

UNITED WISDOM

Colour, pain, music: why experience is difficult to share

World and Consciousness

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Epigraph

> *My thought belongs with my other thoughts, and your thought with your other thoughts.*

William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Volume I, Chapter IX, discussion of personal thought, printed pp. 225–226; English text.

What this article is about

We can show someone a fabric colour, play the same recording, and hear them say that something hurts. Yet sharing an object does not establish an identical experience. In everyday conversation, that distinction can turn into two opposing demands: either understand another person completely or declare understanding impossible. This article explores the space between them. Selected passages by Locke and William James help distinguish naming, description, recognition, and the personal ownership of experience. The IASP account of pain shows why limited access to another person's experience does not remove the need to respect their report. Colour, pain, and music pose different questions here rather than illustrate one medical theory. We establish neither that everyone feels identically nor that everyone necessarily feels differently, and offer no test of another person's sincerity. The practical question is what can be made intelligible, where uncertainty remains, and how conversation can continue without demanding impossible correspondence.

I. A shared object and two separate experiences

Imagine two people choosing fabric beside a window. One calls the colour restful; the other calls it cold and unpleasant. This is a hypothetical scene. They may agree about which fabric they are looking at while disagreeing about its description. We may be tempted to decide who sees correctly before identifying the disagreement. Perhaps they mean a colour name, a preference, or the impression the material creates in this room. These questions differ. Before looking for an error, identify the issue. If one describes a shade while the other describes wanting to live with it, the shared word colour conceals answers to different questions.

We can discuss a single event at several levels. At the level of the object, we identify a fabric, sound, or bodily location. At the level of a report, a person chooses words. At the level of experience, we ask what it feels like for them. Identifying a common object assists

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conversation without transferring us into their viewpoint. Limited access nevertheless does not make words useless. If someone says the fabric feels unpleasant, we already have information relevant to choosing together, even without knowing the complete quality of their sensation. That may suffice for a household decision while remaining insufficient for a philosophical conclusion about experience.

The expression we see the same thing therefore needs a purpose-specific meaning. It can identify a common object, matching answers, or a reported resemblance between impressions. None should silently substitute for another. Clarifying this does not require technical language. Ask whether the person is naming a shade or describing its effect on them. You might say that you know which fabric they mean but do not yet understand what cold means to them. This neither denies their experience nor confirms its complete identity with yours. It makes another step toward understanding possible by identifying the answer still missing. A small clarification can be sufficient for the decision before us.

II. What Locke’s thought experiment examines

In Book II, Chapter XXXII, §15 of An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding, Locke considers a possibility: a violet might produce in one person the appearance a marigold produces in another. With consistent names, they could still distinguish objects and communicate about blue and yellow. This is a philosophical supposition rather than an experiment with two groups. It asks what agreement in naming establishes. People could use words alike without entering one another’s experience. That does not show that the difference actually exists in these people or in everyone. A possibility within an argument and an established state of affairs require different kinds of support.

In that same paragraph, Locke says he is inclined to think different people’s appearances are generally very similar. Omitting this would wrongly turn him into an advocate of universal hidden difference. His discussion also belongs to his account of ideas and capacities, including the theological setting of §14. Our narrower purpose is to distinguish agreement in use from agreement in experiential quality. We do not adopt his historical account of sensory organs as present physiology. The text helps pose a question without replacing a contemporary examination of vision. Responsible reading preserves the supposition, the author’s qualification, and the limits of our application. Otherwise the memorable flower example would itself misrepresent someone’s thought.

One response is to ask which difference would matter to an available check. If two people consistently select matching samples and use the same names, that establishes a particular coordination. It may matter when selling fabric or preparing an image together. The philosophical question about an identical sensation remains different. Do not dismiss the first finding because it cannot settle the second, or present it as a final answer to the second. This

reasoning extends beyond colour: identify the agreement actually obtained, then state separately the stronger claim still lacking support. That is our application of the distinction, not an additional conclusion attributed to Locke. It preserves practical knowledge while leaving the philosophical question open.

