

Session 4: **Empathy**

Goldie, Peter (2011), 'Anti-Empathy', in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, A. Coplan and P. Goldie (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 302–317.

What is empathy?

The traditional debate vs theory-theory and simulation theory is heavily skewed towards the rational and cognitive. However, we seem to have access to other people's feelings and emotions as well. This access has traditionally been associated with a capacity for *empathy*. But what is empathy?

There are probably nearly as many definitions of empathy as people working on the topic. There are two main trends: some argue for a broad definition of empathy as an understanding of another person's feelings, affect sharing or as 'an affective response more appropriate to another's situation than one's own'. So defined, empathy subsumes phenomena such as emotional contagion, sympathy, personal distress or even cognitive perspective-taking. (Vignemont & Singer 2006)

The Vignemont & Singer propose a narrow definition, which takes there to be empathy only if:

- (i) one is in an affective state;
- (ii) this state is isomorphic to another person's affective state;
- (iii) this state is elicited by the observation or imagination of another person's affective state;
- (iv) one knows that the other person is the source of one's own affective state.

This excludes emotional contagion, sympathy, personal distress, and cognitive perspective taking. Alvin Goldman (2011) argues that even this definition includes, but also excludes, too much. But it is a useful starting point. The core idea is that we access the first-personal states of others by being in isomorphic first-personal states ourselves.

Different routes to empathy

We can distinguish (at least) two ways a state of empathy can be realised. Goldman (2011) contrasts these as a 'mirroring' process and as a 'reconstructive' process respectively. But terminology varies. Peter Goldie (2011) characterises the distinction as follows:

One such process is a kind of 'resonance' which is more or less non-conscious. This is what Alvin Goldman calls 'primitive, 'low-level' mind-reading' (2006a: 113), and Karsten Steuber (2006) calls 'basic empathy'. [...] In contrast to these lower-level empathetic processes is what Goldman calls 'higher-level mind-reading', Steuber calls 're-enactive empathy', and I am calling 'perspective- shifting'. (Goldie 304)

An example of the mirroring process is when we experience pain when we watch a sharp needle being pushed into someone else's hand, or when we recognise someone else's face as expressing a specific emotion (where this recognition is based on an affective experience). An example of the reconstructive process is when, after hearing a friend lament for their stolen bike, imagine what it is like to have one's bike stolen. Typically this involves *centrally imagining*.

I successively represent the sights and sounds and smells and internal sensations as they would have reached the eyes and ears and nose and proprio-perceptive system of the triumphant Sultan: [...] I centrally imagine what the Sultan says and does and feels or I imagine him from the inside. He is the protagonist of my imaginative project. (Wollheim 1984, p.73)

Against empathy?

Peter Goldie is critical of these reconstructive processes, at least when they purport to provide access the emotional lives of specific other people. He distinguishes *in-their-shoes* perspective shifting and *empathetic* perspective shifting.

Roughly and intuitively, the difference between in-his-shoes perspective-shifting and empathetic perspective-shifting lies in the content of the imaginative project: who, *in the imaginative project*, is doing the thinking. So if A is wondering what B will decide in some situation, it will be in-his-shoes perspective-taking if A imagines *himself* in that situation, imagines *himself* deliberating and deciding what to do—off-line as Goldman and others put it. In contrast it will be empathetic perspective-shifting if A imagines *being* B in that situation, deliberating and deciding what to do. (Goldie 2011, 305)

The difference between these projects is irrelevant as long as we're thinking about other people as 'fellow rational agents' such that:

1. there are no relevant differences in the psychological dispositions of A, the person attempting to empathise, and of B, the target of the attempt
2. there are no relevant non-rational influences on B's psychological process
3. there is no significant confusion in B's psychological process
4. B is not faced with a psychological conflict

This treats others in an impersonal way and works only for what Goldie calls 'base cases':

it is impersonal in the sense that it is irrelevant who—what sort of person—is doing the deliberation and the choosing. The question really is what would X decide to do, where 'X' ranges over all and only minimally rational agents, including both A and B. (2011, 307-8)

However, genuine reconstructive empathy seems to require not just imagining what *some* person would feel or think, but what *this* person would feel or think. Empathic states are directed at specific other people, and so require empathic perspective shifting. Yet imagining being the other person inevitably distorts their agency, effectively identifying it with the agency of the imager.

Empathy as an intentional mode

Both the mirroring and the reconstructive approaches are representational approaches, in the following sense: the affective state one experiences after 'empathising' is (a) a first-personal state of one's own that (b) acts as a representation of the first-personal state of another.

Following *On the Problem of Empathy* by Edith Stein (1989[1916]), among others, Dan Zahavi (2010) suggests that at least the phenomenology of empathy suggests that empathising is both like and unlike perception. It is like perception, because it gives us immediate access to its phenomena. It is unlike perception in that the phenomenon it gives access to is not experienced as being there 'for us', but as merely being there 'for another'.

To exemplify, let us consider a situation where a friend tells me that he has lost his mother, and I become aware of his distress. What kind of awareness is this? I obviously don't see the distress the same way I see the colour of his shirt, rather I see the distress "in" his pained countenance (Stein, 1989, p. 6). In this case, it makes sense to say that I experience (rather than imagine or infer) his distress, though I certainly do lack a first-person experience of the distress; it is not my distress. (Zahavi 2010, 294)

This treats empathy as an irreducible mode of consciousness or intentionality. The affective state one experiences after empathising is (a) a first-personal state of someone else, that (b) is experienced as belonging to the other. Also this is distinct from emotional contagion, sympathy, personal distress, and cognitive perspective taking. But it also doesn't require mirroring or reconstruction.