Life Lives on the Edge of Contradiction

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Advice giving covers a wide range of social engagements between friends, authorities to subordinates, professionals of many kinds and especially therapists. Therapists generally come from fields such as psychology and psychiatry wherein many focus on research sciences and others focus on use of therapeutics to somehow make people better in some way. For the latter group, coming to grips with what counts as better is problematic since it is not always clear even to the advisee what he or she would count as better. To the more scientifically-minded the notion of better is often eschewed as nothing more than distracting baggage when it comes to truly understanding human-nature. This paper shows first that understanding human nature is likely a chimera. It will never fully come within the grasp of the human sciences any more than the fist can grab itself. Still, scientific approaches are invaluable in the quest for tying action and goals together. However, while the sciences may eliminate the need for reference to some faux qualia, the phenomenology of human experience cannot be ignored altogether. As a result, advisory planning must navigate between the tough-minded and soft-minded while avoiding contradiction.

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Tough-Minded vs. Soft-Minded Psychology

The physician, William James is known for co-founding American Pragmatism as well as for being the father of American Experimental Psychology. As an experimentalist, James hoped to determine things as they are and not merely as one might hope. James sought truth. Pragmatists are in awe of truth. Philosophical pragmatism accepts that human knowledge can never secure its grasp on truth. Truth is the ideal and knowledge is its best approximation.

The ideal of truth designates a human aim. Knowers are the most advanced truth-seekers. They stand out as best at managing evidence commensurate with truth-seeking aims. Truth is approximated to the extent that it removes evidential error beyond that of calling other competing proposals.

James’ pragmatism is unexpectedly generous at times. For example, James acknowledges that urgency created by limitations of time and resources may legitimate a will to believe in a personal God in absence of compelling evidence (Pearl & MacKenzie, 2018). His allowance for responsible will to believe is licensed he believes by conditions of urgency and the phenomenology of the thinker’s experience.

Tough-Mindedness of Cognitive Science vs. Soft Mindedness of Therapeutic Psychology

It is easy to imagine many cases wherein a thinker calculates well but does not feel right about the conclusion. Acts of pure altruism (if they truly exist) are of such a kind. These apparent conflicts of judgement

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may seem paradoxical. One judgement represents right-minded thinking and the other represents unavoidable feeling fact. Adoption of one annihilates the other when constructing a plan for action. Or, so it seems.

The more we learn through cognitive and neuroscience, the less reason there is to think that simple emotions drive action or, that emotions can be shared as deductions can be shared. Emotions are neither doxastic symbols nor tokens that can be arranged and thereby direct intellective commerce. Sharing emotions is tantamount to sharing state of mind. But just what is a state of mind? What are its contours, mass, energy, inferential potency?

States of mind are the landscape of immediate consciousness for a person. A state of mind seems to embody emotions. In contrast, emotions are feels a person has usually directed at some object beyond the feeling itself. Emotions have an intellective component in whereas moods do not. Moods and emotions are not the same. Moods have no objective evaluational focus. Moods are consequent to biochemical drift. Moods slip into and out of one’s state of mind free of evaluation. States of mind are more encompassing than thoughts, moods, and emotions alone. States of mind as much as component parts such as moods and emotions seem ephemeral and beyond the reach of any metric for aggregating and managing data about what should be a person’s next deliberate action. Deliberate action is planned as opposed to mere behavioral response. There is much reason to doubt causal efficacy from any components of a person’s state of mind to a planned further action. In particular elements of personal phenomenology (qualia) are inevitably suspect when offered to explain planned action. For example, as psychologist Paul Bloom notes, feelings of empathy may be both empty of reliable content and distracting or causally impotent altogether (Bloom, 2018).

