NOT SO SKEPTICAL:
A COW'S-EYE VIEW ON OPTIMISM FOR EMPATHY

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I look at two skeptical accounts of empathy that argue against our ability to imagine what it is like to be someone else but present alternative solutions to accomplish the same sort of human understanding. I will demonstrate how these solutions can encompass the imaginative process cattle-equipment-designer Temple Grandin describes undergoing while trying to imagine what it is like to be a cow. I then argue that Grandin's exercise is a successful imagination of the other and because she uses the approaches described to achieve this, the accounts are not actually skeptical, and policymakers ought to adopt these sorts of practices.

I. INTRODUCTION

In Elaine Scarry's "The Difficulty of Imagining Other People," and Catriona Mackenzie and Jackie Leach Scully's "Moral Imagination, Disability, and Embodiment," these authors argue that our ability to imagine what it is like to be someone else, or to empathize, is quite poor. Because of this, they do not think we should focus our energy on imagining what it is like to be someone else.[1] Nonetheless, they both present "solutions" to accomplish the sort of human understanding that mere imaginative empathy fails at achieving. In this essay, I explain these exercises: Mackenzie and Scully's "sympathetic moral imagination" and Scarry's "weightlessness." I demonstrate how these approaches encompass what Temple Grandin describes in her memoir, *Thinking in Pictures: And Other Reports from my Life with Autism*. I will then argue that Grandin's exercise should be deemed a successful imagination of the other, and because she used the approaches of Scarry and Mackenzie and Scully to achieve this ability to imagine, the skeptical accounts are not so skeptical after all.

Temple Grandin is a gifted animal scientist and cattle equipment engineer with autism. In her memoir, she describes in detail the process of using careful observation and her special, visually-oriented imagination in trying to understand what it is like to be a cow so that she can optimally design cattle equipment.[2] By putting herself in the cow's shoes (or hooves), she strives to make the most humane equipment possible. Grandin is notably very good at her job; she has been credited with innovations that have transformed how cattle are handled, and writes that one third of the livestock in the United States are handled using equipment that she designed.[3] My goal is to show that Grandin is special not just because of her visual imagination—which she attributes to her autism—but also because of her effort in attempting to empathize with the cattle. This plays a big part in what makes her successful at her job. Most would agree that the ability to empathize with people who are different from us is an important skill, especially for policymakers. Thus, the optimistic account of empathy I hope to provide would demonstrate that if policymakers make an effort to employ the strategies described by Scarry, and Mackenzie and Scully, then they will be able to imagine what it is like to be someone very different from them. In a parallel to Grandin, if they are to be successful at their jobs then they must put in the effort to carry out these exercises.

1 Elaine Scarry, "The Difficulty of Imagining Other People," in *For Love of Country?*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 98-110; Catriona Mackenzie and Jackie Leach Scully, "Moral Imagination, Disability, and Embodiment," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 24, no. 4 (2007): 335-351, 10.1111/j.1468-5930.2007.00388.x.

2 Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures: And Other Reports from my Life with Autism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 3-26.

3 Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures,* 3.

II. MORAL SYMPATHETIC IMAGINATION

I will begin with Mackenzie and Scully's account. They focus on the empirical finding that able-bodied people typically make poor judgements on the quality of life of people with disabilities, and argue that our embodiment problematically limits our imagination in the case of empathy. They believe that traditional empathy—the exercise of imagining what it is like to be someone else—is flawed because it "is not morally engaging with the other; rather, it is projecting one's own perspective onto the other."[4] They provide a solution with what they call sympathetic moral imagination, where "the role of imagination in moral engagement with others is to expand the scope of our moral sympathies rather than to enable us to put ourselves in the other's place."[5] They define it as follows:

> In sympathetic moral imagination one does not try to imagine being the other from the inside. Rather, one recognizes that the other is different from oneself, one imaginatively engages with her perceptions and experiences, as she represents them, and one responds emotionally to her perspective and her situation.[6]

