

## Chapter 1

### Experience and Inquiry

#### Introduction

The tone of this chapter sets the context of the whole book. It begins with an analysis of why understanding other experiences is an important part of inquiry. It suggests that understanding other experiences is a hallmark of maturity. It argues that such understanding is not subjective but objective. Finally, the chapter suggests that an objective understanding of others' experience is the basic building block for the philosophical inquirer. This theme is therefore consistent with classical pragmatism and the active sense of experience as part of inquiry. The chapter then seeks to lay out part of what the discipline of inquiry is, and how it need not be a passive philosophical tool, but, rather, a lifelong challenge in all spheres of life.

Consider these points further. We live in an age that has highlighted the experiences of those living in other cultures. Airplane travel allows cultures to collide; television brings strange and alien imagery. Yet our temperament has tended to reduce experience out of the picture of knowledge (chapter 4). We so easily become entrenched in our own perspectives on the world that we exclude those of others. This occurs despite the fact that our media bombards us with different experiences daily. But our attitude is passive. This is because inquiry is not at the heart of the appreciation of other experiences.

Inquiry into the experience of others provide both the context and the content for moving beyond our own often

narrow views of the world. And it may also be the case that our humanity is deeply connected to the consideration of experiences other than our own. Considering other experiences is how we move ahead; it is how we grow as we mature. Imagining other experiences is not only important for individual growth, but perhaps has broader implications for social policy. For example, imagining the life of a street person may be important in creating societal awareness on a broad scale for a more humane and hopefully effective social policy.

It is to some extent part of our psychobiological and cultural makeup to consider other experiences, and it is one of the fundamental ways in which we learn about the world (chapter 5). By placing inquiry into experience as something objective and part of the datum of knowledge, we enlarge our "universe of discourse." It also places the self-corrective method of inquiry and fallibilism as part of how to understand how we come to know one another and other animals. Thus it must be the case that our advances in knowledge are never to impoverish, and by cultivating inquiry into experience we expand our views on the world. But again, this practice is not one of being passive. Generating hypotheses, in the act of considering the experiences of others, is an active event.

I speak from the point of view of a practicing neural scientist and a pragmatist; classical pragmatism is an attempt to come to terms with our experiences: to make sense of them. Science, I believe, needs no defense. But when it is used to compromise our sense of matters of importance it is likely to be dangerous. Scientism is bad science, and is one consequence of trying to reduce experience from the purview of that which can be known. Our knowledge of how the brain works is not going to eliminate what we want to know about the experiences of other people, or animals (see chapter 9).

What we need is a large view of inquiry and of what counts as a testable hypothesis. This was the vision of the American pragmatists. We need to understand the experiences of those of other cultures, minority groups within our culture, and the great diversity of animal life. When experience is reduced to sensations or judgments as some philosophers have thought, or to behavior or neurons as others have thought,

the consequence is misguided; the rich sense of the experience is omitted.

Appreciating the experiences of others is the major tenet of this chapter. We need to enlarge the notion of inquiry, objectivity and truth. The chapter begins with why experience is not captured by definitions, is not the same thing as the qualities that inhere in it, nor the judgments that one makes. Experience is also not identified with consciousness. Later chapters (e.g., chapter 9) address why mental events are not the same as what goes on in the brain.

### **Capturing Experience**

There have been attempts to define experience in this century, but no one definition prevails. The experience of love differs from the experience of pain. No informative definition captures them both. A dog who has not been fed for a day experiences hunger, as would a human being. When rats or people taste table salt, they experience a salty taste. What common method or definition of experience captures the experience of hunger or of a salty taste? None, I submit. One point is that inquiry into experience need not employ one simple methodology or be circumscribed by one definition.

