1. Introduction

Can I know what it is like to smell a skunk, deliver a stand-up comedy routine, give birth to a child, or go to war, without having had those experiences myself? Can I gain this ‘what it is like’ (WIL)-knowledge by reading novels or talking with the experienced?

- “If you want to know what a new and different experience is like, you can learn it by going out and really having that experience. You can’t learn it by being told about that experience, however thorough your lessons may be.” (Lewis 1998, p. 29; bold added)
- “What we learn from the case of Mary is that stories, testimony, and theories aren’t enough to teach you what it is like to have truly new types of experiences—you learn what it is like by actually having an experience of that type.” (Paul 2014, p. 13; bold added)

2. The Pessimistic Attitude

*The Experience Condition* (first pass): Necessarily, one knows what it is like to \( \Phi \) only if one has had an experience of \( \Phi \)-ing oneself.

*The Experience Condition* (second pass): Normally, one knows what it is like to \( \Phi \) only if one has had an experience of \( \Phi \)-ing oneself or some other distinct but relevantly similar experience(s).

- “In fact, humans vary so much and so deeply, that even small differences (contextually speaking) in experiences between people can prevent us from knowing what it is like to be a different type of person. … If you are a man who has grown up and always lived in a rich Western country, you cannot know what it is like to be an impoverished woman living in Ethiopia, and if she has never left her village she cannot know what it is like to be you. If you are a white businessman living in San Francisco in 2013 you cannot know what it was like to be a black man involved in the Jamaican rebellion in 1760…or know what it was like to be a slave in the American South. …[I]f you have always been happy with the gender identity assigned to you at birth, you cannot know what it is like to be forced to live with a gender identity you reject….All of these examples bring out the deep and familiar fact that different subject points of view, as different conscious perspectives, can be fundamentally inaccessible to each other. Unless you’ve had the relevant experiences, what it is like to be a person or an animal very different from yourself is, in a certain fundamental way, inaccessible to you. It isn’t that you can’t imagine something in place of the experience you haven’t had. It’s that this act of imagining isn’t enough to let you know what it is really like to be an octopus, or to be a slave, to be blind. You need to have the experience itself to know what it is really like.” Paul (2014, pp. 7-8; bold added)
3. The Optimistic Attitude

_Esquire_ magazine’s _What It Feels Like:_

- “There’s nothing we like better than experiencing the heights and depths of the human condition—just as long as we can do it while sitting comfortably on our big butts, preferably with a nice glass of vodka tonic within arm’s reach. Which is why, for the past three years, _Esquire_ magazine has collected a series of exhilarating first-person tales for our recurring feature, ‘What It Feels Like.’ …Thanks to Buzz Aldrin, we can share with you what it’s like to stomp your boots on the fine talcum powder that covers the moon. … Thanks to 7’6” tall basketball star Shawn Bradley, you’ll learn how it feels to peer down at the bald spots of everyone in a crowd.” _What It Feels Like_ (p. XIII-XIV).

Karl Marlantes’ _What It Is Like To Go To War_ (2011):

- “Karl Marlantes has written a staggeringly beautiful book on combat—what it feels like, what the consequences are and above all, what society must do to understand it” (bold added). —Sebastian Junger.
- “_What It Is Like To Go To War_…contains fresh and important _insights into what it’s like to be in a war and what it does to the human psyche_” (bold added). —_The Washington Post_
- “…ought to be mandatory reading by potential infantry recruits and by residents of any nation that sends its kids—Marlantes’s word—into combat.”

Nancy Sherman’s _The Untold War: Inside the Hearts, Minds, and Souls of Our Soldiers_ (2010): Sherman is an example of someone who is a renowned expert on the subjective nature of experiences they not had themselves.

Louis Menand on WIL-knowledge and history:

- “Intuitive knowledge—the sense of what life was like when we were not there to experience it—is precisely the knowledge we seek. It is the true positive of historical work” (Menand 2003)

I suspect that any view that straightforwardly rejects the optimistic attitude will fail to adequately explain our apparent practices of treating stories, testimony, and theories as sources of knowledge about what experiences are like.

Relatedly, I think any such view will struggle to explain the important moral obligations we can be under to try and better understand the subjective lives of other people through the use of such resources together with our capacities for empathy and imagination. Of course, even if one agrees that there should be some way of reconciling the pessimistic and optimistic attitudes, the challenge is to show _how_ this can be done given that these attitudes appear to be flatly inconsistent with each other.
4. Knowing-WIL as Knowing-Wh

(1) Mary knows what it is like to go to war.

(2) Mary knows what it is like to see something red.

(3) Tui knows where the best coffee is.

(4) Sue knows when the game will begin.

(5) Jill knows why the game was fixed.

(6) Miguel knows how to swim.

