Understanding Others in an Alienating World: Comments on Lori Gruen's *Entangled Empathy*

REMY DEBES

Is moral theory alienating? This question, and the worries that lie behind it, motivate much of Lori Gruen's distinctive approach to animal ethics in Entangled Empathy. *According to Gruen, the "traditional" methods of moral theory rely on abstractions that strip away the details that give our lives meaning. Although I am deeply sympathetic to these worries, as well as to the alternative ethics Gruen proposes in response to them, in this article I express a few reservations about the argument Gruen uses to motivate her worries and to establish her solution. First, I raise some questions about her conception of "traditional" moral theory and the possible historical figures she means to indict. I then suggest that the principal gear of her argument—her conception of "entangled empathy"—suffers from some inconsistency in application, which risks leading her to posit a thicker notion of empathy than she should want. In particular, her argument risks setting a standard of correctness for "successful" empathy that is implausible on its own terms, but that is also a standard of correctness with morally and politically questionable implications in the human context.*

Is moral theory alienating? This question, and the worries that lie behind it, motivate much of Lori Gruen's distinctive approach to animal ethics in her brilliant book, *Entangled Empathy*. In fact, anyone who thinks this book is about only animal ethics would miss much of its point. Certainly, it is about animal ethics. But the animal ethics is supposed to illustrate an alternative method for ethics in general. This is because, according to Gruen, moral theory is indeed alienating. Its "traditional" methods, she argues, rely on abstractions that strip away many of the details that give our lives meaning. Moreover, these abstractions often end up implying suspicious binaries. For example, abstract ethics often assumes that moral deliberation is all about choosing between "right" and "wrong" actions; and it often constrains the narratives we rely on in these deliberations to tropes about "heroes" and "victims." The

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end result, Gruen argues, is a picture of moral life that doesn't match very well with . . . well, moral life.

I want to reflect on this broad aspect of Gruen's book. I am sympathetic both to her worries about ethical theory and to the alternative approach she proposes. Indeed, my own work presses a similar line of argument, albeit in the context of human ethics. But the main reason I focus on this broad aspect is that, insofar as I have reservations about Gruen's conclusions or some of the various moves she makes, they largely connect back to the alternative form of moral theorizing she proposes and its implications for critical projects in contemporary moral philosophy like feminist ethics. Correspondingly, I pay comparatively less attention to her specific aims within animal ethics, which aims are more thoroughly examined by my fellow commentators, Diana Tietjens Meyers and Myisha Cherry (included in this issue).

To be clear, nothing I say here is meant to undermine Gruen's arguments. Gruen and I have similar ideas about how to reconceptualize certain fundamental questions in ethics and thus we are—from my perspective, anyway—in dialogue. In other words, I would not call myself Gruen's critic. I am her interlocutor. And the following comments are my exchanges in a conversation she has so beautifully initiated.

I. Moral Theory and the Alienation Problem

Gruen speaks of four kinds of alienating effects of abstract moral theory. The first might be called *structural insensitivity*. Gruen writes, "As it is usually practiced, ethical theorizing detaches us from our actual moral experiences and practices through abstract reasoning. It sidesteps the complex social and political structures and ideologies that are always in play" (Gruen 2015, 13). In other words, moral theory often fails to notice the ways it trades on assumptions about conceptual norms that are already ideological. Its very language, for example, is often the language of what is Western, male, white, straight, human, and so on. Second, moral theory is *insensitive to particulars*, especially what is meaningful to particular persons, from their particular points of view. Abstract reasoning, Gruen explains, "sets aside our particular concerns, our relationships, and the other things that make life worth living" (13). Third, abstract moral theory has a *flattening effect*: "Since ethical theories force us to focus on certain features of a situation in a narrow way, the narrow focus flattens or erases the complexity of actual moral problems. They, therefore, fail to capture all the richness of moral experience" (13–14). These first three effects are the "principal" ways moral theory is alienating (my terminology). The fourth alienating effect, by contrast, is a consequence of the preceding three: insofar as we suffer from the first three effects, Gruen argues, we risk being alienated from possible *solutions* to the moral problems we face. She explains, we are alienated from "possible interpretations of the context in which we find ourselves—interpretations that could lead to an expanded understanding not only of the troubling situation, but also of one's role in it" (14).