There is a history of thinking that experience is exclusively involved with sensory impressions (its qualitative intensity).<sup>1</sup> But experience is not simply a matter of sensory impressions. Consider this: An individual visits a cathedral that was bombed during World War II in England. What stands of the old cathedral is used as background for an outdoor theater. To the rear of the theater stands a new church that was built with the help of both the Germans and British. Inside, there is a sign that says that the church is open twenty-four hours a day, and there are also photographs of the holocaust destruction as well as the American bombing of Dresden. Part of the individual's experience is to acknowledge the destruction as well as the hope of this century. People destroy and yet rebuild together. Hope is the mortar of the new structure. This experience is not reducible to sensory

impressions. No doubt there is a quality (or qualities) to the experience that should not be confused with the experience.

Another common mistake in interpreting "experience" is equating experience with an analysis of judgments.<sup>2</sup> The logic of this position is that our judgments are shared, not private. We can only know shared meanings of a community with its use of language.<sup>3</sup> We can know something about the way of life and how to communicate with others. But the judgments about what to do can be made by machines that do not experience, such as computers that make judgments daily. Experience is greater than the shared judgments that one makes.

Historically, behavioristic theorizing has dominated American academic psychology and philosophy. It no longer does, because in explaining behavior one is forced to attribute mental events as part of the explanation.<sup>4</sup> That is, it has become clear that it is enormously helpful to attribute beliefs, desires, and intelligence to intentional systems, as exemplified in chess playing computers, rats, or persons. In modern philosophical vernacular, the mentalistic attribution is an epistemological axiom. That is, we invoke beliefs and desires since we cannot predict or explain behavior without them. But there is no further inquiry into whether the creature (or machine) who believes and desires also experiences. The attribution of beliefs and desires to creatures like bats, apes, or persons can be independent of talk of experience. But there is, however, an *experience* of really *wanting*, *believing*, or *desiring*. Computers do not have that competence yet: that is why we do not care about them if we kick them, but do care if we kick a dog.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps, the experience of intentionality can be found in directed bodily movements. At times when one intends to perform an action there are directed movements from which one ultimately does or does not receive satisfaction. For example, the Chinese dance Tai-Chi-Chuan has great form and intensity; intentionality pervades it.<sup>6</sup> The actions are performed with great intent. The body, in a well-patterned movement, is geared toward a goal that may terminate in satisfaction. The goal of each movement is explicit while the

body is at peace, and yet attentive. These movements are intentional and the intention is part of the experience.

Attributing desires and beliefs thus is not everything. We also want to inquire further into those creatures that we believe embody those beliefs and desires, not just functionally but experientially. If one believes that there really are experiences and that no future language will replace them without including them, then one is committed to understanding them.

But for many contemporary philosophers and psychologists, the term "mental event" has been disassociated from its traditional use. One speaks in contemporary terms of mental operators in the same way that we would speak of the function of the kidney or the operations of the nephron. We do not think of the kidney as experiencing anything, and the same holds true for the "mental organs". These organs, e.g., the computational procedures involved in judging the trajectories of moving objects, in maintaining perceptual constancies, in generating sentences, or in the learning of skills, are not part of what we experience. Mental events, for the most part, are neither conscious nor experienced in this view.<sup>7</sup>

By contrast, in the more traditional view, mental events are part of experience. How the mind operates is akin to how we sense the world: the way we get around our likes and dislikes, emotions and associations, beliefs and desires. The mental is the essence of the subjective. All mental events are conscious and therefore a part of experience. We have learned that a large part of our mental life is unconscious (chapter 5). The result has been that experience is, or is seen as either less important, uninformative, or simply too difficult to study. And this I believe is a mistake, for as I indicated a large sense of our evolved humanity occurs because we can consider other experiences other than our own.

### **Are Experiential Events Difficult to Confirm?**

Philosophical psychologists, like Fodor, have raised what has been called the "inverted spectrum problem."<sup>8</sup> That is,

one could imagine two people who were alike behaviorally, but when shown an object and asked its color one would have the experience of red, while the other sees green. Nothing in their behavior would indicate any difference in their experiences while looking at the object.

