

Imagining the Lives of Others

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What could be more exhilarating than experiencing the world through the perspective of another person? In “Remembrance of Things Past,” Marcel Proust’s narrator says that the only true voyage of discovery is not to visit other lands but “to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds.” This is one of the central projects of the humanities; it’s certainly part of the pleasure we get from art and literature.

Many believe that this psychological connection is also essential for political change. They may argue, for instance, that in order for white Americans to adequately respond to the events in Baltimore, Ferguson, Mo., and elsewhere, they need to put themselves in the shoes of those in minority communities. After the death of Eric Garner at the hands of New York City police officers, Hillary Rodham Clinton called for changing police tactics, and then added: “The most important thing each of us can do is to try even harder to see the world through our neighbors’ eyes, to imagine what it is like to walk in their shoes, to share their pain and their hopes and their dreams.”

This is a moral claim, but it raises a psychological question. Can we do what Mrs. Clinton asks of us? Just how successful are we at seeing the world as others see it?

Apparently, we are nowhere near as good as we think we are. In his book “Mindwise,” the psychologist Nicholas Epley discusses experiments in which people were asked to judge the thoughts of strangers. These included asking speed daters to identify others who wanted to date them, asking job candidates how impressed their interviewers were with them and asking a range of people whether or not someone was lying to them.

People are often highly confident in their ability to see things as others do, but their attempts are typically barely better than chance. Other studies find that people who are instructed to take the perspectives of others tend to do worse, not better, at judging their thoughts and emotions.

So we are often bad at the project Clinton recommends. But a fan of perspective-taking would say that we just have to get better at it; we should try harder.

There are certain limits, however, to how far we can go. The philosopher Laurie Paul, in her book “Transformative Experience,” argues that it’s impossible to actually imagine what it would be like to have certain deeply significant experiences, such as becoming a parent, changing your religion or fighting a war. The same lack of access applies to our understanding of others. If I can’t know what it would be like for me to fight in a war, how can I expect to understand what it was like for someone else to have fought in a war? If I can’t understand what it would be like to become poor, how can I know what it’s like for someone else to be poor?

One approach is to go ahead and actually have the experience. Some have chronicled their attempts to take on other identities, like Norah Vincent in her 2006 book “Self-Made Man,” a memoir of a woman posing as a man, or John Howard Griffin in “Black Like Me,” which recounts his experience living disguised as a black man.

These acts of immersion are fascinating, but they have their limits. In the aftermath of torture revelations during the Iraq war, some journalists, like Christopher Hitchens, decided to get themselves waterboarded so that they would know what it was like. I don’t doubt that they learned something from the experience, but what they didn’t experience — what they *couldn’t* experience — was the lack of control. Surely part of the terror of waterboarding is that it is done to you when you don’t want it and you have no way to make it stop.

This point was missed by Donald H. Rumsfeld, who, when told that prisoners had to stand for many hours a day, responded that he himself had a standing desk and was also standing for many hours a day. But of course he could sit down whenever he wanted.

There is also the issue of duration. I can imagine what it’s like to deal with a crying baby for a few minutes, or spend time by myself in a small room, or have a stranger recognize me on the street. But it’s much harder to imagine — impossible, I think — what it would be like to be a single parent, suffer a year of solitary confinement or become a famous movie star.

These failures should motivate a certain humility when it comes to dealing with the lives of others. Instead of assuming that we can know what it is like to be them, we should focus more on listening to what they have to say. This isn’t perfect — people sometimes lie, or are confused,

precariously between gift and invasion.”

Also, Mrs. Clinton might be mistaken in her claims about the moral importance of perspective-taking. Scholars ranging from Adam Smith to the contemporary literary critic Elaine Scarry have pointed out that when we try to act morally toward strangers based on empathic projection, we typically fail. This is in part because we’re not good at it, and in part because, when we allow ourselves to be guided by our feelings, our emotional investment in ourselves and those we love is overwhelming relative to our weak attachment to strangers. We become better people and better policy makers if we rely instead on more abstract principles of justice and fairness, along with a more diffuse compassion.

None of this is to say that the project of experiencing the lives of others should be abandoned. Under the right circumstances, we might have some limited success — I’d like to believe that novels and memoirs have given me some appreciation of what it’s like to be an autistic teenager, a geisha or a black boy growing up in the South. And even if they haven’t, most of us are still intensely curious about the lives of other people, and find the act of trying to simulate these lives to be an engaging and transformative endeavor. We’re not going to stop.

But we’re not good at it, particularly when the stakes are high, and empathic engagement is far too fragile a foundation to ground public policy. To make the world better, we shouldn’t try to put ourselves in the shoes of Eric Garner or anyone else. Our efforts should instead be put toward cultivating the ability to step back and apply an objective and fair morality.

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