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Gruen traces these tendencies toward alienation to a basic methodological misstep, namely, of thinking about ethics from the "outside in" rather than the "inside out" (28). She offers a few different descriptions of what she means by this, but the most persuasive, I find, is her suggestion that traditional moral theory misconceives agency, namely by making moral agency "parasitic" on a person's "outward behaviors." Drawing on the work of Iris Murdoch, Gruen argues that "These outward behaviors become the focal point of ethical choice and action, and the inner life of the agent remains mysterious or, when accessible, beside the point of ethical theorizing." Instead, Gruen endorses Murdoch's insistence that an adequate moral theory will make sense of the way that moral life "is something that goes on continually" (Murdoch's words), and thus focuses on all that happens *in between* our choices about what to do. As Murdoch says, "What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial" (Murdoch 1970, 36, quoted in Gruen 2015, 27).

I think Gruen, and Murdoch before her, are right about this. Correspondingly, I agree that moral theory needs both to rethink moral agency and to shift to thinking of those whom one is deliberating about in terms of the *particular* agents they are. Moral theory must find ways of appropriately taking into account what is important from the point of view of the particular others whom one engages with. Or to put this last point into my own terms, the goal should be to acknowledge and respect the *experiences* of particular others—where "experience" is understood dynamically and diachronically, and thus incorporates more than static judgments and discrete actions. But also and what is crucial, the goal should be to acknowledge and respect the *meaning* or *significance* of those experiences *for* the ones who have them.

Of course, this family of claims must be defended. And Gruen spends some time doing just this, partly by way of the negative argument regarding the costs of alienation (described above), and partly by way of a positive argument justifying her alternative methodology. This alternative methodology (which I will elaborate further in section III) advocates "entangled empathy" as a kind of moral "attentiveness." Gruen defends its value on two grounds: (1) entangled empathy fleshes out Murdoch's call to describe the inner life of the moral agent who is deliberating; and (2) it fleshes out the deliberative attitude needed to properly acknowledge the particularity of others, their experiences, and the significance of those experiences. Let me reflect briefly on Gruen's negative argument, and then more substantively on her positive one.

II. Which tradition? Clarifying Gruen's Target

Gruen's argument that "traditional" moral theory is alienating will draw some objections. And in some respects, this might be fair. Gruen doesn't pause to say exactly what she takes "traditional" moral theory to be, who it includes, when it begins, and so on. Consider the contemporary scene first. Presumably Gruen has the deontological-consequentialist dichotomy in view, as evidenced in part by her use of Tom Regan and Peter Singer as two paradigm examples of "traditional" animal ethics—but

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one might reasonably wish she had been clearer on this point. After all, as Gruen herself notes, worries about the alienating effects of the staid "Kant v. Mill" picture of ethical theory are not new. Thus, if this picture is the suspect "tradition" Gruen has in mind, then it is a tradition *already* under fire. Correspondingly, one might wonder why Gruen thinks current moral theory is still in thrall to this tradition. Indeed, the signature arguments of Regan and Singer are now over thirty years old. I'm no expert on animal ethics, but is it really so mired? To be clear, for my part, and thinking of human-focused ethical theory, I think Gruen's worries still have merit.[1] But because Gruen doesn't specify the various thinkers outside of animal ethics she has in mind, I concede that she leaves room for resistance.

Furthermore, the historical scope of Gruen's criticism of "traditional" ethics is also unclear. Plausibly, she means to include as part of "traditional" ethics the early modern "canon" of Western ethics, from Grotius and Hobbes to Kant and Mill. This is particularly likely given that Gruen ultimately allies herself with care ethics, which has feminist underpinnings, and feminist ethics has registered many grievances against exactly this "canon." But if Gruen does mean to target this early modern "tradition," then I think more caution is needed. Though the early moderns have been interpreted in ways that gave rise to the kind of tradition Gruen laments as "alienating," it is less clear that the historical figures *themselves* fail, at least *en masse,* in all the ways Gruen lays out.

So consider further: few scholars of early modern ethics (c. 1650–1850) believe this period can be neatly divided into utilitarian and deontological traditions. This is not just because Kant and Mill were literally late bookends to this period, but also because early modern ethics was manifestly diverse. It incorporated a wide range of moral theories, a fact that contemporary moralists unfortunately often lose sight of. Furthermore, and more important, although I certainly agree that most early modern views failed in the first principal way Gruen worries about—namely, they largely failed to notice the ways their views traded on ideological assumptions (concepts normed to what is male, Western, white, and so on)—nevertheless, I'm not convinced that early modern views failed in the second two principal ways Gruen identifies. That is, I'm not convinced that (1) early modern moralists were—all of them—insensitive to the particular values and experiences of particular people; or that (2) they "flattened" the moral world out, erasing the complexity of actual moral problems.

