Many of us find it hard to understand the decisions that other people make. We may be concerned that our actions are not understood by others, we get frustrated when our friends and family cannot see something from our point-of-view, and we struggle to comprehend how someone could commit an atrocious act like murder. But why is it so hard to understand each other, and what prevents us from putting ourselves in someone else’s shoes?

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full understanding likely requires more than just empathy.

HOW DOES THOMAS STUDY EMPATHY? Thomas is a member of a research group investigating this connection between empathy and interpersonal understanding. Philosophers research a topic by checking reality (known as ‘phenomena’) against a specific concept. “We are concerned with conceptual problems and try to develop terminology related to these topics that is clear and unambiguous,” says Thomas. For example, Thomas may ask whether ‘emotional contagion’, such as our ability to pick up the mood of a room full of people, is really a form of empathy. “Does this phenomenon fall under the concept of empathy?”

Thomas is not only concerned with theoretical concepts. “We want to use findings from developmental psychology to reveal the reality of empathy,” he says. Hopefully, this will lead him to an empirically informed theory of empathy in relation to interpersonal understanding. “We want to explain how empathy works.”

THE LIMITS TO UNDERSTANDING OTHERS In today’s world, it often seems like we are getting worse at understanding each other. Thomas believes that psychological mechanisms such as biases and poor emotion regulation are hindering our performance of empathy. And our increasing interaction through technology is not helping, as we lose so many social cues such as tone of voice and body language when we do not communicate face-to-face. When no personal connection exists, it is hard to ‘read’ someone, and so therefore harder to empathise with them.

We also struggle to grasp what understanding actually means, and what a successful version of empathy looks like. We often fail to understand what is good for others, meaning empathic decisions might not lead us to morally sound conclusions. And barriers to fully understanding someone are always going to exist. “It is a common feature of empathy that we cannot ever fully succeed in empathising, because we cannot ever be the other person,” says Thomas.

A common topic in philosophical discussions of empathy is whether we can empathise with people who have completely different backgrounds to us. Some theorists argue that to understand someone requires shared knowledge or experience with them, however Thomas sees limitations in this argument. “We can at least partly overcome different backgrounds,” he says. “If we can accept there is always going to be a boundary to other minds, then cultural differences do not pose an insurmountable hurdle to successful understanding.” With this viewpoint, he highlights the importance of successful understanding, rather than full understanding, when interacting with others.

BECOMING A BETTER EMPATHISER If empathy is a skill, how can we improve our success at using it? As Thomas suggests, our capacity to empathise is not fixed or limited by personal or social identities. “Empathic skill can be improved by self-knowledge and imagination,” he says. “If you know your weaknesses and biases, and can distance yourself from them, you have a good chance of improving your empathic abilities.” Thomas believes an important requirement for empathy is to focus on the other person and not on yourself. “When we empathise, another person is the target of our efforts,” he explains. “So we mustn’t ask ‘How would I feel in such a situation?’ but ‘How does this person feel?’”

Successful empathy is the ability to, as much as possible, understand the other person. And while it can be difficult to understand those with completely different life experiences, this is not a barrier to showing empathy. If we all developed our skills of empathy and used them to increase our interpersonal understanding, the world would likely be a much kinder and more compassionate place.
Philosophy is the study of knowledge, the mind, ethics and our very existence. For thousands of years, we have been asking ourselves, ‘Why are we here?’ and ‘How do we even know that we exist in the way we perceive ourselves in the world?’ And today, philosophers are still trying to answer these questions.

Thomas specialises in moral and political philosophy, combined under the term ‘practical philosophy’ due to their concern with practices and actions. Humans behave in ways that have practical repercussions, for example someone’s actions may harm others, and moral and political philosophy involves asking questions about how we should behave.

Thomas is also interested in the philosophy of medicine. “Pretty much all traditional areas of philosophy can be applied to medicine,” he says. Ontology is the philosophical study of what exists and in what way. “This can be applied to the philosophical debate of whether mental disorders exist, or whether they are brain diseases,” explains Thomas. Epistemology, the study of knowledge, can be used to investigate how medical conditions are diagnosed. “Are patients’ illnesses diagnosed using certain rules and medical data?” asks Thomas. “Or do doctors use their intuition and experience to treat patients?”

WHAT ARE THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES OF BEING A PHILOSOPHER?

“I like the open nature of philosophy,” says Thomas. “There is no topic that might not become the object of philosophical thinking.” Thomas loves spending his working hours reading and thinking, allowing him to pursue his personal enjoyments as his job.

However, Thomas highlights this can also be a problem, as philosophy does not deliver products in a traditional way. “Philosophers don’t invent new technology or identify life-saving treatments,” he says. This can lead some people to think that philosophy is a superfluous activity, nice if you have the time for it, but not a serious economical pursuit. Thomas thinks it’s important to fight this distorted image. “The benefits of philosophy are vast and they concern human thinking by offering new perspectives,” he says. “This does not have a monetary value but is invaluable nonetheless.”

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF PHILOSOPHY?

Despite the challenges facing modern philosophers, Thomas thinks the field is an exciting one to work in. “You never know what philosophical issues will arise. That’s the beauty of it!” he says. “Suddenly, new ideas are introduced, and they change how we perceive the world.”

Philosophers address human issues, such as racism and climate change, and so they are vital for understanding how we can all live with each other and our planet. And new technological developments have philosophical implications. Modern philosophers ask questions about artificial intelligence and debate the concept of the ‘extended mind’. This view argues that our mental realm is not just inside our head but is extended to things in the world. With so much of our existence now dependent upon, and contained within, our phones, why are our phones not considered part of our mind? “Philosophy opens a completely new avenue of thinking and a new way of perceiving the world,” says Thomas.
WHAT WERE YOUR INTERESTS WHEN YOU WERE YOUNGER?
For a long time, I was far more interested in activities than thinking. I wanted to become a chef when I was a young teenager, then an industrial designer when I was a young adult. In high school, I started developing some interest in ethical topics and politics, but only decided very late to enrol for a philosophy degree.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO BECOME A PHILOSOPHER?
I never planned to become an academic. It was down to luck and partly caused by the fact that I was running out of options after finishing my PhD! Initially, I tried to get into writing for newspapers, but I didn’t have any contacts in journalism. Then, I got lucky and landed my first academic job in philosophy, which started my career.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF? ARE THESE USEFUL CHARACTERISTICS FOR A PHILOSOPHER?
I’d say I’m diligent and conscientious. I always try and give my best. This also makes me competitive, although I do support my colleagues and enjoy their achievements. I certainly believe these characteristics are helpful, but they are not required to become a successful philosopher.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE FACT ABOUT A FAMOUS PHILOSOPHER?
I have to say that most of them are quite boring people! For instance, Ludwig Wittgenstein, a famous philosopher who taught at Cambridge, is reported to have said that it did not matter to him what he ate, as long as it was the same every time. Apparently, he always ate the same meal! I don’t know if that’s really true, but I would say that indicates a character flaw, a kind of dietary narrow-mindedness. Still, we don’t admire famous philosophers for their character, but for their thoughts.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY DOING OUTSIDE OF WORK?
My main passion outside of work is football. I play for a vet’s team and try to squeeze in regular 5-a-side games with colleagues. I’m also interested in movies.