

The video intends to reveal the sense of appreciation I have towards my upbringing and those who raised me. By using family films, I hope to convey a sense of gratitude for the memories shown in the videos. Each clip reveals a scene or event that has significantly impacted my present day character. The featured events shaped my views on the world and over the years have changed my perspective on life. Through my exploration, I realized that if you focus too much on the negatives of the present, it alters your memories of the past.

I considered the importance of gratitude and the role it plays in perceiving the world while posing the question, what gives us perspective? From there, I investigated what has changed my perspective on life and how I realized what I am grateful for.

Ciara M.

I've often been struck by the fact that every person around me, whether a close friend, or someone I've walked past in public and barely noticed, has a point of view that I'll never completely understand, and a life full of experiences that I'll never completely know. With this idea in mind, I wondered whether there were ways to break down the barriers created by our singular points of view, or at least to challenge ourselves by trying. My interest in this topic led me to look at the brain and abnormal psychological conditions to understand what we might be capable of. In doing so, I learned of a condition where the individual actually experiences the feelings of people around them, whether physical or emotional. This condition is called "mirror touch synesthesia", which acts almost like an intense form of empathy. This provoked me to wonder whether we could we achieve a level of empathy even close to what these synesthetes were capable of.

How would we perceive the world differently if we could do more than make *assumptions* about people's feelings and nuanced experiences of the world? In my mixed media piece, I am attempting to show the difficulty of understanding another's perspective through the symbol of two hands reaching toward each other. I hope to convey the idea that, although you may get an idea of another person's perspective, it is nearly impossible to understand it in all its complexity. In another animation, I furthered this idea by using pictures of the eyes of my peers as symbols of other's perspectives, and making the argument that although our individual point of view will always be more focused on ourselves, we can and should still try to learn about and understand the perspectives of others.

Chanina K.

From the singular perspective of a human being, it is nearly impossible to have a deep understanding of the another's point of view. Even disregarding the Freudian belief that people are innately bad and selfish, it makes sense that we have trouble seeing from the viewpoint of others and feeling what they feel. Though we do often act selfishly and greedily, our behaviour may always be, in part, caused by the fact that we are physically confined to a single viewpoint. If we could do more than make assumptions about people's feelings and nuanced experiences of the world, how would we perceive the world differently?

It is a weekday afternoon, and you walk slowly along the sidewalk, leaves crunching under your feet. There is a bus stop ahead, and as you get closer, you can see a girl of maybe three or four years animatedly playing with her stuffed bear, moving further and further from where her mother sits. The woman, perched on the bench by the bus stop, doesn't seem to notice. She crosses her legs, then sets both down again, shifting her position. Her head is facing downward, and she is holding a notebook in her lap. She reads what she has written, then quickly adds something with a pen, and continues on. You feel the tremor in her arm echoed in your own when you watch her shaky movements. Some of her hair has fallen out of the bun on top of her head, and hangs by her face, but it doesn't seem to bother her. She only looks up to check her watch or the bus route posted on the board next to her, but she does this frequently, as if something on either her watch's face, or on the bus route will have dramatically shifted in the span of a few seconds. You feel her unease crawl into you and settle there as if it is your own. As you notice the slight way her back is angled, and the way she positions herself on the bench, you can physically feel the stiffness in her body, and the aching of her muscles. Her distress creeps into you, a cold draft letting itself into a worn out house, and though you will never know everything about the woman, you feel connected to her in some way.

As the bus approaches, she hurriedly closes her notebook, shoving it into the bag that lies at her feet. Picking the bag up as she stands, she frantically spins around, searching for her daughter while calling her name. The girl runs back to her mother, her little fists clenched and swinging at her sides. You notice that she is no longer holding her stuffed bear. Her mother takes her by the hand and pulls her toward the open door of the bus. Only about ten feet away from the bus stop now, you see a look of realization flash across the daughter's little face. She immediately pulls away from her mother, her panicked eyes scanning the surroundings for her toy. Unable to understand her daughter's sudden reluctance, the woman strengthens her grip on the girl's hand and scolds her. When her daughter still won't cooperate, she raises her voice, and pulls her more forcefully toward the bus. The girl begins to sob. The woman can't understand why. All the while, you look at the girl's face, and feel her desperation and loss. You feel the tug of hands and rushing of emotion, and you are both of them at once, though you will never know their names.