Two assumptions:

(I) Knowing-WIL is a form of knowledge-wh.

(II) Knowing-WIL can be analysed in terms of knowing-that in line with the orthodox question-answer semantics for knowing-wh.

It is often suggested that knowledge-where, knowledge-when, knowledge-why, and knowledge-how ascriptions quantify respectively over locations, times, reasons, and ways. For example, one might give the following truth conditions for (3) and (6):

- “Tui knows where the best coffee is” is true iff there is some location l such that Tui knows that l is where the best coffee is.
- “Miguel knows how to swim” is true iff there is some way w such that Miguel knows that w is a way for Miguel to swim.

Stoljar (forthcoming a) suggests that knowing-WIL also quantify over ways, but ways of being affected by events rather than ways of performing actions.

In stereotypical contexts when we ascribe knowing-WIL we will be concerned with ways of being experientially affected by events, such that one feels a certain way in virtue of some event.

As Stoljar says, on his view “‘knowing what it’s like to F’ is plausibly analyzed in contexts like these as being roughly equivalent to ‘knowing how it feels to F’” (forthcoming b, p. 3).

- “Mary knows what it is like to go to war” is true iff there is some way such that Mary knows that it feels that way to go to war.
- “Mary knows what it is like to go to war” is true iff there is some way such that Mary knows that it feels that way to x for y go to war.
5. An Initial Response

I think the key to identifying potential solutions to our puzzle is to note how closely this puzzle resembles well-known insufficiency challenges to the orthodox question-answer semantics for knowledge-wh:

- **Cycling**: Miguel tells Mary that *that* way [pointing at a cyclist] is a way for her to ride a bike. But Mary has never even attempted to ride a bike herself. Does Mary now know how to ride a bike?

- **Coffee**: Miguel points to a photo of the interior of his favourite café in Norwich and tells Mary that *this* café serves the best flat white in Norwich. Mary herself has never been to Norwich. Does Mary now know where to find the best flat white in Norwich?

- **3 Feet High and Rising**: Mary asks Miguel who Hong Oak Yun is? Miguel tells Mary that Hong Oak Yun is over 3 feet tall. This is all that Miguel says and Mary has never met Hong Oak Yun or heard anything else about him. Does Mary now know who Hong Oak Yun is?

The main kinds of responses to these cases: (1) contextual-shift responses (contextualist and invariantist versions); (2) special ways of knowing/entering responses; and (3) disambiguation responses.

- **Cerebroscope**: Before she has left her black-and-white room, Mary uses her cerebroscope and comes to knows that *that* [demonstrating a brain state of a subject who is seeing something red] is the way it feels to see something red. Does Mary know what it is like to see something red?

- **War**: Mary is a renowned expert on the subjective experiences of going to war. As a result, Mary knows many true and informative propositions about the way it feels to go to war. But Mary has never been to war herself. Does Mary know what it is like to go to war?

What are these subjects missing? Following Tye (2009, 2011) I think that what’s missing is that in possessing this knowledge—that these subjects do not entertain these propositions in what we might call a phenomenal way.

Tye’s (2011) account of the cerebroscope case:

- “…while Mary, located in her black-and-white room and viewing a cerebroscope trained on the brain of someone experiencing red, does know an answer to the question, “What is it like to experience red?”, this answer would not be countered as acceptable in normal contexts. By the usual standards, the demonstrative concept operative in her knowledge has the wrong kind of origin and thereby is a contextually inappropriate demonstrative concept.

By contrast, I do know what it is like experience red, since I know an answer that is acceptable in normal contexts. What I know is that experiencing red is like *this*, where
the demonstrative concept my knowledge draws upon originates in an act of attending to the relevant phenomenal character in my own experience.” (Tye 2011, pp. 165-6)

Initial response to our puzzle: Mary can come to know propositions of the form ‘that way is the way it feels to go to war’ by consulting stories, testimony, or theories. However, Mary won’t thereby be able to entertain those propositions in a phenomenal way because that would require her to have a demonstrative concept of the way it feels to go to war that originated in acts of attending to the phenomenal character of her own experiences of going to war.

This response can then be developed in at least three different ways depending on how one thinks of the relationship between the phenomenal way condition and the semantics and/or pragmatics of knowing-WIL ascriptions: the inflationary invariantist, contextualist, and minimalist invariantist versions of this response.

The key is that on any of these approaches we can consistently acknowledge both that Mary knows many truths about what it is like to go to war (in line with the optimistic attitude) and that, at least in stereotypical contexts, it would nonetheless be wrong to claim that Mary knows what it is like to go to war (in line with the pessimistic attitude).