They explain that the key concept behind sympathetic moral imagination is "asymmetric reciprocity." Asymmetric reciprocity involves two main aspects: (1) the recognition of the other's personhood (the reciprocal requirement), and (2) the acknowledgement that there is a lot one does not know or understand about the other person (the asymmetric requirement).[7] Thus, it is an approach of humility. Instead of trying to imagine what it is like to be someone else—where you inevitably project your own perspective—you should use your imagination to keep an open mind and engage with others. This is especially useful in cases where we try to imagine being someone very different from ourselves, which are often the most difficult (but most important) cases.

I will now draw connections between the moral sympathetic imagination and Grandin's account. It is evident that Grandin meets the reciprocal requirement by recognizing the equivalent of humanity

4 Mackenzie and Scully, "Moral Imagination," 345.

5 Mackenzie and Scully, "Moral Imagination," 338.

6 Mackenzie and Scully, "Moral Imagination," 347.

7 Mackenzie and Scully, "Moral Imagination," 346.

in a cow. She writes, "No one understood why the animals coming out of the dip vat would sometimes become excited, but I figured it was because they wanted to follow their drier buddies, not unlike children divided from their classmates on a playground."[8] Here she compares cows directly to children, making it clear that she believes they have complex emotional states just like she does as a human. In designing the dip-vats, she put a great deal of effort into understanding what it is that scares the cows, again demonstrating that she recognizes the mutual "humanity" between herself and the cow.

The more complicated question is whether or not Grandin properly meets the asymmetric requirement. Mackenzie and Scully underscore the idea that thinking you can perform an *in-her-shoes* imagination is dangerous. However, it appears Grandin thinks she can do just that. She writes that "I can imagine the sensations the animals would feel. If I had a calf's body and hooves, I would be very scared to step on a slippery metal ramp."[9] Grandin is perspective-taking, which seems to be exactly what Mackenzie and Scully want to avoid. However, I do not think that Grandin fails the asymmetry requirement. To explain this, we first have to separate the process from the outcome. Grandin's outcome is imagining what it is like to be a cow—or at least thinking she can—but her process involves much more. She writes elsewhere that she "had spent the past six years studying how cattle see their world and watching thousands move through different facilities all over Arizona" and it was because of this that "it was immediately obvious to me why they were scared."[10] It is not as though Grandin always thought she was capable of knowing what it is like to be a cow; it is quite the opposite. This might seem obvious because very few of us think we know what it is like to be a cow, as opposed to knowing what it is like to be another person. Grandin was no exception; her approach was one that met the asymmetric requirement and exhibited humility. She did not project her perspective onto the cows, instead she actively tried to learn theirs. At the beginning of her career she used a camera at the cows' eye-level in an attempt to best capture their perspective. Her process was a more difficult, cow-equivalent of some actions that Mackenzie and Scully suggest can cultivate moral imagination, such as "talking to those whose perspectives one is trying to understand, informing oneself about their situation, reading fictional representations of their lives," and "watching films that represent the world from their point of view."[11] Cows do not communicate like humans, but Grandin

8 Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, 8.
9 Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, 8.
10 Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, 6.
11 Mackenzie and Scully, "Moral Imagination," 347.

humbly meets them more than halfway. Indeed, Grandin ends up imagining from the inside, but she is only able to do so after years of observation from the outside.

If we focus on Grandin's process, we can see that she meets both the reciprocal and asymmetric requirements necessary for sympathetic moral imagination. It is important to note that Grandin also credits these sorts of approaches with allowing her to outperform other engineers and have meaningful innovations. I have not fully addressed if the fact that Grandin ends up perspective-taking as an outcome is something Mackenzie and Scully should still be concerned about. However, we do know that they are only concerned with unsuccessful perspective taking. Later, I will argue that Grandin was indeed successful, and that if this argument is bought we can dismiss this worry.