Being able to physically feel what others are feeling isn't a reality for most of us, but during my research, I found that this experience of the world *is* a reality for some. In the podcast titled "Entanglement", from NPR's "Invisibilia" series, hosts Alix Spiegel and Lulu Miller speak with a woman named Amanda who has "mirror touch synesthesia," meaning that she can physically feel what other people feel when she looks at them. Spiegel and Miller also consult Michael Banissy, a researcher in the general fields of social neuroscience and visual cognition, to find out more about the condition. Banissy explains that everyone has "mirror neurons," which fire whenever you take an action or physically feel something, but also react in the same way

when you see *other* people take an action or physically feel something. In a subtle way, our brains act as if both physical actions or feelings belong to us. In people like Amanda, these mirror neurons are just much more active. For example, she describes an instance when she was at the grocery store and witnessed a boy fall and hit his head while playing around with a shopping cart. She ran to go help him, but immediately felt a splitting pain in her head, and fell to the ground, so that she practically had to crawl over to the boy. She also explains why never eats in the company of others: “It feels like they’re shoving food in my mouth, and I’m trying to eat, and they’re shoving their forks in my mouth. It’s like this thing piled on top of itself, and it’s terrible!” Even during Spiegel and Miller’s interview with her, if one of them would scratch their ear, for instance, Amanda would feel it on her own ear. When people *without* this kind of synesthesia observe someone else being touched, the mirror neurons in their brains are also activated, but in a much smaller way. The heightened awareness of those with mirror touch synesthesia makes them intensely empathetic, in a way that people without it could never be. In some ways, this is an advantage. As discussed previously, it is difficult and nearly impossible for the average person to see or feel the world from the perspective of someone else. For people with mirror touch synesthesia, it is much easier to make connections and better understand people on deeper levels. However, because they are constantly experiencing everyone else’s emotions and physical feelings, attempting to live a normal life and interacting with others can be overwhelming. Even putting any focus on their own lives becomes a huge challenge. This lack of sense of self is also caused by a difference in their brains. Research on the topic, Banissy says, has shown that Amanda, and people like her, are missing a lot of “gray matter” in the “temporoparietal junction” of the brain, which is the part of the brain that distinguishes self from other. So, even though mirror touch synesthesia might prove useful in understanding others, it also causes people who have the condition to become so preoccupied with experiencing the feelings of others, that they start to lose themselves in the people around them.

So, with this condition, affected people are given an entirely different insight into the people around them, one that people *without* mirror touch would never be able to experience. On the other hand, this insight comes with a cost, and ends up making the lives of these synesthetes difficult to navigate. Of course, no matter the pros and cons of mirror touch synesthesia, most of us live without it, and will never be able to experience that form of reality. In most cases, we may not get any clear indication of what someone else is feeling unless we actively try to find out. At the same time, mirror touch synesthesia should not be considered a “shortcut” for people to understand the point of view of others better. Even when people should, because of their relationship to each other, have a good understanding of each other, they might not. It just takes so much to really *know* someone. For instance, Amanda (in NPR’s “Entanglement” story) had previously discovered that mirror touch synesthesia could be hereditarily passed down, and her eldest daughter had always shown signs of it. So, in a lot of ways, they did completely understand each other, because they had lived in close quarters to each other for such a long time, and would constantly feel each other’s emotions and physical feelings. However, they still saw the world in very different ways. Amanda had lived a longer life, full of past experience with her synesthesia, and had decided that living in isolation from the outside world was the only way to make sure she wouldn’t drift away from her family. At the same time, she also felt that she could never let herself get *too* emotionally involved in the lives of her children, because she would just end up living through them, the way she had emotionally (and almost physically) lived in the lives of others in the past. Meanwhile, Amanda’s daughter probably understood all this at a

certain level, but still felt that, no matter what, they should both try to get out in the world, even though every moment was always so overwhelming when surrounded by so many people.