III. A name helps locate an experience without replacing it

In Chapter III, §2 of the same book, Locke remarks that many sensory distinctions lack separate names: familiar terms do not enumerate all distinguishable smells, tastes, colours, and sounds. This is a historical observation rather than a measurement of a present vocabulary. It helps distinguish a limited description from a limited experience. Someone might say only unpleasant because more precise words are not immediately available. A brief report does not establish that nothing remains to be clarified. Neither does it authorise us to invent the missing details and call that understanding. The difference gives both speakers room to continue without claiming access they have not obtained.

Pointing can supplement naming. In the fabric example, a person compares two samples and says one is closer to what they meant. That does not transfer the entire sensation, but it reduces uncertainty about a choice. In a conversation about music, pointing to a moment in a recording can replace an argument about the entire piece. We acquire a common reference to revisit. Pointing also has limits: it selects a passage without explaining all the relations someone hears in it. A useful clarification therefore combines the object with a question. Does this moment matter because of its loudness, transition, expected continuation, or a memory the person wishes to describe?

Not every misunderstanding needs a larger vocabulary. Speakers may already understand the description and simply respond differently to the object. If one enjoys a sharp sound while another finds it intrusive, a new term need not remove the difference. They can agree on volume or listening time while retaining different preferences. A shared decision does not require shared taste. Language can coordinate actions without proving identical states. Demanding a perfect description before any agreement may trap the conversation in an unnecessary task. Treating agreement as proof of identical experience loses the distinction we were clarifying. Practical accuracy means answering the actual question without assigning the answer additional properties it has not established.

IV. The personal ownership of experience in James

At the beginning of Chapter IX of The Principles of Psychology, James treats thought as belonging to a personal consciousness. His lecture-room example describes different people's thoughts as not merging through proximity or simultaneity, even where their content resembles. This is a primary argument from the late nineteenth century rather than a neuroimaging result. It clarifies one limit: learning about another sensation and having that person's very sensation are different relationships. We can know which sound someone heard, what they said, and what they asked to change. Such knowledge has content without turning their thought into ours. Ownership and an available report do not become identical because both are called understanding.

Personal ownership should not become a claim that people have no cognitive contact without a further argument. Words, actions, shared objects, and clarifications already communicate something. A report's failure to transfer an experience completely does not erase what it conveys. Distinguish an imperfect copy from an answer to a question: conversation need not be copying. If I need to know whether someone wishes to keep listening, their request to stop answers that question within the interaction. It does not describe their entire inner history. Demanding that history before accepting the request as intelligible changes the conversational task; it does not automatically deepen understanding. We can respond to the answer actually offered.

Several kinds of understanding are therefore possible without a single ladder whose final rung must be identical feeling. I might identify the object, restate the words accurately, understand a reason to the extent it was explained, or agree on an action. Each result has its own check. The person can correct the restatement, specify the object, or decline to discuss a reason. Declining does not make the experience less theirs. Reaching agreement does not authorise me to describe more on their behalf than they shared. Understanding can remain bounded and substantial. It can develop through precise corrections rather than a demand to confirm our confidence that we now feel exactly alike.

V. Music: sharing more than an isolated sound

Imagine two listeners after a short recording. One mentions a beautiful sound; the other mentions the return of a theme after a pause. Their answers need not conflict: they selected different relations within the same listening occasion. In Chapter IX, James discusses thunder following silence, showing how naming an object alone can overlook its relation to what preceded it. This is his analytic example about the flow of experience, not a finding about a special mechanism of musical pleasure. Our scene makes a limited comparison: describing music can include what changed, what a sound answered, and how the transition seemed, as well as the sound itself.

A second listening need not be required to reproduce the first exactly. The person now may know which moment you invited them to notice or may listen for another question. That changes the task even within this hypothetical conversation. If their description changes, do not immediately accuse them of inconsistency. Ask first which impression and which occasion they are describing. Initial surprise, later recognition, and a subsequent judgment identify different relationships. This is not a universal claim about memory or sound processing. It is a way of interpreting reports without making words answer simultaneously for different moments of encountering a piece. Differences in the reports may call for clarification before evaluation.