This is not the place to canvass early modern moral theory to prove my point. Instead, I offer just one counterexample: the eighteenth-century Scottish sentimentalist tradition, known best through the work of David Hume and Adam Smith. First of all, Hume and Smith made much of the role of empathy, albeit under the terminology of "sympathy." Second, and more important, even though Hume and Smith emphasized one kind of abstraction in making judgments—namely, by requiring us to be aware of and to bracket personal foibles and selfish biases that could cloud empathy—both Hume and Smith emphasized the necessity of attending to particular details of particular lives. Smith was the most explicit in this respect. Thus, at the outset of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith argues that it is precisely when we

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don't take up the particular viewpoints of particular persons that we are apt to drift toward moral insensitivity: "[T]he spectator must, first of all, endeavor, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other . . . He must adopt the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents; and strive to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded" (Smith 1759/2001, I.i.4.6). This sounds very much like what Gruen is encouraging.

I suspect Gruen will readily concede that Smith is more ally than antagonist. But she might reply that Smith's work is, at present, still largely only known of, not well known. Hence, she might say that Smith's theory is an unfair counterexample to her worries about what today is considered "traditional." Fair enough. Still I hesitate. After all, Hume's theory is well known, and Hume's view is a precursor to Mill's. Moreover, I suspect that Mill himself—who also laid some stress on the import of "sympathy" in the crucial chapter 5 of *Utilitarianism*—expressed far more sensitivity to particulars than going caricatures of his view make clear. Similarly, there is considerable sensitivity to particular persons and contexts in Rousseau, who was in important ways a precursor to Kant. This should make us wonder whether even Kant, the great generalizer, showed more concern for the inner lives of particular agents and their particular cares than we usually remember him for. In short, however alienating moral theory has become, Gruen's account leaves it unclear in what sense, exactly, this is a problem of the "tradition" of moral theory.

III. Empathy, Care, and Understanding: Gruen's Theory in the Human Context

I turn now to Gruen's positive argument for entangled empathy. I won't try to rehearse the entire argument here. Instead, I will focus on a few key points of the argument, and raise some questions about those points.

As Gruen defines it, "entangled empathy" is one species of empathy. It blends emotion and cognition into a process that is both simulative of and reflective on the situation of another. It is a kind of mental "attunement" to the life of a particular other (human or nonhuman animal), which begins when our attention is "grabbed" by the wellbeing of the other (Gruen 2015, 51).

I expect there will be those who will take Gruen to task for her conception of empathy, in some kind of attempt to show it is not "really" empathy. This is because empathy research is flourishing across all areas of the arts and sciences. And although this flourishing has produced an array of interesting insights, it has (unsurprisingly) also resulted in proprietary attitudes and debates about the concept. But Gruen could and should brush aside such challenges. On the one hand, she might simply cite the variety of different usages of the term *empathy* as evidence that the concept is, *now*, eclectic and in principle malleable. Thus, although I suspect most would describe empathy as more or less some kind of mental process leading to affective/emotional accord or resonance between persons, Gruen is hardly the first to use it to connote a similar process in nonhuman animals. Sometimes "empathy" connotes only the end state of such a process in humans or animals, that is, the *resulting* affective *accord*

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between sentient creatures. Others argue that empathy can be "cold"—that we can come to know what another creature feels without actually feeling any such emotion ourselves. "Empathy" has even been used to denote a distinct emotion rather than a process or capacity to feel emotions. Or again, "empathy" has been used to indicate a correspondence of thought rather than emotion, especially in the longstanding debate between simulation theories and "theory" theories of "mind-reading" (which debate, I duly note, has further complicated the meaning of empathy in virtue of recently linking empathy to the discovery of so-called mirror neurons). And even this list isn't exhaustive. I'm cataloguing only the most common definitions of empathy.[2]

On the other hand, and more to the point, Gruen could point out that empathy has *always* been a malleable concept. The term *empathy* wasn't even in the English language until 1909, when it was coined by the early twentieth-century American psychologist Edward Titchener as a translation of the German aesthetician Theodor Lipps's concept of *Einfühlung*—and, to boot, a *mis*interpretation of what Lipps meant (see Debes 2015). "Empathy" is thus a term without principled etymological roots, which, from the outset, has been an instrument for expressing the fancy of theorists. Indeed, as I've argued elsewhere, the short conceptual history of "empathy" is distinguished precisely by the diverse ways it has been used to capture a range of phenomena in psychology, psychoanalysis, ethics, aesthetics, sociology, legal theory, and neuroscience (to name the most prominent) (Debes 2015).