If the Amanda's daughter could live through her mother's past, would her perspective change? If Amanda could live through a day of her daughter's life and see from her point of view, would she change her mind? Perhaps, when the situation is looked at this way, the only possible solution would be to transfer the past experiences of each person to the other. Unfortunately, at least as of now, it seems impossible to do so. There are philosophical terms however, that relate to this topic. They discuss our individual perception of the world, and hypothesize about how it is shaped, whether that hypothesis includes past experiences or not.

According to The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, **objectivism** entails that things like facts and relativity exist, regardless of people's opinions and thoughts about them. To say that "something has objective existence, is usually to say that its holding or existence is not derivative from its being thought to hold or exist." . For example, as Lloyd Kaufman writes in Sight and Mind, "what I say about another is quite as good as that which he might be able to say about himself. In some cases he may be in a better position to make the judgement because he may have more information available – but this is a trivial difference. Objectivity is still preserved...Clearly, any experience is more complicated than the report of the experience. The report is merely a sign of some experience, and it is the experimenter's problem to find out more" (21). In other words, people may have various or even opposing judgments about things, but those judgments don't alter the universal facts about those things.

Another channel of thought, **subjectivism**, is a term that means that either "judgments in question, despite first appearances, are really judgments about our own attitudes, beliefs, emotions, etc.", or that "one can deny that the judgments are true or false at all, arguing instead that they are disguised commands or expressions of attitude" (885). This way of thinking therefore depends more on an individual's point of view to decide whether something is externally true or real (etc.) than objectivism does. This is at once both a more limiting, and more open view than the one provided in objectivism, because it means that all of our judgments and beliefs (the way we perceive the world) are only based on previous judgements, beliefs, etc. that are already ingrained in us; although, it also means that our perception of the world is more layered than objectivists would like to say it is.

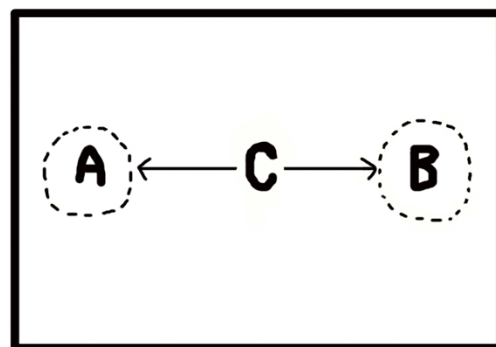
The third philosophical term that I looked into, **empiricism**, makes the claim that "experience has primacy in human knowledge and justified belief"(262). This form of thinking argues that our judgments and beliefs are built on a subtly complex structure, that depends on our entire life experience as human beings. In the empirical view, the *experience* of something leads to the established concepts or beliefs about that thing. In this way, empiricism is actually linked to objectivism, because it does establish that certain things are externally real, even if it puts more emphasis on experience to make those decisions.

In our world, it is hard to tell which strand of philosophical thinking we should put more focus on. There are seldom chances to test whether objectivism, subjectivism, or empiricism are more applicable to the human experience. Although, based on our previous approach to understanding the perspectives of others, and our relationship to empathy, a subjective view of the world might be more helpful. Meanwhile, neither empiricism nor objectivism give much credit to the concept that a person's perspective is based on personal views, attitudes, or emotions. However, because of empiricism's focus on experience, I believe that it is also helpful when trying to understand other people's view of the world. In NPR's story about the woman with mirror touch synesthesia, it was easy to see how experiencing the world subjectively, and

acknowledging that every person's perspective is different based on their emotions, etc. What if, however, there were a way to relate the importance of experience (which is related to empirical ideas) to a real world situation? Take the example of a pair of identical twins, separated at birth. Similar in looks and traits, should they be held to the same expectations even after having grown up in different environments? Or, would their experiences of the world cause their perspectives to differ?