When inquiry into experience is put into these terms, the study of experience may seem somewhat objective. It is true that although two people's behavior may be the same, with the same causal antecedents, the experience may still be quite different.

The inverted spectrum problem, however, is an important and challenging issue in the study of inquiry, but should not undermine investigation. There is indeed uncertainty about whether two people have the same experience. We could be wired in the same way, with the same causal history, and still experience differently. There will always be uncertainty in any form of inquiry. But we do have warranted assertions from convergent tests that lead us to believe the objective hypothesis that we experience many things in a similar vein. Thus we can know, and do know something, about the experience of other people.

We can even know something of the experiences of more primitive animals. So, for example, it is a warranted hypothesis that rats who are salt hungry experience something pleasant when they taste salt. When they are salt hungry, they display the facile profile that they would express as if the salt were sweet. They experience pleasure. This may also be true of people. People report that salty foods taste pleasant when they have been placed on a low sodium diet. By contrast, if they are replete with sodium they show distaste for salt.<sup>9</sup>

It has been argued that we cannot know what it is like to be a bat because the bat's construction of a world and its sensory system and experiences are so drastically different from our own.<sup>10</sup>

“But bat sonar, though clearly a form of perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine.”

“Insofar as we can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells us only what it would be like for us to behave as bats behave. But that is not the question. We want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat. Yet if we try to imagine this, we are restricted to the resources of our own minds, and those resources are inadequate to the task.”

Of course there is a similar, though less compelling, objection with regard to one's knowledge of a fellow human being. One can imitate another's behavior but one is still oneself. To have your experience (so the argument goes) one would have to be you. The experiences could be different even though the behavior is the same—the inverted spectrum dilemma. But pragmatists look for reasonableness and to inquiry.

Consider a possibility: Suppose that it were possible to rig up an apparatus that allowed one to hear sound in much the way that scientists hypothesize that bats detect their prey.<sup>11</sup> One's experience might then be, in part, something like a bat's. The experience of detecting prey and getting around by echolocation would then come to life to some extent. Still, it may be too difficult to simulate. But if we put a person in a situation, a bat-like domain, and he or she is able to detect objects the way we theorize bats do, the latter would constitute some evidence of a bat-like experience—just a bit. Theories about the bat, formed in the context of careful observations and supplemented by insightful experiments, lead to a simulation of the purported world of the bat. Then we check and alter, the same as we might do with an ape, person, or rat, or at whatever point we imagine experience to emerge in phylogeny.

It is indeed farfetched to imagine that one could do everything a bat does. It is much easier to conceive of the experience of the gorilla. We share more of the same biological stuff. Still, while the experiences are not identical, a sense of the bat's world can emerge for the human inquirer. A community can reach agreement and speak coherently and employ criteria. One can inquire into the experience, and it is not foolish to do so. One can be a good inquirer, capture



and imagine quite a bit about other experiences, and test hypotheses. Moreover, the kind of direct demonstration for the bat's experience cannot be provided for humans.

A "fallibilist", or pragmatic inquirer, is one who must face different hypotheses about a problem and choose. The warranted assumption is that there is a correlation between behavior and experience in creatures like ourselves. Although an inquirer might erroneously hypothesize about an experience, it is all done rather easily and can be tested. The question of whether one can capture experience correctly always remains. The skeptic can still object. In recognizing this, one should be humbled. This message is a reminder that the confidence wanted, or the certainty desired, cannot always be acquired—but should not block inquiry.

As I indicated, inquiry into experience, as it is construed here, is not a mere sensation or a judgement. Also, experience is not the same thing as consciousness. One can have the experience of being a Martha Graham dancer without being particularly conscious of it, nor can the reduction of experience to a neural field capture what it is to experience joy. In what sense do endogenous opiates secreted by the brain describe our joys and pains? Moreover, one can know all the causal relations about how one got to where one is without knowing one's experience. This is no substitute, since what one wants is to be understood in terms of the unique first person experience.