In short, at this point the only responsible use of the concept of *empathy* requires some degree of stipulation. And Gruen does exactly this. Correspondingly, any direct challenge to the veracity of Gruen's conception would be wrongheaded. (To be clear, the foregoing apology for Gruen should not be confused with asking how her conception of empathy *fits into* the general landscape of literature on empathy? This is a good question—but as it is already well addressed by my fellow commentators, Cherry and Meyers, I will not belabor it here.)

Having said all this, I do have a complaint about Gruen's usage. At a few points, Gruen waffles a bit in her own application of her definition. And this waffling drifts unannounced into what I think is an overly thick notion of empathy—that is, a notion of empathy that would place onto her alternative ethics a daunting condition of success that she doesn't even need. So consider again: Gruen clearly wants to thicken empathy to a kind of "caring understanding" of the situation of the other, where the sense of "care" is cognitive. It is a kind of "attention" to another creature that is focused, so to speak, on the wellbeing of that creature.[3] However, sometimes Gruen runs this cognitive sense of "caring" together with a motivational one. For example, just before her formal definition (Gruen 2015, 51), she says empathy is the ability to "understand" the situation of another, "and try to help them overcome a problem they may face" (51). This formulation builds pro-social motivation into entangled empathy. Then, only a few lines later, Gruen says that empathy only "tends" to lead to action. So which is it? The ensuing paragraphs continue the discussion of motivation, but they are inconclusive. She notes that *psychologists* often couple motivation to their concept of "empathy," but she never says definitively whether such coupling accurately describes her own particular conception of entangled

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empathy. She cautions against conditioning empathy only on purely altruistic kinds of motivation, conceding that self-interested motives (for example, to relieve the distress one feels by empathy with another's pain) can be hard to dissect in practice from altruistic ones.

I think clarity on this point of motivation is important. If entangled empathy must involve motivation to further the wellbeing of the other (in some sense), then Gruen's concept is very thick indeed, and this thickness risks limiting its applicability. More to the point, I do not think Gruen needs so thick a notion—to solve the problems of alienation anyway. Those problems, recall, press us to (1) raise our awareness of the "social and political structures and ideologies" that form the currency of our own thinking; (2) take into account the particular viewpoints, concerns, and cares of individual others; and (3) engender sensitivity to the complexity of real, lived moral situations. But can't these problems of alienation be solved (in principle) by Gruen's notion of entangled empathy as a cognitive-affective kind of *attention* to the situated wellbeing of others? I do not see how a pro-social *motivation*—such as a desire to aid others to overcome their problems—does any further *conceptual* work toward de-alienating our moral encounters, even if I can guess how it might serve as a psychological buoy to such attention.

Having said this, let me take one further step to ask, is it even essential to construe empathic attention as a kind of *care* in the first place? I understand that if we construe empathic attention as focused on the "wellbeing" of the other, it might simply seem to follow that we are talking about a kind of care. After all, what else do we mean by care, cognitively speaking, than attention to another's wellbeing? So let me recast my question: is it necessary to think of empathy as focused on *wellbeing*? That is, is a focus on wellbeing what is needed to solve the alienation problems? Let me elaborate.

It seems to me that what is at the heart of the alienation worries is not a question of wellbeing per se, but of agency, namely, of the fact that agency is perspectival. That is, to be an agent just is to have a perspective, where this means, roughly, to have experiences with significance. Agents don't simply "have" experiences, they have experiences that mean something. Moreover, to understand this significance, it is never enough to generalize the meaning of this significance, that is, by interpreting the significance of one's experiences through various abstractions. We must try to understand the meaning of their experiences *from their point of view*. Likewise, as agents ourselves, we think of ourselves in similar terms. Now, hitherto "traditional" moral theory has paid little attention to this aspect of agency, focusing instead on the idea of persons as *rational* agents. Correspondingly, it seems to me that what matters fundamentally when it comes to overcoming alienation isn't making sure we work in considerations of "wellbeing" (though such considerations might come into play), but rather that we work in proper recognition for this aspect of moral agency —for the fact that agents have experiences with peculiar significance.