In the movie *Twinsters*, a pair of identical twin girls find out about each other at 25 years old. They had been born in Korea, and were adopted by two different families. Sam had been adopted by a couple in America who already had two biological sons; Anais had been adopted by a couple in France who hadn't been able to have children. Neither their families nor the adoption agencies could figure out why they had ever been separated, but Sam and Anais were overjoyed that they had found each other at all. They felt deeply connected to each other almost instantly, but later came to discover the invisible differences between them that made it hard for them to completely understand each other. Even though Sam had grown up in a white family, and lived in a neighbourhood that was also predominantly white, where she looked nothing like any most of the people around her, everyone around had always been so accepting. She never thought that being adopted could be considered an abnormality or be perceived as a bad thing. She had always felt close to her older brothers and parents, and had grown up as a sociable and extroverted child. Meanwhile, Anais had been bullied for being adopted when she was younger. She remembers one of her peers telling her that she had been given up because her parents didn't love her. She also made the association early on that, if her adopted parents had been able to have their own biological children, they may not have adopted her at all. Because she was raised as an only child, she often felt lonely as well, but was never all that comfortable around other children. After having met her twin, she made the connection that she might have somehow been missing Sam the whole time. As two people with such different experiences, their perspectives on the world became unpredictably different, even though they felt so deeply connected to each other. Sam was always much more confident about taking bold steps, such as travelling back to Korea and attending a huge adoptee convention, meeting back up with both of their foster moms, and attempting to contact their birth mother. Meanwhile, Anais was always more hesitant about taking risks, and more cautious about making huge changes. Without learning about each other's past experiences and outlooks on the world, however, they couldn't understand the reasons that they felt differently or saw things in different ways.

A helpful metaphor to this situation can be found in Sight and Mind by Lloyd Kaufman. In one example of how our eyes perceive things, Kaufman describes a situation in which there are two points on a wall, A and B, using a diagram similar to this:



If a light is shone quickly at point A, then turned off, and then a separate light is shone at point B, then turned off, a viewer would see the light from point A moving across to point B (within the distance C). The truth is, there was never any light in range C at all! The lights shone at points A and B were physically separate, but the eye sees a connection between them when

both lights are shone in succession at a fast speed. This creates a paradox, because although the eye sees the light moving in range C before it gets to point B, we know that the light being physically shone at point B has to happen first, *before* the eye sees the light moving across C!

To relate this to Sam and Anais's story, our eyes have to see both lights in succession *before* we make an actual connection between them. Similarly, Sam and Anais had to understand more about each other (see both points A and B) in order to forge a deeper connection and relationship to each other. Learning more about the other person's experiences and point of view allowed them to empathize with each other and strengthen their bond.

So, how would the world be different if we had much better empathic skills? Based on the previously discussed examples, we might be able to answer this question. Of course, an intense level of empathic sense, like in the case of Amanda (in NPR's "Entanglement"), is, for the most part, too overwhelming and overstimulating for one individual to handle. Even if we tried however, most people *without* mirror touch synesthesia would never be able to get to that level. What we should do instead, is try to expand our understanding of others whenever we can, even if our level of understanding will never stretch to completeness. By taking time to step out of our narrow point of view, we could better understand how to act around others and in certain situations. I don't want to sound as if I'm the kind of person who wants to wrap the world in bubblewrap, and make sure that no one is ever offended, but I do believe that a heightened sense of empathy and understanding of other human beings could hugely change the world for the better. A lot times, because we think we understand each other well when we really don't, misunderstandings can happen. These misunderstandings might be avoided if we took time to try seeing from each other's point of view.

