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DOI 10.1007/s10677-011-9272-0

Michael Slote, Moral Sentimentalism

Oxford University Press, 2010, $65.00/£40.00 (hardback), 160 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0-19-539144-2

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Empathy is taking on an increasing role in Slote's philosophy. Long a proponent of virtue ethics who postulates a tight connection between the moral status of acts and the motivation of agents, Slote argued in *The Ethics of Care and Empathy* (2007) (ECE) for the relevance in normative ethics specifically of empathic motivations:

> [EMP] An action is morally wrong iff (and probably because) it reflects, exhibits, or expresses an absence (or lack) of fully developed empathic concern for (or caring about) others on the part of the agent. (ECE 31; cf. MS Ch. 1)[1]

Moral Sentimentalism (2010) (MS) extends the project to metaethics—particularly to moral semantics. It seeks to show how empathy is involved in our moral concepts, which in turn gives us further reason to believe EMP (MS 159). The most important new elements here include: a theory of 'levels' of empathy (Chapters 2–3); a story about how empathy figures in fixing the reference of moral terms ('right' and 'wrong' and/or 'good' and 'bad'—he leaves it open which) (Chapter 4); a claim to derive 'ought' from 'is' (Chapter 5); and a brief argument that moral principles are not important in first-personal moral reasoning (Chapter 6). (However, the book borrows heavily from ECE in places, and is replete with injunctions to 'go read ECE for more details'.) Chapters 7–10 give accounts of respect, autonomy, paternalism, justice, objectivity, and rationality—always trying to appeal solely to empathy in analyzing these concepts. The ambitious breadth matches his goal of defending sentimentalism more thoroughly and systematically than anything since Hume's *Treatise* (MS vii). It is also the reason why the thin book remains underdeveloped.

Slote characterizes empathy as a process in which (something like) the (presumably, salient or important) feelings of another are (usually involuntarily) aroused in ourselves (15).[2] The new material of MS starts with the observation that empathy can come in levels

[1] The "(and probably because)" hedge in my reconstruction is based on Slote's remark that he is trying "to show that all, or almost all, the moral distinctions we intuitively . . . want to make can be understood in terms of—or at least correlated with—distinctions of empathy" (ECE 4).

[2] The first and second parenthetical hedges are my additions; the third is Slote's and is to be found in the last paragraph on p. 15. Although they are important, hereafter I will usually suppress all three.

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Published online: 27 February 2011

(Slote focuses on the bottom two). Let's say Bill feels (something like) Chelsea's dismay at losing her job. This is an example of first-order empathy, which is second-personal. (Bill's merely feeling bad for her isn't enough—that's sympathy; to empathize, he must *feel her pain*—in a sense Slote leaves underdescribed.) Second-order (third-personal) empathy is the "warmth" that a third person, Hillary, feels toward Bill because of and/or in virtue of his 'warm' empathy for Chelsea (cf. p. 36).[3] This is empathy only in a loose sense of the word: what is important to Slote is not that Hillary feels a vicarious version of Chelsea's pain, but that Hillary feels warmed by Bill's warmth ("empathic concern") toward Chelsea.

Here's where Slote concocts a theory of moral approval and disapproval: second-order warmth toward someone *is* (constitutes) moral approval of him or her (35). Moral disapproval is the "cold" feeling we have toward people who lack first-order empathy (who exhibit either indifference or hostility toward the other's feelings). For example, if George exhibits indifference toward, and Jenna revels in, Chelsea's dismay, Hillary will feel "chilled" by, and thus morally disapprove of, both George and Jenna.

Too obviously, not all disapproval is phenomenologically 'cool'. Anger and bitterness, for example, are 'hot' (cf. Smith 2011). But a charitable interpretation might associate "warmth" and "chill" with positive and negative affect (or psychosomatic arousal), respectively, which are mixed in with the emotions Hillary directs at the [un]empathic agent[s] Bill [and George].

Several interesting features of moral judgments are already implied by this account (Ch. 3). I) Moral judgments typically *motivate*, for there's at least some sort of strong connection between empathy and motivation (53-4—although Slote leaves it underdescribed). II) (First-order) empathy *"enters into" our very understanding of moral claims* (53). That's because 1) moral approval and disapproval "enter into" the making of moral judgments, and 2) (first-order) empathy "enters into" moral approval (and disapproval) on Slote's theory of the latter (53). A corollary to (II) is that, to the extent that a psychopath cannot display empathy, she is incapable of making a real moral judgment beyond a mere 'inverted commas' moral judgment.

Unfortunately, it is not clear what this 'entering into' relation is, or how (1) is to be supported. One might think that at least some (evil-loving) people can make judgments that an action is wrong or bad yet approve of people doing it. Yet that might not count as a counterexample if it turns out Slote is just talking about *typical* moral judgments—it is unclear. A problem for (2) is that, even if Hillary is warmed by a warmth Bill has, it seems Bill's warmth or concern could be of some other type which is non-empathic. Bill might feel genuine love for Chelsea, be concerned for her welfare, but not be all that adept or frequent at feeling what she feels.