**Does Smart Thinking Require a Sensuous Mind?**

Mere thinking does not require a sensuous mind. Cooperative, human thinking does. By sensuous minds here is meant capacity for considering qualia aspects of one’s own and perhaps other’s experiences. Qualia are not fully shareable beyond the experience of each thinker. The experience of sympathy is qualia humans may share as evidenced in actions they initiate in sympathy with another. For example, people may applaud or cheer showing sympathy with another’s success or lend a hand to help someone struggling with some mishap. Other individuating accounts of experienced qualia are either run-sharable or perhaps, do not even exist. For example, a person may claim to know another’s joy on winning a prize or sense of bereavement when losing a loved one. Such claims are usually accompanied by claims such as: I know just how you feel! I felt the same way when I (won a prize) lost my mother. These claims of alleged, empathetic qualia are highly suspect. It is not so much that claimants are deliberately engaging in deceit as much as mistaking a type of sympathy. Obviously, they simply cannot know if their feel in one situation is in fact identical to another’s feel in a similar situation. Moreover, since there are no reliable clues establishing identity of qualia, the phenomenology of the experience may be nothing more than a special sympathy rather than empathy. Qualia such as empathy may not even exist. Empathy may be nothing more than a token of sympathy primarily amplified perhaps by other feelings such as fear, anger, shame, and such.

Computational thinking is smart. It figures things out and in the best of cases can do so purposefully. For example, a thermostat has both a purpose and a systematic process for securing fulfillment of the purpose. When set at a given temperature, the sensor apparatus is a filament initiating electrical activity to an air conditioner or heat pump. Humans think no better than thermostats when it comes to maintaining room temperature. The fact that the thermostat setting (purpose) was initiated from outside the system has no bearing
on the thinking leading to performance. This is the same for humans as well. Human purposes may also be set
from outside the person’s mind. This is fully analogous to the lowly thermostat.

Consider the strictly computational and purposeful thinking of today’s smart cars. Sensors on a smart car
alert drivers to impending harm. As the complexity of algorithms advance, it is becoming clear that
computational smartness in cars and humans and computers may be much alike and even giving computers a
bit of an edge when it comes to response efficiency.

Ahorn, a screamor, flashing lights can alert car sensors and human drivers alike to impending harm and
need for evasive action. The algorithmic system of a smart car may be more efficient in execution than humans,
but, is there more to smart, sensitive thinking than efficiency of responsive execution?

Alert sensors in humans are felt, usually a fraction of a second after execution of action begins. Alarm and
prompt for evasive action usually precede the feel of qualia (Mele, 2014). Humans routinely think they decided
on corrective action. But an abundance of research indicates their intuition is qualia experienced on the heels of
response activation and seldom if ever its cause (Libet, 2015).

Computational sensor’s execute evasive action is as quickly or more quickly than neurological sensors of
the human mind. Especially with continuing sophistication in Bayesian decision trees, computational sensor
alerts are increasingly efficient. Yet there are times when inefficiency may be of prudential value. Inefficiency
is of prudential value when it succeeds in overriding an unanticipated hasty response. For example, the human
who sees an inevitable collision leading to either killing a mother and her child or letting the driver’s car
swerve off the road and down a cliff, may have enough time to override the first instinct and opt for a “best
choice”. Best choice is admittedly a trolley problem type issue (Wilson, 2004) circumvented here in lieu of
focusing on causally—related qualia. The possibility of prudent override by a human cogitator is at issue when
arguing in behalf of human smart sensitive thinking in the collision scenario above.

Smart, human thinking might be unique by being phenomenologically sensitive. To be
phenomenologically sensitive, human thinking must draw on qualia to override imprudent impulse to act.
While the neurosciences find ever less room for causally determinate phenomenological experience in human
action, there is arguably evidence for split—second human override in a decision moment.

Self-consciousness, awareness of the contents of other minds, and feels of any sort seem in the eyes of
many researchers to be reducible to biochemistry activation among cortex columns, hormones activity such as
oxytocin, serotonin, and other physical processes (Lieberman, 2018; Zak, 2012). Phenomenological is
accordingly written off as epiphenomenal excess, meaning a sort of foam or sparks set off inconsequentially by
the physical work going on within brain material.

Alfred Mele, after extensively reviewing the scientific literature, makes a strong case for the possibility
and evolutionary value of an override capacity in human thinking (2017). Qualia may override imprudent
action. Qualia can cause doubt or at least some disquieting feeling with proceeding with an activated algorithm
in a brain (Ludlow, 2004).