I've been told that I'm "observant", though it may just be due to my predisposition to stay quiet in social situations, and watch the exchanges of others instead of joining in. This was especially true when I was younger, and had even more trouble than I do now with being outspoken. While going about my daily life, I've witnessed plenty of exchanges become muddled and confusing because of misunderstandings. For example, I remember one small incident in which my brother and one of my friends were discussing their favourite tv shows. My friend's favourite show had always been Spongebob, and she was talking about how much she loved the show when my brother got distracted by a different show that had just come on the tv screen. He started making a comment about that show while, my friend, still in the last conversation, finished what she had been saying about Spongebob by telling us that she had watched every existing episode of it. In my brother's mind, the topic had already changed, and he asked, incredulously, how she could possibly have watched every episode of whatever show was playing on the tv right then. They then got into an argument about whether or not she had really watched every episode. Watching from outside the conversation, I had witnessed the exact moment that all the confusion had come from, even though neither my brother nor my friend even realized that there was any misunderstanding until I brought it to their attention. During even the simplest of conversations, each side can get a different impression of the situation, because it's hard to see how the other person's mind is working. Making faulty assumptions about the mutual understanding between you and someone else is extremely common, as Nicholas Epley, author and professor of behavioural science, proves in a series of experiments he has conducted. For instance, in one such experiment, people guessed how a general group of people (ex: their coworkers) felt about them in terms of qualities like intelligence, sense of humor, and consideration. Then, each person in that general group would actually evaluate them on those qualities. People's guesses about how a group would generally feel about them actually

corresponded quite well with the real evaluations: 0.55 correspondence (on a scale of 0 (no correspondence) to 1 (complete correspondence)). However, when people made guesses about how individual members of the group felt about them, the correspondence was only 0.13! This data shows how hard it is to tell if the impression you get from an individual reflects what they truly think. Because of our tendency to believe that we have a good idea of what others are feeling or thinking, we can easily walk into misunderstandings, big or small. For instance, you might find yourself in an unnecessary argument about television shows. In other cases, confidently assuming that you understand another person can lead to much graver consequences. As Nicholas Epley explains in his novel, *Mindwise*, this can happen not only in personal relationships, but in interactions with much more worldwide gravity attached to them.

In 1938, when Hitler told Neville Chamberlain, the then prime minister of Great Britain, that he would keep peace with Czechoslovakia, Chamberlain believed him and told the Czechs not to mobilize. He stated that “in spite of the hardness and ruthlessness [he] thought [he] saw in his face, [he] got the impression that here was a man who could be relied upon when he had given his word” (Epley, 8). In reality, Chamberlain was mistaken, and Hitler had already been prepared to, and did attack Czechoslovakia. Conversely, American officials assumed that Saddam Hussein was lying when he said that he had no weapons of mass destruction (Epley, 8) and ended up going to war even though Hussein was telling the truth. By being overly confident in what you know about others, you erase the possibility of understanding more. If Chamberlain or the American officials had considered more than what they saw at the surface level, maybe they would have refrained from making the decisions they made, or taking the actions they took. However, people tend to think that they have a better idea of how other people think or feel than they actually do. This is why, in many cases involving stereotyping, discrimination, and inconsideration, it can be hard to convince people to look past their prejudice.

As Roman Krznaric describes in his talk, “Empathy: Why it Matters & How to Get it”, understanding people on a deeper level than the impression we get of them from quick judgments can be helpful in changing the general mindset that we or others may have. Krznaric tells the story of Patricia Moore who, at 26 years old, worked at one of the most well-known design firms in the 1970s. She was the only woman who worked there at the time, and was sitting in a meeting about the design of a refrigerator door with her male colleagues, when she asked whether they could design a door handle that would be easy for people with arthritis to use. When she gave her suggestion however, one of the men simply turned to her and said, “we don’t design for those people”. This frustrated Moore, and for the next three years, she travelled to over 100 cities in America in the disguise of an 85 year old arthritic woman. She had a professional make up artist make her look older, she bound her arms and legs so that it would be difficult for her to move or use everyday objects, wore uneven shoes, and did everything she could think of to make her persona more accurate. Then, she experienced what daily life was like for a real elderly person with arthritis, went through the difficulties that neither she nor her colleagues at work had ever had to face, and saw how others would be treated because of her outward appearance. In a situation like this, it is easy to see how much this kind of experience could change one’s perception of the world. Especially as a designer, Moore was now able to recognize even more clearly the ways that society was cruel to and inconsiderate of the elderly and people with arthritis, and had the ability to use the insight that she had for good, by suggesting ways to make the world a more habitable place for these people. Of course, upon hearing this story, many people will be impressed by Moore’s dedication, but will doubt that they could ever do something even close to what she did. I can’t judge, as I don’t know if I could