A shared conversation can select a short passage and allow two descriptions to coexist. What did each person hear? Which moment mattered? What does the selected word mean within that account? Such questions need not assess anyone’s cultural worth. A participant does not need musical terminology to describe a response. Technical description is not automatically a more personal or truer description of enjoyment; it answers its own question. Distinguishing a recording’s organization from a response to it preserves both conversations. We can examine composition without treating someone’s indifference as proof of incomprehension. The common object supplies a meeting place; shared taste is not a condition of meeting, provided the participants want to continue.

VI. Pain: limited access is no reason for denial

The comparison now changes character. A fabric or recording can be offered as a shared object; another person’s pain reaches us differently, and mishandling a report may have different consequences. The IASP definition announced on 16 July 2020 treats pain as personal experience. Its notes say the report deserves respect and inability to communicate does not exclude pain. This is a professional organization’s definition, not a trial of our conversational exercise. It supports a limited point: lacking a detailed account does not itself deny experience. No individual cause, diagnosis, severity, or treatment is established here.

In ordinary conversation, avoid making a similar experience of your own the measure of another person's. Saying that you experienced something similar can introduce your story if they wish to hear it. It does not establish matching causes, intensity, or circumstances. Saying that you cannot see it describes your access rather than automatically proving the reported experience absent. This is a logical distinction between incomplete knowledge and a negative conclusion. It does not require accepting every proposed explanation of a cause as established. Respect for a report can coexist with uncertainty about its cause. A medical question needs suitable information and professional assessment; a philosophical article cannot replace them with an attentive tone or familiar anecdote.

Philosophical doubt should not become a compulsory examination for the speaker. Someone describing pain need not first solve the problem of other minds. Our next question can concern what they wish to communicate and what assistance or conversational change they request, rather than whether they can prove complete correspondence between inward and outward. They can also decline a detailed account. This boundary is the authors' conversational proposal, not a clinical assessment scheme. It permits listening without claiming medical competence. Questions beyond ordinary agreement need their own appropriate examination. The availability of philosophical doubt does not authorise ignoring a report or choosing treatment through personal analogies. Listening and establishing a cause remain distinguishable responsibilities.

VII. Comparisons can reveal meaning and also conceal it

When a precise word is missing, someone may offer a comparison: a sound like an empty room, a colour like an evening sky, or a sensation like carrying a weight. These examples are invented. A comparison selects a relationship and allows another question. It does not transfer every property of a room, sky, or weight into the experience. Reading metaphor literally can produce a conclusion the speaker never made. Clarify the selected aspect: do they mean space, coldness, weight, or something else? They may say our proposed term does not fit at all. Then our interpretation needs correction, rather than their right to use an imperfect image for a difficult description.

James's stream image concerns how consciousness appears to itself in his discussion of continuity. It does not provide a physical instrument for measuring another person's flow. In a neighbouring discussion, musical overtones supply an analogy for what he calls thought's fringe. Applying the image in conversation requires preserving its status as analogy. We can suggest that a single word leaves relations and transitions undescribed. We cannot infer a measured musical structure common to all experiences. A powerful metaphor helps pose a question when we identify the aspect it illuminates and the explanatory work it does not undertake. Its vividness does not itself establish an empirical mechanism.

Sometimes several comparisons are preferable to one final image. A person may clarify that it is not simply heaviness but difficulty beginning a movement, or that a particular transition rather than the entire piece suggests farewell. This can improve intelligibility without eliminating uncertainty. It may also reveal that they do not want further analysis. Conversation is not the extraction of detail at any cost. A description sufficient for a joint decision can be accepted while the rest remains personal. Fidelity to what was said matters more than the volume of words obtained. The more detailed our interpretation, the more useful it is to ask whether the speaker recognises it. That creates room for correction rather than demanding agreement with our elegant image.