III. WEIGHTLESSNESS

I will now introduce Scarry's account. Scarry does not share the same view that "generous imaginings" of individuals are dangerous—she thinks we should engage in them—but she does point out that we have good reason to think we are bad at it. Because of this, she argues that we should focus on unimagining the self in order to eliminate the concept of "foreignness."[12] Similar to Mackenzie and Scully, she worries that generous imaginings—or even discussions—involving the concept of the other "allow[s] the fate of another person to be contingent on the generosity and wisdom of the imaginer."[13] This means that empathy could easily be botched and abused by policymakers. To explain what she means by weightlessness, Scarry writes: "The alternative strategy is to achieve equality between self and other not by trying to make one's knowledge of others *as weighty as* one's self-knowledge, but by making one ignorant about oneself and therefore *as weightless as* all others."[14] It might seem difficult to apply this concept and her call for constitutional design to the cattle case. However, something pertinent and valuable is revealed when we focus on how Grandin's approach actively fights against the temptation to dismiss cows as "the other." I believe this can be supported in the same way the reciprocal requirement was supported in Mackenzie and Scully's case. By recognizing the humanity within cows and exhaustively trying to see from their perspective, Grandin accomplishes this dissolution of "the other." It might seem more tempting in the cow case—compared to a human case—to simply dismiss cows as not

12 Scarry, "Imagining Other People," 98.
13 Scarry, "Imagining Other People," 106.
14 Scarry, "Imagining Other People," 105.

having the same sort of complex emotions and reactions that people do. This is exactly what Grandin fights against. Another important part of Scarry's weightlessness is the process of unimagining the self. This aspect happens to align nicely with Mackenzie and Scully's asymmetry requirement, which we have already proven Grandin has met with her incredible humility in her process of careful observation. Recall that Grandin carries in no assumptions, but instead films hours and hours of tape in an effort to figure out exactly how the cattle would feel or react. She wants to rewrite her own visual memory using film where she is at the cows' eye level, so she can see how they see. If there was a constitutional safeguard in place—like the one Scarry calls for—perhaps other engineers would not be making the errors that result from dismissing the cow's pain or fear.

IV. EVALUATING SUCCESS

Now we know that Grandin's actions appear to correspond well with the alternative solutions suggested by Mackenzie and Scully. However, we have yet to evaluate whether her actions result in the optimism for empathy that we are seeking. Should we count this as a successful imagining of the other? To raise the stakes, recall that if Grandin's imagining was not successful, Mackenzie and Scully would likely dismiss her whole process and deem it dangerous. But if Grandin was successful, there is no need for concern.

We know that if we evaluate success based on the outcome, Grandin was successful in achieving her goal; she created equipment that better handles cattle, so her process fulfilled its purpose. However, this does not necessarily mean her imaginative exercise was successful, because we do not know if her reasoning was correct; it might be that the cows no longer tip and drown for reasons other than being less afraid. Nonetheless, Grandin impressively predicted how the animals would react to the equipment, which gives us good reason to believe her imaginative exercise might be on par with what the cattle are really thinking. Empirical evidence suggests reactions are difficult to predict, even our own. With this in mind, if someone is able to predict what appears to be an emotional or behavioral reaction, or lack thereof, this certainly seems like a win. Grandin also predicts animal response better than any other engineers, and attributes it to her deeper understanding of the cows. This leads me to believe the success is valid. If Grandin believes that she has implemented practices better than other engineers because she can understand the cows better than they can, it is unlikely that her success is due to "luck" or some other factor.