Assuming Mele is right, can there be phantom qualia which is to say, qualia and no action potential at all?
Presumably there are different types of qualia. Consider the car collision scenario above. The driver seeing the
mother and child may be so stirred that rather than execute action for self-preservation, his sympathy for
mother and child interrupts the default algorithm of self-preservation and leads the driver to sacrifice his own
well-being. In contrast, phantom qualia such as the much suspect empathy may not lead to any action. Since it
is only about feeling as another does rather than feeling towards interrupting a default neurological pattern,
empathy even if it exists, leads to no change in action potential only sympathy does. In a therapeutic context is there any reason to believe one person’s alleged empathy for another leads to productive advice for action?

In a recent book on recovery from divorce the author, a veteran of divorce, expressed sympathy and then summed plan of action counseling the psychologically wounded to action. Specifically, he advised those feeling crippled by divorce to do three things: (1) fix your bed each day, (2) shine your shoes, (3) start running. If you already do run then run more (Wagner, 2017), nowhere does the author suggest that the author’s own divorce is a reason for the reader to implement evasive action to save self. Instead, the author’s counsel amounts to three metaphors summed in saying; if it feels awful then act to encounter other feels. Presumably, the author knows feeling bad or claiming to share bad feelings is no prompt to action. Entertaining lament or sharing lament fixes nothing.

Addressing lament by sharing lament and no direction away from lament, the alert system defaults into a recursive loop of alert, no action and repeat alert. In psychological terms this may be described as obsessive-compulsive disorder or some other form of depressive inaction. In short, it is not shared lament that leads to improvement mere feelings can be sustained indefinitely. To make a difference the alert system for humans much like that of smart cars must activate protocols, practices, and actions to avoid further impending distress. The therapist’s sympathy for the client’s lament may lead to action by advising specific actions commence now. Any empathy—if such exists—is nowhere evident as a catalyst to a client’s recovery.

Certainly, most people appreciate when others show genuine sympathy for their situation. Sympathy is an expression of concern and not to be mistaken for the arrogance of pitying another. Noting these are all qualia of evident action potential, something mere empathy undecidedly lacks.

Sympathy is a ubiquitous phenomenon with action potential commonly recognized such as when a dog lays its head in the lap of an ailing master. No one can be quite sure what exactly is in the mind of the dog or any sympathizing person; so there is no meaningful catalytic role for empathy. Agent actions on behalf of another are therapeutic when they activate motivating feels, qualia in the lethargic and dependent client. Being assured that someone else went through “the same thing” is an inert and unknowable boast.

For empathy to be effective in clinical practice it must be responsive to identifiable needs. However, those needs cannot be identified because no one can know another person’s feeling is exactly any more than neurological knowledge makes it possible for anyone to know what it is like to be a bat.

So as things sum it seems therapists serve clients best by laying aside any pretext of empathy and focusing instead on action protocols leading to recovery. Get the patient moving, physically, if possible, with the reasoned expectation that relief from mental distress will follow accordingly. Soft-mined advisors allegedly empathizing may simply be reinforcing the old saw, “misery loves company”. Mere accompaniment of another languishing in despair may only reinforce a recursive loop of depression (Marusic, 2018, pp. 205-209).

“Shine your shoes, make your bed and run” is not just a plan but a call to immediate action no matter how simple or removed from the source of psychological distress. Action puts a person into motion. Inaction does no more than fuels the recursive loops of despair (Wagner, 2015; Wagner, 1984).

Too Tough-Minded to Say: Just Do It?

Frank Jackson, an early proponent of qualia determining human action has over time equivocated on the matter. In this account, qualia are admitted in the ontology of mind and determining at times of action as Jackson originally conceded (1986; 1982). For example, unlike hair standing up on the back of a dog feeling
threatened, humans feeling threatened sometimes overrides a flight or fight initiative especially when time allows for reflection estimating the utility of either option. In states of arousal less urgent and intense, people sometimes reflect considering the phenomenological feels sorting and arranging them along with other data of perspective to characterize the experience at hand and then prepare for appropriate action (Chalmers, 2012, pp. 3-4, 413-416).