One can simply deny that there are experiences, or suggest that the term should be eliminated as frameworks change.<sup>12</sup> One can conceive of experiences as theoretical entities, but then they are a very well-entrenched set of concepts. It is very hard to imagine giving them up the way one would imagine giving up the concept of gravity or some other concept. Gravity is simply more removed than the experience of love. What they are removed from is simply what one experiences. Experiential concepts are deeply entrenched, they are not like ghosts. To deny them would require an unnecessary radical shift in our understanding of things.



## Objectivity and Experience

Hypotheses are objective if they are testable. If warranted, a hypothesis ought to be agreed upon by a community of inquirers, because it puts forth the phenomenon in the best way possible, given the current alternatives (see also chapters 6 and 7). What counts as an objective hypothesis varies with the subject matter. An objective claim sometimes provides a sense of how something works, is organized, is predicted or is experienced. It is something that is always disputable or fallible, that is part of what makes it objective. One doubts a claim when there are particular reasons.

What are the characteristics of a good inquirer? One factor is that ideally, inquirers make themselves vulnerable by challenging the very beliefs they argue for. It is this vulnerability that marks the quest for objectivity more than making a case persuading. Making a case is one thing, being objective about a claim involves more. The vulnerability of objectivity should be voiced loudly. It is all too easy to deny the subjectivity of others. The barbaric tramples here. And we all do it. But nonetheless, objectivity can be reached about experience.

The most general feature of what one does when making an objective claim is giving a plausible story. One states one's beliefs (or those most likely to be challenged) and the reasons for the beliefs, making a case for their viability by persuading an audience of the merits of the claim and subjecting the beliefs to criticism. What is persuasive or warranted varies according to the subject matter. In one case prediction may be the persuasive factor. In another, it may be the perspicacious analysis of a text. In both cases, what makes it objective is that it can be criticized, tested, or challenged in some form. The inquirer makes a case to which the community of inquirers can respond.

But it is possible to predict behavior without referring to experience. But when it comes to humans or other animals one wants knowledge of experience. It is a quest to know what it is like for them to exist. Prediction is not the only measure of truth, or the only measure of understanding. The concept

of understanding is larger than the notion of prediction. Simplicity is not the last word, and science narrowly construed is no Bible.

Now one might ask, "what kind of understanding do I have when I understand the experience of another? How is it different from other kinds of understanding—say of the way a hormone acts on the brain? What do I know when I know what it is like to be another?"

When one knows what it is like to be other people, or animals, one knows the way they experience their pain and sorrows as well as their joys.<sup>13</sup> One knows how they get about, how they respond to different people, what their interests are. One shares biological and cultural frameworks with others.

To understand what it is to be another we need to put ourselves into the other's shoes. This is accomplished by reconstructing the experience of the other. If the other is a scientist, for example, and we are interested in what she is like as an inquirer, we learn about her research—how she thinks and what she finds interesting. We watch her talk and observe the social self she displays to the community. We then rehearse for ourselves what it seems like to be her, and then we look to determine whether it is something similar for her. A case is made. Evidence is offered. Ethologists and anthropologists may do much the same, as do some actors, dancers, friends and therapists. The experience is conveyed, the life of the animal is presented, the internal is appreciated.

There is another issue. Often when we care about other people one of the things that we try to do is get a sense of their experience—not just what they do, but what it is like for them, how it connects up with their life history. Part of our capacity to recognize another as a person requires that we have a sense of her experience. When this is withdrawn, or avoided, so is the elegance and form of being human. In being human or civilized we recognize the experience of others. The view that inquiry should be broadly defined, and experience and its study be made empirical, was suggested by James early on.<sup>14</sup> Given access to the experience of other people makes it easier to love, forgive, care, and also to avoid them. This is not trivial.