6. Refining our Response
Walton (2015) on empathy:

- ‘Emily’s judgment or impression is not merely that “I am panicked, and so is Oscar,” but rather, “Oscar is as I am, like this.” She can appropriately say, “I know how it is with him,” or “I know how he feels,” where “know” carries a connotation of intimacy, acquaintance. This is close to what one might call Verstehen, or “knowing what it is like” for Oscar. Notice that the content of what she knows is in propositional form: She knows that Oscar feels like this. But this is propositional knowledge of a special kind, with the sample in place of a linguistic predicate in the formulation of what she knows.’

Drawing on Walton’s ideas we can distinguish three kinds of knowledge of experience (KoE):

- **Gold-standard KoE**: There is some way w such that Mary knows that w is the way it feels like to go to war, where the concept of w that her knowledge draws upon originates in acts of attending to the phenomenal character of her own experiences of going to war.

- **Silver-standard KoE**: Mary has not been to war. But there is some way w such that Mary knows that w is the way it feels to go to war, where the concept of w that her knowledge draws upon originates in acts of attending to the phenomenal character of her own mental states.

- **Bronze-standard KoE**: Mary has not been to war. But there is some way w such that Mary knows that w is the way it feels to go to war, where the concept of w that her knowledge draws upon does not originate in any acts of attending to the phenomenal character of her own mental states.
Refined response to our puzzle: One can’t gain gold-standard knowledge of experience from stories, testimony, or theories because merely consulting such sources will not involve one’s having that experience oneself. However, by consulting such sources can come to know propositions of the form ‘that way is what it feels like to Φ’, thereby gaining bronze-standard KoE. Furthermore, such sources can help us to gain silver-standard KoE. More precisely, such sources can help to stimulate, inform, and constrain, one’s imaginings, memories, and empathetic responses and one can then use these mental states as samples to represent the way that it is like to have the relevant experience one has not had oneself.

And, again, there will be different ways of formulating this response depending on how one thinks of the relationship between these three different forms of KoE and the semantics and/or pragmatics of knowing-WIL ascriptions.

7. Grades of Knowing-WIL

As the “gold”, “silver”, and “bronze” labels indicate it is natural to see these three kinds of KoE as falling along different points of some kind of evaluative scale. This seems to fit well with the fact that knowing-wh ascriptions are usually gradable, in the sense that they can be modified by adverbial modifiers like “largely” and “in part” and by degree modifiers like “well”, “very well” and “better than” (Sgaravati and Zardini 2008, and Pavese forthcoming) And knowing-WIL ascriptions look to be no exception to this:

(7) Marlantes knows what it is like to go to war better than Sherman does.
(8) Sherman knows what it is like to go to war better than I do.
(9) Miguel knows in part what it is like to be a role model.

If knowing-WIL is gradable this might open up other ways of formulating our response to our puzzle. One might say that what is right about the optimistic attitude is that one can know in part, or to some degree, what it is like to Φ on the basis of consulting stories etc., whilst maintaining that what is right about the pessimistic attitude is that one cannot know in full what it is like to Φ if one has not had an experience of Φ-ing oneself.

Parvese (forthcoming) argues that the gradability of knowledge-how-to ascriptions has both a quantitative and a qualitative dimension, and I think there are likely to be related distinctions for knowing-WIL ascriptions.
8. Paul on Transformative Choices

Paul’s original (2015) argument is based on the following case:

- **Scenario**: You have no children. However, you have reached a point in your life when you are personally, financially and physically able to have a child. You sit down and think about whether you want to have a child of your very own. You discuss it with your partner and contemplate your options, carefully reflecting on the choice by assessing what you think it would be like for you to have a child of your very own and comparing this to what you think it would be like to remain childless. After careful consideration, you choose one of these options:
  
  (HC) Have a child.
  
  (∼HC) Remain childless.

Paul acknowledges that this way of deciding between HC and ∼HC “seems perfectly apt” and is widely encouraged in our culture. However, despite its appeal, Paul argues that this decision process is not rational.

- “The trouble comes from the fact that, because having one’s first child is epistemically transformative, one cannot determine the value of what it’s like to have one’s own child before actually having her. This means that the subjective unpredictability attending the act of having one’s first child makes the story about family planning into little more than pleasant fiction. Because you cannot know the value of the relevant outcome, there is no rationally acceptable value you can assign to it. The problem is not that a prospective parent can only grasp the approximate values of the outcomes of her act, for then, at least, she might have some hope of meeting our norms for ordinary decision-making. The problem is that she cannot determine the values with any degree of accuracy at all.” (Paul 2015, p. 11)

A reconstruction of a key part of Paul’s argument:

**The Knowledge Premise**: You can know what it is like to have a child only if you have had a child yourself.

**The Value Premise**: You can determine the approximate value of the phenomenal outcome of having a child only if you know what it is like to have a child yourself.

Therefore,

**Intermediate conclusion**: You can determine the approximate value of the phenomenal outcome of having a child only if you have had a child yourself.