For example, a person may feel both happy for and envious of a friend who just got a prized promotion at work. Congratulations may be tempered by the accompanying feel of disquieting envy. Joyous sympathy is blunted by the disrupting feel of envy. In such cases of sympathetic qualia, roommates do not share the same qualia arrangement though the experiential engagement is accommodating of the similar but non-identical qualia.

In the case phantom qualia such as empathy not only are that there no identity of qualia but there is no impulse directing action. A spouse may feel wonderful—uniquely and especially wonderful—about a spouse’s promotion with no disrupting competing emotions framing the experience. Nonetheless, there is no possibility the two can identify that they are sharing identical feels. Nor is there any direction from the feel of empathy alone to do anything. In contrast, joyous sympathy may prompt acclaim, hugs and kisses, and so on but empathy (even if it existed) remains inert. The mere thought “I feel her happiness as she does” prompts no action whereas “I am so happy for her” prompts gestures of glee, not shared glee, one’s own glee prompted by the stimulus of good news, a celebratory moment, each shared with the other in his or her own way.

In closely related couples, years of bonding may secure especially robust responsiveness between spouses and are evidenced by expressions of types of sympathetic gestures. The sympathetic gestures reflect years of thinking about the other, becoming accustomed to the signaling gestures of each other and showing sympathetic care for each other. But none of this sums to empathy as qualia as sympathy is evidenced.

Imagine a spouse in the last minutes of life dying from a chronically progressive disease. Would even the most aggrieved spouse declare he knows just how the dying spouse feels at the moment? Is not this experience every bit as elusive as the super-talented bat neuroscientist trying to imagine what it is like to be a bat? The aggrieved spouse may have experienced critical illness previously but it would be nothing short of arrogance to proclaim “Hey, I’ve been there. I have been seriously ill in the past too. I know just what you are feeling!” In short, regardless of how generally suspect qualia may be for determining human experience, the phantasma of empathy cannot be employed therapeutically not even for purposes of analysis. Empathy adds nothing to scientific exactness in thinking about the phenomenology of human experience. Nonetheless, there may be more to the story of empathy than tough-minded thinking would countenance.

The Neuroscientist Does Not Know What It Is Like to Be a Bat. But…the Bat Does

Philosophers, psychiatrists, and psychologists speculate about what it means to know one’s self. It is unlikely that any of those will ever gain general acceptance. Timing experiments for example show that people’s brains often initiate action before an actor is self-conscious of the decision (Libet, 2015). Still there is evidence of override capacities to account for slight timing differentials and timing studies have little to say about reflective planning or speculation well in advance of action (Mele, 2014). In the end, some things may necessarily elude investigation.

For example, neither neuroscience nor artificial intelligence as illuminating as they might be, can ever tell investigators what it is like to be a bat. Neuro responsiveness and computational processing can be traced and
modeled. Tracing and modeling give a systematic account of bat information—processing, its biochemistry and behavioral repertoire. What it does not do is giving an account of a bat distinguishing between knowledge and belief or levels of confidence reflectively showing evaluation privileging some beliefs over others as knowledge much less the experience of *bat-ness* from the inside (Putnam, 1990; Nagel, 1974). So, is self-knowledge, and knowledge of other mind’s qualia a dead end for responsible scientific, tough-minded investigation? Moreover, do any evidential grounds even hint at empathetic understanding as an existent, separate from types of sympathy?

Knowing one’s own mind as an object of investigation is indeed an intractable problem. Douglas Hofstadter observed, it is akin to a fist trying to grasp itself (1979). So, for the tough-minded, investigating empathy may be a non-starter if it means knowing that one’s qualia are identical to those of another person or some other sentient being.