## The Commonplace

One often has a sense of the experiences of others. Consider what happens when one reads or hears reports of people's experiences. The communication of experience is taken so much for granted that it often goes unnoticed. Television, movies, books, and the media in general provide an account of the experiences of people. We want to know what it is like to be a great personality (a ball player, a ballet dancer, a musician). We voraciously consume tidbits about their lifestyles and life histories in order to find out how they arrived at who and what they are. Still the way we appreciate another person is by coming to see what they see, or at least getting some idea of it: that is, inquiring into their experiences.

The analysis of experience, in philosophical terms, is often analyzed in terms of the "what" and the "how." One kind of knowledge of experience is the "what" of a person, for example, the kind of dancer she is. The other kind of knowledge is the "how," the particular way the individual actually is. One knows not just the "what" but the "how" of the dancer. That she dances in a certain style of experience is "what" she is. "How" she dances is more indicative of who she is. The "how" is the ultimate goal. But in both cases one speaks of experience. It is the knowledge of the how that gives the confidence to say "oh yes, I know what she's like as a dancer, how she experiences being a dancer, how she relates to music, what her body expressed." Since the idea of her experience can be tested, challenged and corrected, it is objective and agreement can be reached. This methodologic and pedagogic distinction between the "what" and the "how" highlights a common-sense fact.

Knowledge, experience and its fruits have been put very nicely by an anthropologist:<sup>15</sup>

"To some extent we are all prisoners of our own culture; traveling to other lands gives us a chance to break out temporarily and briefly taste what it is to be not just somewhere else but someone else."

The experience of the other and what it means for someone's life has been elucidated by the actress, Olivia de Havilland, who played Melanie Hamilton Wilkes in "Gone with the Wind."<sup>16</sup>

"The character of Melanie Wilkes was the woman I always wanted to be. The role of Melanie meant a great deal to me; she personified values very much endangered at that time. The source of her strength was love. For a little while, as I lived her life, I felt her love, felt her trust, felt her faith, felt her happiness."

People other than actors take on roles, especially children whose lives are filled with play-acting. It is hard to imagine personal growth occurring without this capacity (a biologically and culturally important phenomenon).

The parochialism of one's own experience is liberated by appreciating the experiences of others. This is important for wisdom or rationality, as discussed in the next chapter. This is where inquiry into experience and wisdom meet.

Inquiry into experience is also important for an appreciation of other animals. In a zoo for example there is an old female gorilla who has spent a better part of her days in there. She is quite special in one regard; she knows how to upset the noisy intruders. She vomits up some of her food, or defecates, evoking a characteristic feeling of disgust in the onlookers. Then she looks at the crowd and, with what appears to be quite an intentional action, removes and eats the food from the vomit and feces to provoke yet a further cry of disgust from the crowd. Her experience includes the intentional thought of wanting them to experience revulsion. In fact, it is known that higher non-humans, primates, are intentional creatures (see chapter 2).

After conveying a sense of what the old gorilla is like, one can explain much of what she does and go on to predict her behavior. In this regard, some studies of the gorilla go to great lengths to give us a sense of their experiences.<sup>17</sup> One feels satisfied that one knows this creature when what is known is something about her experiences. The same holds for humans. To a lesser extent, the same holds for rats.

With regard to the issue of objectivity, part of what one means when one acknowledges the experience of others is that one can get to know them in part. And of course, one's judgments about each other experiences can be either correct or incorrect, as is true of all claims. How can one know which? As I already indicated, one would generate tentative hypotheses to convey the experiences, ones that seem well grounded, bear fruits, and can be checked, challenged, and replaced—which is what one does in all domains of inquiry.