VIII. Checking understanding without testing someone’s worth

Consider a hypothetical conversation after a concert. Someone says a particular passage affected them; the other person offers a detailed explanation the first does not recognise. The difficulty may be a premature move from the words heard to a ready interpretation. Instead of adding another explanation, offer a brief restatement: you understood that the pause before the theme’s return mattered, and ask whether that fits. This checks your restatement. It does not force the speaker to agree or admit an inability to explain. A correction identifies a particular change. Declining further discussion also communicates a boundary of this encounter, rather than proving the experience lacked substance. The listener can adjust without claiming a final account.

Distinguish clarification from requiring someone to justify a feeling. Asking whether you understood the words permits several answers. Demanding an explanation of their entitlement to react changes the relationship. Evaluation sometimes is relevant, such as when discussing a specific public claim about a work. Then examine the claim’s grounds rather than the speaker’s personal worth. When someone is simply describing an impression, their report need not become a dispute they did not choose. This is not a universal prohibition on disagreement. It distinguishes answering the offered topic from appointing yourself judge of whether another response is permissible. The distinction helps select a clear question before the conversation takes a direction one participant did not want.

A restatement can be inaccurate even when gently phrased. It can add a cause, remove doubt, or turn a temporary impression into a permanent personal characteristic. Select a small passage and retain its form: now, at this moment, it seemed to me. These words identify the encounter being described. If someone says they do not wish to hear a recording today, do not report a permanent aversion to music. Checking understanding remains work on our own representation. Its result extends only to what was clarified. It guarantees neither closeness nor agreement: people can understand each other more precisely and still choose different actions. That possibility is a normal conversational limit rather than a necessary failure.

IX. Three examples do not make one scale

Colour, pain, and music share this article's question about conveying experience, but their differences determine suitable actions. Colours can be compared through visible samples; musical discussion can identify a passage; a pain report calls for its own attentive response and is not an aesthetic judgment. Combining them into a scale of how correctly someone experiences would erase each question's substance. Similar words need not imply equivalent consequences. Even quality concerns different tasks here: how colour feels, what a person reports about pain, or how they describe encountering a sequence of sounds. A shared philosophical question helps reveal differences when it is not presented as a universal method for solving all three practical situations.

Locke and James do not provide two identical confirmations of one present theory. In the selected paragraph, Locke discusses ideas, naming, and possible differences in sensory appearances. James describes personal ownership and the flow of thought within his psychology. A point of comparison exists: a report and immediately owned experience cannot simply be declared one object. Their systems, argumentative forms, and historical explanations nevertheless differ. IASP supplies a professional definition for the particular question of pain rather than confirming either philosophy wholesale. Our connections are limited comparisons. They establish neither historical influence nor a combined authority obliging readers to adopt a final worldview. Each source does different work, and the editorial bridge belongs to this article.

A reader can retain a position on the nature of consciousness while using clearer distinctions in conversation. Philosophical disagreement does not require speaking for another person; respect does not require accepting every metaphysical account. If participants want to discuss such an account, identify it separately and examine its argument. If they want to choose fabric, discuss music, or understand a request, use the appropriate conversational level. A household decision need not become a concealed vote for a philosophical school. A personal report need not become final proof of a scientific explanation. Separating questions preserves freedom of judgment: comparison, acknowledged uncertainty, and practical action can continue without resolving every problem associated with experience at once.

X. Understanding as a sufficient answer to a chosen question

After these distinctions, saying I understand you can acquire a clearer meaning. It need not promise identical experience. You can specify that you identified the passage, can restate the request, or see why your proposed comparison does not fit. These small results can be checked within the interaction. The speaker can confirm or correct a particular point. Neither participant needs to measure another's inner world through the strength of personal certainty. The broader the claim to understand, the more it undertakes. Modest precision can say less while providing more useful support, because the next action rests on a coordination actually achieved. It leaves room for further explanation without demanding it.