Furthermore (Ch.4), III) moral judgments *refer objectively.*[4] This is because second-order (third-personal) empathy fixes the reference of moral terms, so that they refer to whatever causally sustains that mental process which elicits second-order empathy ("warmth directed at agents"). Since "it is trivial and obvious" that it is "agential warmth"

[3] Confusingly, Slote talks about empathy at both levels as having, or coming along with, a "warm" or a "cold" feeling. So it is because of Bill's warmth that he feels Chelsea's dismay, and it is because of Hillary's warmth that she feels warmed by Bill's warmth toward Chelsea. Bill's warmth toward Chelsea Slote calls "agential warmth", and Hillary's warmth toward Bill he calls "warmth directed at agents"—at least in such crucial passages as that on p. 61.

[4] To make good on this claim, Slote must do something more to show that moral judgments refer to features of the world. Otherwise, there's no reference to fix. Contrast: it may be an objective feature of the world—female peacocks—that elicits male peacocks' response of bearing their tail feathers, but that response is not an utterance or judgment.

(first-order empathic concern) which typically causes second-order empathy, such "agential warmth" is what moral terms refer to (and thus "just what the goodness (or rightness) of actions consists in") (61). Thus, Slote, if approximately correct, adds support to his first-order view—that wrong acts always exhibit a lack of fully developed empathy—by showing a necessary (and a priori[5]) connection between the very concepts of wrongness and empathy.

Slote thinks (Ch. 6) that, due to our empathic capacities, we (normal humans) usually need not heed (and usually cannot come up with) principled injunctions to get ourselves to act rightly, but need only to empathize with relevant potential patients of our acts (84–6). However, second-personal injunctions can be useful in that the injunctions of others tend to motivate people, especially if they remind them of empathic feelings they have already felt (87ff). We may worry here that Slote is being too optimistic about human nature; anecdotal and some experimental evidence suggests that at least some people tend to ignore their empathic capacities (see Prinz 2011).

Even if we generally share these particularist sympathies, we may worry that empathy isn't the only, the best, or even a good guide for us to use (Prinz 2011). At the least, we need to balance people's feelings against their objective interests, and it is not clear that empathy is even a part of identifying those. Perhaps love or (not-necessarily-empathic) concern is important for motivation here, but why need it be empathy in particular?

It is fairly easy to recognize how empathy is biased toward those who are near, dear, cute, or mentally salient (Prinz 2011). Slote embraces our bias toward the near and dear (in defending deontology—ECE Ch. 3 and MS Ch. 1), but will presumably dismiss other biases as arising from empathic concern which is not 'fully developed'. I cannot find a satisfactory account of this latter notion. I suspect that on Slote's understanding, someone with fully developed empathy will also happen to have many other qualities: due impartiality, adeptness at identifying morally relevant features, skill at weighing others' wishes against what is objectively good for them—and in other words, will rely on many considerations other than empathically derived feeling or the concern connected thereto.

A final worry concerns Slote's theory of reference-fixing. Even if Slote is correct that children's consideration of how victims of harm feel helps fix the reference of moral terms (18), it seems likely that moral terms have multiple reference-fixers. It is likely that children acquire knowledge of various sorts of norms by apprehending numerous behavioral cues in their peers and superiors (Sripada and Stich 2006), as well as simply by perceiving states of affairs as valuable, desirable, disgusting, scary, beautiful, appropriate, etc. If that's so, then Slote can't appeal to "agential warmth" (61) as the only thing which causes us to experience moral goodness or rightness since it is not the only thing which would lead us to find an action morally appropriate or inappropriate. This would help explain why we are inclined to judge that someone can act morally rightly even without being motivated by empathic feeling but rather (say) by the simple desire to do duty for duty's sake.

Overall, this book's creativity makes it worth perusal by most normative and meta-ethicists. But those who use it will have to employ a lot of interpretation, qualification, and

[5] Here's a worry Slote anticipates. Worry: the connection between moral goodness/rightness and (first-order) empathy is a priori, but the reference-fixing model seems to make the connection *a posteriori* (as is the connection between our experience of redness and the set of microscopic properties which cause it in us). Slote's response: in this case, we can know a priori what causes the relevant reference-fixing experience (where the reference-fixing experience is second-order empathy, and the thing that causes it in us is first-order empathy). In other words, the reference-fixer is "thicker" (64), and this allows us to know a priori what right-making property (viz. first-order empathic concern) our term 'right' refers to. This is why he says his "new kind of reference-fixing" is only "semi-Kripkean".

patching. Slote succeeds in showing that something like empathy has many roles in moral philosophy, but he needs to be more careful and detailed in order to show that these roles are those of empathy, and not some other emotional process(es). He also needs to deflect more objections in order to convince us that he need not appeal (e.g.) to values or rationality in order to ground moral requirements, or to cognitive judgments or rational intuitions in order to explain our conceiving or apprehending them.[6]

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[6] Thanks to Mark Timmons for helpful comments on a draft of this review.