So, we have strong evidence that Grandin can successfully predict animal behavior as a result of her imaginings. However, many will

protest that knowing how a cow will behave is not the same as knowing *what it is like* to be a cow. For example, we know how a trained dog will behave, but that does not mean we have any idea of *what it is like* to be a dog from a first-person perspective. I would argue that the concept of knowing *what it is like* in that sense is impossible, or at least extremely difficult, for any other person or animal. I think the kind of concept people employ with that standard is something like consciousness, a standard that is far too high. I highly doubt that we will ever be able to know another's consciousness, nor do I think that it would be of much use to anyone even if we did. We should recall the goal here: to get an account of empathy that is optimistic enough for policymakers. For a policymaker to be successful in an empathetic exercise, I think we want them to achieve some understanding of how individuals come to their conclusions and respond to things. We do not need a step-by-step thought process, and certainly not a stream of consciousness. We want policymakers to excel in empathetic exercises that involve knowing when others will experience fear and pain in cases when the policymakers themselves would not. The prediction of behavior and reaction seems like a win for empathy; this prediction was useful in the cow case, and its equivalent would be a significant asset for policy makers in the people case.

V. WORRIES AND RESOLUTIONS

Even if Grandin was successful in her imaginative exercise, in order to deem this a promising account of empathy we also need to show that it can be transferred to policymakers, and that they too can be successful even if the cases are notably different. We might worry that Grandin's case is an exception for two reasons. First, she is gifted—if she can succeed, does that necessarily mean policymakers or non-gifted people can too? Second, we might worry that empathizing with cows is relevantly different than empathizing with people.

Beginning with Grandin, it seems there are two relevant advantages she has that might make her a special exception for empathy: (1) her autism and visual thinking advantage, and (2) time. I think we can ultimately dismiss these, because policymakers should be able to replicate both of them. First, with her visual thinking advantage, Grandin notes that there are now cameras and equipment that allow people to do themselves what she does so efficiently in her head. Also, the visual advantage seems to apply more to the equipment design example than it would to policy design. We hope that policymakers would have the equivalent of relative advantage/talent in being able to foresee/design future policy. The second advantage is time. Grandin spent many years trying to gain a cow's perspective, and that was only

one type of animal. How can we expect policymakers to put the same effort into so many different types of people? The answer is—like Grandin would say about her own work—that it should be part of the job. One of the advantages Grandin describes is always thinking in specifics, not generalizations, and perhaps policymakers should employ this too. They should aim to meet with and learn the stories of many individuals, which would improve their ability to imagine the other. On an individual level, the people case should be far easier to employ than the cow case in both of these respects, because we have the advantage of being able to directly communicate with each other. We do not have to follow another person around for years—we can simply read books, watch movies, and accept testimony.

This means we have also started to solve the cow vs. people issue. While some might be concerned that cows have much less complex emotional states than humans—making the human case harder—Grandin would disagree. Part of what we established when breaking down her methods is that she assumed cows had similar emotional states/reactions to humans, and it seems as though the outcome verifies her assumption. In addition, if we think the challenge of an empathetic exercise corresponds to the differences in experience between the subject of empathy and the empathizer, and the complexity of the emotional state we are trying to uncover, then we still do not have good reason to believe it is harder to empathize with humans than cows.

Most people would say they have more in common with people—who are starkly different from them, but live in the same country—than they do a cow. Once we add the fact that we can directly communicate with people in a way that we cannot with cows, it seems as though the policymaker's job should almost be easy compared to what Grandin managed to accomplish. If Grandin achieved empathetic success with cows by using the methods of Mackenzie and Scully, and Scarry, then policymakers should not find much trouble in applying them with people—which was the original intention of the authors.

VI. CONCLUSION

To conclude, although Mackenzie and Scully, and Scarry give pessimistic accounts of imagining the other, they advocate for processes similar to Grandin's process of imagining what it is like to be a cow. There are many reasons for us to think of Grandin's imagining as successful, especially in predicting responses and behavior. I have argued that policymakers should be able to employ the sort of processes advocated by Mackenzie and Scully, and Scarry, and that, if they do employ them, we have good reason to believe it will result in a successful empathetic exercise—just like the one Grandin managed. Because of this, the accounts do not appear that pessimistic after all, and it seems we can be optimistic that empathy can and should have an important place in policymaking.

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