To be perfectly clear, I agree with Gruen that empathy (in some sense) is the linchpin. What it means to "recognize" another's perspective still requires something like the cognitive-affective process of attention Gruen presses. All I am questioning

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is whether this attention must focus on the other's *wellbeing*, as opposed to the more generic, broader notion of *perspective*? This might sound like splitting hairs. So consider the question from another angle. What is involved with understanding a person's situation in a way that is focused on wellbeing? Quite a bit! Gruen emphasizes the fact that we must try to take account of the other's concerns and interests. But why stop there? Don't I need to attend to your preferences, goals, aspirations, hopes, fears, anxieties, heartbreaks, lovers, enemies, friends, family, and so on? All of these feed into your "wellbeing." And if so, then what can possibly count as successful empathy? The answer, it seems, is something like "full" empathy. Gruen suggests as much in the context of thinking about how empathy can "go wrong." She writes:

> When we empathize with others we are attempting to imagine *fully* how they experience their situation from their position. We notice the environmental cues that they are responding to, and we try to understand their particular frame of mind. However, their perspectives are often shaped by experiences that we ourselves haven't had, and thus our empathetic engagement will be limited or incomplete. (Gruen 2015, 85; emphasis added)

I have deep reservations about this. First, as I already noted, I am suspicious that anything like "full" empathy—understood descriptively as "complete" or "perfect"—is needed to overcome the risks of alienation in traditional moral theory. Second, given Gruen's particular ambitions in animal ethics, I think this is a risky norm to set on entangled empathy. It seems to me that the only way to be *certain* we have reached such "full" empathy is if the other creature whom we are trying to understand can *confirm* the interpretation we make of her situation; that is, if she can confirm our interpretation about the significance her experiences have *for her*—from her point of view. And although I'm sanguine about the possibility that some nonhuman animals can confirm our interpretations (in some way or other), it stretches the boundaries of credence to think many can. *Our* interpretations are so saturated in human concepts, theory, and ideology that it seems wild to say nonhuman animals could fathom them. So how can they confirm what *we* mean by *our* interpretations of *their* perspectives? Now, perhaps Gruen could simply bite the bullet here, and admit that entangled empathy with nonhuman animals is in principle incomplete empathy. But even this concession wouldn't allay my worries. Understanding a person's perspective "fully" is or ought only to be a sufficiency claim, not a descriptive one. I close by offering three brief arguments for this claim, which arguments will slowly draw us back to thinking about the implications of Gruen's arguments for critical projects in ethics, feminist or otherwise.[4]

The intuition pump: To be sure, in our everyday exchanges about the situations that we face in life, we say things like, "I understand exactly what you mean," or "I totally get you." But we rarely mean it literally. In our everyday practice, empathic success is treated as understanding someone's perspective "well enough."

The moral argument. If a descriptively "perfect" grasp of another's perspective were the goal—that is, if this is what we meant by "full" understanding—who among us

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would really want to be fully understood? We are undoubtedly usually eager to have our individual perspectives taken into account, but this desire comes with the caveat that some distance is preserved. This is not just an issue of privacy. We cringe at the suggestion that we are not, to some degree, inscrutable in the eyes of others. But also, the aim of perfect understanding seems to mischaracterize the ethically proper mind-set of the one-trying-to-understand. To think we see the world *exactly* as someone else does flies in the face of the concept of other-regarding respect. Whatever the precise nature of such respect turns out to be, it must preserve the distinction between *me* and *thee*—that is, of self and other. Yet isn't this what a claim of "perfect" understanding, if taken literally, seems to efface?