take such a bold step either, but I believe that there are plenty of ways that people can create or find smaller experiments that may tackle similar problems of prejudice and inconsideration. Personally, one of the most insightful experiences I've had was participating in a Dialogue in the Dark tour. In these tours, people are lead in small groups by a blind tour guide through a completely dark building, set up with simulative sounds, scents, etc. to create a realistic portrait of daily life from the perspective of a blind person. As Dialogue in the Dark's website states:

"The daily routines become a new dimension. A reversal of roles is created: people who can usually see are confronted with the sudden withdrawal of their key-sense sight and are taken out of their familiar environment. Blind people are the experts out of their living circumstances, and provide the public with security and a sense of orientation by transmitting to them a world without pictures."

Through this experience, people who normally have the ability to see can take themselves out of their limited perspective for a moment. Of course, Dialogue in the Dark is still a controlled environment, and the one hour long tour will never compare to a lifetime of real experience, but it can offer a new perspective to people who could never imagine being in the shoes of a blind person. In my opinion, the experience did a good job of having the participants understand the struggles of daily life for a blind person, and of showing people with sight the conveniences that we take for granted. However, I believe it also allowed participants to see that it is no heroic deed to treat blind people with so much sympathy that it comes across as more of a pitiful attitude than one of understanding or respect. Blind people are human beings, and though their lives are more difficult than those of people with sight in some respects, they can be completely capable of navigating their own lives. Through such techniques of personal experience and simulation, people can expand their point of view to be more accommodating for others. Although, in certain situations, it truly is more difficult to create any sort of similar experiential bridge to empathic thinking.

For instance, it's nearly impossible to ever fully understand the point of view of someone else in the context of racial inequality and discrimination. For artist Fred Wilson, this reality has been ever-present in his life. He grew up as one of the only black people in his area, and in a place and at a time when no one around him was fully aware of or cared about how he felt about things they did or used in their daily lives. One element in his work has been the incorporation of "blackamoor" sculptures that he's collected. These tend to depict people with very dark skin as servants, holding trays or containers. People often owned them as everyday objects in their own homes, to hold such things as cigarette or candles. At a basic level, this insensitive side of society is just another case of a lack of empathy, but it cannot be dealt with in the same ways as the previously discussed cases. Supposing we could convince people with racist outlooks to consider the point of view of Wilson, or anyone else in similar circumstances. They would still never be able to empathize fully in the context of such a heavy dialogue as racism. In trying to understand arthritic people or blind people, going through the simulated experiences makes sense, because it provides a point of view that is close to realistic, even if the participants only get a small window of experience compared to the unchangeable path of those who actually have arthritis or are blind. In terms of racial issues, on the other hand, there is no way for, for example, a white person to physically receive the experience of a black person who has been subjected to a such a specific and deep-rooted kind of discrimination. In cases like this, it would be better to admit that there's no way for you to fully understand the person's mind or understand what it feels like to be in their place. Now, this isn't any kind of suggestion to give up on the whole effort. On the

contrary, taking a step back and viewing the situation in this way would open up more room for improvement.

In fact, this is important to keep in mind in relation to all kinds of situations. Because most people can't physically feel or understand what others are feeling, we end up only guessing and assuming. Of course, it is good that we are trying to make connections and understand people, but we have to destroy our illusion that interacting with others like that is good enough, and admit to ourselves that we *are* only making assumptions. Through this kind of mindset, people can become better at recognizing when they should think things over more thoroughly before brushing something off or making judgments about someone. Essential to the process of becoming a more empathic society, each individual should realize the importance of seeing from the point of view of others, and take steps toward doing so on both small and large scales.

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