Sometimes acknowledging a limit is enough. Someone cannot find words; the listener agrees to take a request into account without a detailed picture of the sensation. That arrangement does not prove words are always unnecessary. It concerns this encounter. If a later wish to describe more arises, the conversation can continue; otherwise its boundary remains. In a hypothetical shared life, this might mean turning off a recording, choosing another fabric, or not discussing a private sensation at a communal table. These examples are not studied relationship-improvement techniques. They demonstrate the logical possibility of acting on partial understanding without making its partiality an accusation or presenting it as completed knowledge of a person.

Sharing experience can cease to be a choice between perfect copying and total isolation. We have objects, words, comparisons, questions, and opportunities to correct an answer. They neither eliminate personal ownership nor guarantee agreement, but they let us learn particular things about one another. Colour highlights the distinction between naming and sensation; music highlights a selected moment and transition; pain highlights why limited access does not authorise dismissing a report. These different tasks prepare the common conclusion: identify what needs understanding and promise no more than the answer can convey. Both substantial conversation and the freedom to keep some experience personal remain possible. That freedom need not become a mystery another person is entitled to expose.

What this means in practice

Choose a neutral object both participants agree to discuss: a colour sample or a short musical passage. Do not use pain as an occasion to experiment on another person or ask them to produce an unpleasant sensation. Each person can first identify the object and one aspect of their response. Clarify whether the conversational object matches. Is one describing a shade while the other describes a preference? Is one referring to a sound and the other to a transition? Name differing questions before looking for a common answer.

Offer a short restatement of only what was said. Add no cause, biography, or permanent personal trait. Allow the person to correct a word, select another moment, or decline to continue. You might keep three lines: the shared object; what you understood; what remains personal or unclear. Record any agreement about action separately, since it does not establish identical sensations. If further discussion is unnecessary, the exercise can end there.

This is the authors' proposal for reading and conversation, without established scientific efficacy. It neither replaces medical assessment of pain nor determines sincerity. A small clarification or acknowledged limit can be a useful result. Obtaining a complete picture of someone's inner life is unnecessary. Retain the possibility of returning to their words if they choose to elaborate later, and correct your own understanding when it does not fit what they communicated.

Key quotation

> *Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits.*

William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Volume I, Chapter IX, discussion3, printed p.239; English text. This characterizes experience's presentation in James's argument, not a universal neurophysiological finding.

Connections between traditions

1. **Locke and James on another person's experience.** Locke II.XXXII.15 distinguishes naming from possible experiential quality; James IX, pp.225–226, distinguishes ownership from communication. Both concern limits of direct transfer without making their systems identical.

2. **A colour name and the course of sound.** Locke II.III.2 discusses sensory differences lacking names; James's thunder example, IX, pp.240–241, considers relations between successive impressions. Both question an isolated word's reach, but their objects and arguments differ.

3. **Personal ownership and respect for pain.** James's personal-thought discussion is compared with the IASP2020 notes. The former poses a descriptive philosophical question; the latter belongs to a professional pain definition. The bridge is this article's, not proof of one shared doctrine.

4. **A thought experiment and a professional definition.** Locke's supposition does not measure the prevalence of differences; IASP does not test our exercise's efficacy. Each needs an appropriate role, and their purposes differ.

5. **A stream and a musical image.** James IX, pp.239 and258–259, uses streams and overtones in his analysis. We borrow only the question about relations omitted by a short name. No physical identity or historical influence is established.

Primary sources

1. John Locke. An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding, VolumeI; BookII, ChapterIII §2 and ChapterXXXII §§14–16. Project Gutenberg10615 English text.

2. William James. The Principles of Psychology,1890, VolumeI, ChapterIX: selected passages on personal thought, continuity, and overtone analogy; York University text. Russian quotations are UnitedWisdom's own translations.

3. International Association for the Study of Pain. IASP Announces Revised Definition of Pain,16 July2020: definition and six notes.

Tags

subjective experience, experience, colour, pain, music, experiential quality, understanding, other minds, Locke, James, personal consciousness, stream of thought, thought experiment, violet, marigold, naming, description, metaphor, analogy, IASP, pain definition, report, partial understanding, coordination, preference, freedom of judgment, conversational boundaries, hearing, impression, translation

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