Then what reason is there, outside of wanting only necessary knowledge, to doubt, as some thinkers do, the very existence of other experiences, or that we can have knowledge of them? One can be scientifically chauvinistic and deny that experiences really are objective, defining objectivity in terms of physical laws. This is both incorrect and pernicious. Or one can just be skeptical; this doubt is akin to doubting that there is an external world, or that if there is, one cannot know it at all. But in terms of justified belief rather than necessary knowledge, claims about experience can be justified. The skeptic asks for too much. In terms of truth telling, one has pragmatically warranted reasons for the belief that others have experiences of various kinds. One can reach agreement with others, and there are criteria for adjudication. Who seriously doubts this?

The skeptic reminds us of our ignorance. This is important. We do not want to slight the skeptic, but we allow her to sit and feel the impact of our shared experiences and knowledge of each other. The force of this phenomenon makes it more difficult for her.

## Limits

Are there intrinsic limits to inquiry into the experience of others? There is really no metric for answering this question. For that matter, there is no metric for measuring how far the understanding of matter in physics can go. The lack of antecedently measurable limits is not troublesome itself, unless it is exploited by crude scientism.

If a person describes her experiences, unless one has a specific reason not to, they ought to be taken seriously. Sometimes psychoanalysis raises serious objections to the contents of the experiences, but to deny someone else's experience can be harmful and false. Thus there are limits to the knowledge one can have of what it is like to be another. If one presents a case for how someone experiences disgust and the person says "no, that's not it," then one is forced to believe her no matter how much contradictory evidence one has accumulated. The same is true with regard to the exhibition of pain behavior and the lack of experience of pain that a person might report. If a person reports that she still feels pain even though levels of neurotransmitters suggests she should not, it is hard to deny her. The doubt that lingers is one of the dilemmas of life and knowledge.

But people often feel that they are not understood. There is something about personal experiences that others cannot always capture. Saying that we do not quite capture a person's experience is akin to saying that one does not quite capture the real world. There is no proof of complete knowledge of the external world, or how close we attain truth in general. We do not have complete knowledge of anything. What we do have are specific instances, where we offer interpretations and where inquiry is conducted in a piecemeal fashion. If it is a good interpretation of a person or an animal, it conveys what is important to note, and the experience comes to life.

## **Conclusion**

Inquiry into the experience of others is often undermined and has not been stressed enough as something to study and think about seriously in our culture. It is ironic that, in this century, inquiry into experience has achieved a kind of radical legitimization and understanding through the psychological, anthropological, and phenomenological inquiry.<sup>18</sup> We are for the first time publicly expressing theories of the existential—the life experience.

It is generally through the interactions with friends, parents, siblings, television, schoolyard, music, the study of

literature, and of history, that the child first gathers a sense of what the experiences of others are like. It is not very often put into the context of inquiry. Most often, this is relegated to the subjective from an early age. So the expression "well, that's just your opinion" is often heard in this context as a way of indicating the belief that there is no objectivity to be gathered here. This is a common way of dismissing the event on the grounds that it is not real. This is both unfortunate and mistaken.

Inquiry into experience should be stressed. Why? There are important values associated with this kind of inquiry. These include the liberation from myopic or parochial points of view. An appreciation for the differences in experience may emerge. This figures importantly in being "rational," in being civilized (chapters 2 and 5).

What one does in the context of inquiry into others is to theorize and test with regard to their experiences. By considering other experiences we are forced to reflect on our initial perspectives on the world, our customs or way of life as one among many. As a result, objectivity about oneself and others is strengthened.

Pragmatists, like Dewey, made experience central to his philosophic vision.<sup>19</sup> And like James, experiences were not just passive and inquiry was extended to them. Moreover, this capacity to imagine the experience of others is a striking phenomenon. It is the hallmark of the mature, enlightened human. To have it in the service of objectivity and inquiry is valuable. Objective claims can be made about other experiences. Existential or experiential knowledge of the other is not legitimately satisfied until a sense of their experience is achieved; only then is there really knowledge of the other. By legitimizing the objectivity of knowing another's experiences, the natural sense of taking in these other experiences can be placed in the context of inquiry, discovery, and growth.