The political argument. To norm empathic understanding to descriptive fullness risks systematically favoring socially empowered groups and harming disempowered ones. Consequently, it risks reifying what social epistemologists call "epistemic oppression," and in turn, to reintroduce alienation into moral theory. Consider: Empowered groups enjoy certain seeming epistemic privileges when it comes to self- and interpersonal understanding. In particular, dominant social groups trade on existing, "collectively" shared—perhaps we should say, mainstream—forms of social understanding to reach self- and interpersonal understanding. And disempowered groups are pressed to conform to these normalized, mainstream social understandings. These understandings may take myriad forms, but are especially obvious in the gamut of narrative tropes that the mainstream uses to relate what it means to (1) occupy paradigm social roles (father, wife, teacher, doctor, bus driver, and so on); (2) experience major life events (job, college graduation, promotion, birth of a child, retirement, and so on); or (3) possess life goods (job, house, gym membership, and so on). We rely on these narrative tropes to make sense of who we are, to ourselves and to others. And yet, as Miranda Fricker argues in her seminal work on epistemic oppression, *Epistemic Injustice*, it is easy to entertain the idea that relations of unequal power "skew" these tropes, with the result that the powerful tend to have easy and more widely accepted understandings of their experiences, "whereas the powerless are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible" (Fricker 2007, 148). The consequence is if full understanding were set to a descriptive norm, then dominant groups would get the unearned privilege of better prospects for successful "full" understanding—at least in the sense that they would more likely have a *sense* of being understood.[5] Correspondingly, disempowered groups will be subject to disparaging judgments of their perspectives, which perspectives will risk being thought weird or even unintelligible.

This last remark should elicit a pause. On the one hand, the foregoing consequence hardly seems hypothetical, but rather a description of the actual world we live in. On the other hand, I claimed that everyday claims to understanding persons do *not* purport to be claims of descriptively full understanding, but instead claims of sufficiency. What, then, explains why disempowered groups are actually struggling for understanding? But the answer to this question *is* the point. Despite purporting only to sufficiency, our practices of understanding are nevertheless vulnerable to trenchant epistemic injustice. Even though our actual claims to understanding persons don't

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pretend to be more than, or demand more than, sufficiency, the way we go about deciding what is sufficient nevertheless trades on already accepted social tropes. This is because there are always two parts in the process of understanding persons: the actual back and forth of the interpretive dialectic, and the judgment, if only implicit, of whether that dialectic succeeded; whether I "got" your perspective, or you "got" mine. And when it comes to this second, normative part—the judgment of whether a given interpretation of a given experience "gets someone right"—this practice of *evaluation* is mired in the real epistemic inequities. Thus mainstream, empowered groups tend to count as sufficient only what can be rendered in existing descriptive tropes, which is to say, the tropes *they* accept. And it is the reality of this epistemic injustice that informs the political reason against norming understanding to descriptive fullness. Were we to defend descriptive fullness, we would reify in theory what is already an in-practice injustice, and thus add insult to injury.

I suspect Gruen will agree with my arguments and in the future avoid describing the goal of empathy as descriptive fullness. Of course, that opens a new question: what determines what is "sufficient" when it comes to empathy (or understanding) with nonhuman animals? A good question. But a question for another time.

Notes

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1. My worries connect to my particular philosophical view, which argues that understanding the personal perspective of others constitutes a form of respect for them. Correspondingly, my worries about alienation stem partly from the way I think the concept of respect has been and continues to be treated in current ethical theory, and the way the concept of understanding has been and continues to be treated in current epistemology, and in turn, how the intellectual traditions of these two concepts (understanding and respect) have seeped down into everyday thinking. All this is to say, the "thinkers" I would identify might be quite different from those Gruen would identify. I offer a preliminary sketch of this view in Debes forthcoming.

2. For a meatier rendering of the landscape, see Stueber 2014. Also very good (though older) is Sherman 1998. For an inroad into the complicated place of empathy in the philosophy of mind, see Goldman 2006. For an inroad into the specific debate over mirror neurons, see Debes 2010.

3. The quotation marks here are mine. But Gruen explicitly self-locates her notion of entangled empathy in the care ethics tradition on p. 30. And the conceptual requirement that entangled empathy is a kind of attention to the wellbeing of others is the main point of chapter 2.

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4. In what follows, I borrow from my arguments in "Understanding Persons and the Problem of Power" (Debes forthcoming), which I wrote in tandem with this commentary.

5. One must be careful not to suggest that empowered people are in fact epistemically better off. On the one hand, if the "accepted" tropes distort reality, it is not clear that empowered people enjoy a genuine epistemic advantage. On the other hand, but relatedly, as thinkers like José Medina have emphasized, empowered peoples are prone to cultivating certain kinds of ignorance about the world around them and the people in it. See Medina 2013.

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