But, in daily life, soft mindedness may yet have some heuristic potential. Experiences that give the outward appearance of identity between persons seem to give some authority to speak to another person about what he or she may feel now or expect to feel in the near, causally related future. While tough-minded thinking makes it clear there can in fact be no shared identity, soft-minded willingness to share on grounds of outward experience may open the door to some heuristically useful exchange of advice under conditions of urgency helping persons get a manageable angle on a challenge. James’ “will believe” here is not a natural kind term but instead testifies to a need to act even when timely and exhaustive counsel cannot be secured from genuine authorities. No authority possesses sufficient knowledge to the *content of* another person’s qualia. The content is not about the intensity of any feel but rather the internal focus precipitating an advisee’s feel of the moment.

Even if alleged empathy is an illusion and is actually intensity of sympathetic feel for another’s similar experience, it may spark self-reflection on other actionable emotions and subsequent action. James’ soft-minded commitment to less than tough-minded analysis under moments of urgency may be heuristically potent by relaxing the dispiriting drive seeking certainty before action (H. Putnam & R. Putnam, 1989; James, 1960). There is a reason why investigators into decision-making note heuristical inferences may be the apt tools humans have to rely on at times (Pearl & Mackenzie, 2018).

A sort of paradox seems on the intellectual horizon at this point. Science and tough-mindedness seem to say, to give us time to purchase increased certainty. Soft-minded considerations relax inferential demands in response to the urgency and undecidability of matters now.

On the one hand, it seems there must be a physicalist explanation for so-called qualia and even the epiphenomena of empathetic moments. What the brain is equipped to do naturally is what it should do. On the other hand, there can be little doubt that qualia and even phantasma states such as empathy arouse moral deliberateness in agents advising and accepting advice. Deliberateness if not attributable to acts of will cannot easily be written off as whimsy and capriciousness either. Deliberateness about morality and planned future experience requires at the very least a different style of explanation than either tough-minded or soft-minded thinkers are likely to offer.

And perhaps, most importantly, the urgency of a moment especially one of moral consequence may license reference to the qualia of phenomenological states and even imagined empathetic claims. Qualia and even the feel of phantasma states of empathy may broaden the range of heuristically promising options. Notice of additional plausible options for optimizing planned success in the moment makes pragmatic-decision making more potent. Certainly, the debates between some psychologists and philosophers in recent decades have
broached just this potential contradiction in ideologies (Cohen, 1992; Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982) without resolution (Sapolsky, 2017, p. 550). While it is best to leave the issue of deliberateness to further investigation by scientists and philosophers before final ontological judgements are rendered, persons live in lives of social engagement with others. Persons are reasonably held to be responsible for they decide and do. Tough-minded and soft-minded considerations are conjointly relevant to initiating a planned course of action. Responsible decisions cannot be declared inevitable lived now in the moment (Weinrich, 2021). In practice, this means the most pragmatic option is to recognize that life itself is not lived in the philosopher’s study or the researcher’s pristine laboratories but often on the edge of contradictions.

Even to the most expert of decision theorists acknowledge, there is no set of decision-theoretic algorithms that can guarantee right-minded decision making regarding expected utilities in each case and for each decision-maker (Weinrich, 2020). The edge of contradiction is part of the decision-making landscape. Navigating the landscape is filled with timely demands for degrees of planned action.

Experts in game theory, Bayesian statistics, and other decision-making strategies recognize that in the end these do not render secure solutions or ways out from on the edge but only plausible default strategies increasing the odds for reasonable people acting under conditions of uncertainty (Pearl & Mackenzie, 2018). On the edge of contradiction, urgency licenses pruning elaboration favoring instead employing the efficiency of Occam’s razor. Whether tough-minded or soft-minded, the goal of problem-solving is to identify the best route for fulfilling one’s purposes thereafter (Sober, 2015, p. 239).

Advisors and advisees cannot avoid the edge of contradiction (Goudin, 2021). But the advisor’s tough-minded aggregation of considerations is invaluable. So too is the advisee’s feels of qualia indicating excessive personal risk and preference of values from the actor’s perspective (Chalmers, 2012, pp. 310-311; H. Putnam & R. Putnam, 1989).

References