concept is *ceteris paribus* closer to a true phenomenal belief about the target's state the more the understander's experience is (or was) phenomenally like the target's experience.

When concurrent states colour the phenomenal character of an emotional state, this introduces further parameters whose calibration could bring the phenomenal character of an atomic state closer to that of the target's: both the number of accompanying states and the proximity of each of their phenomenal qualities to the corresponding state of the target person will be relevant to the question of how close the empathic state is to the target's state. An empathiser who can simulate a significant number of the components of the target's complex state in a way that approximates each of their phenomenal characters will be able to form phenomenal beliefs which are relevantly close to true phenomenal beliefs. They will be in an epistemically better position than another person without such phenomenal beliefs.

## 10. Phenomenal Understanding and its Ability Components

In the previous section, I mentioned that differences in, or degrees of, explanatory understanding may derive from understanding's ability component. According to Hills, in order to understand a subject matter, an understander not only needs to have knowledge of it, but also needs what she calls "cognitive control." This means that the understander needs to have a set of cognitive skills or abilities which enable her to grasp the explanatory relationships between the propositions that she knows about the subject matter (Hills 2016). She presents a list of these cognitive skills intrinsic to explanatory understanding. On this list are abilities such as being able to follow and give an explanation, drawing conclusions, and so on.

Understanding's gradability derives, then, from the fact that an understander can be better or worse in exercising these cognitive abilities. In analogy to explanatory understanding, phenomenal understanding has components of cognitive skills as well. It is certainly debatable whether all items on the list are necessary, or whether some are too challenging. Hence, for an account of phenomenal understanding of another person, it might turn out that we don't need all of these skills for sufficient understanding. I assume, however, that at least some of the mentioned skills are also necessary for phenomenal understanding.<sup>8</sup>

For successful phenomenal understanding, the understander has to understand why the target person feels the way she feels. Here we can see clearly why phenomenal understanding is in this respect more demanding than mere phenomenal knowledge of another person's state, because phenomenal knowledge does not require cognitive control.

In order to phenomenally understand a target, the empathiser has a phenomenal belief about the target state *and* can, for example, explain why the target is in her state. In order to give such an explanation, the

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8 Nick Wiltsher presents an account of what he calls "understanding what it is like to be (dis)privileged" (Wiltsher 2021). He develops an account of understanding of what it is like to be (dis)privileged and argues that the phenomenal knowledge of the experiences of (dis)privilege have to be accompanied by the cognitive skills we listed from Hills. He reformulates the list of skills in order to explain how a disprivileged person's experience is explained by social structures of disprivilege (Wiltsher 2021, 336–337). It is important, however, to note, that Wiltsher holds an optimistic view of empathy as a source of phenomenal knowledge (Wiltsher 2021, 323). His account of understanding-what-it-is-like is accordingly a factivist account of understanding. In the following, I will generalize Wiltsher's idea and apply it to interpersonal understanding in general in a non-factivist way.



empathiser needs further information about the target and her situation. Moreover, the empathiser needs at least basic folk psychological knowledge and needs to relate this knowledge to their phenomenal beliefs about the target's state.

Think again of the example taken from the novel *Middlesex*. An empathiser who wants to phenomenally understand Desdemona and her mixed emotions when she sees her husband lying dead on the kitchen floor gains phenomenal beliefs about Desdemona's state by means of affective empathy. From the description of the scene, and given some basic folk psychological knowledge, it is relatively easy to see why Desdemona experiences panic and grief in this moment. It is, however, difficult to understand why she feels happiness and relief. Further knowledge about her personality and her past can help. The author tells us that the death of her husband is the worst thing that could have happened to her, and that she was in deep worry that this could happen all through her adult life. With this additional information about Desdemona, we can understand her reactions: when she realises that this worst thing has now happened, she feels relief, because she believes that there is nothing to worry about in her life any more. However, the simulation process which takes place in affective empathy is not the source of knowledge or beliefs about these relevant additional facts of the target's situation or her biography. Thus, phenomenal understanding of another person cannot rely on affective empathy alone.

## 11. Conclusion

In this article I identified concurrent emotions as the main problem for the thesis that affective empathy can be a source of phenomenal knowledge of a target person's state. In the philosophical debate about empathy, the target person is often considered to be only in a single emotional state. I argued that this is a simplification, because we are often in a state of concurrent emotions. I distinguished atomic conscious states and complex conscious states, and assumed that emotions are atomic states in the explicated sense. One problem arises from the assumption that concurrent emotions have a mutual influence on their phenomenal character. An empathiser who simulates a single emotion without a view to its further attitudinal environment, when the target is in a state of concurrent emotions, will simulate a state with a different phenomenal character than the target's atomic emotional state. Further, I assumed that the set of conscious states we are in at a time has a phenomenal character, too. Phenomenal knowledge of the character of this complex state is of greater epistemic value in an attempt to understand another person than phenomenal knowledge of only a component of a complex state. It is because of the complexity that it is difficult, perhaps in many cases practically impossible, to simulate a target person's complex conscious state with the exact phenomenal character of the target's complex state. For this reason, affective empathy is, at least in many cases, not a source of phenomenal knowledge of the target's complex state either. I specified phenomenal knowledge as involving a propositionally structured true belief, where the propositional content contains a phenomenal concept. I argued that empathisers can gain phenomenal beliefs by empathising with a target. When these phenomenal beliefs are close enough to true beliefs, there can be cognitive progress. Finally, I claimed that false phenomenal beliefs can enhance one's understanding of the target person, if this belief is relevantly close to a true belief. Hence, phenomenal understanding is, in contrast to phenomenal knowledge, not factive. If, as I assume, phenomenal, like explanatory, understanding also has an ability component, an understander's capacity to explain why the target is in her atomic or complex conscious state is a candidate for such a component. Further research needs to examine which abilities are involved in interpersonal phenomenal understanding and how exactly they contribute to its particular depth.

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