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How to Be a Proponent of Empathy

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Abstract A growing interest across disciplines in the nature of empathy has sparked a debate over the place of empathy in morality. Proponents are eager to capitalize on the apparent close connection between empathy and altruism, while critics point to serious problems in our exercise of empathy - we are naturally biased, empathize too much or too little, and prone to making all sorts of mistakes in empathizing. The proponents have a promising response, that it is not empathy simpliciter, but empathy in some "proper" form, that does the work they claim for it. This paper aims to propose a cautiously optimistic position for the proponent by rethinking the suggested approach. I argue that empathy plays two important roles in morality, one epistemic and the other relational, but the proponent must be careful not to exaggerate the contribution that empathy, even in its "proper" form, can make to our moral life.

Keywords Empathy · Care · Understanding · Morality

1 Introduction

What is the role of empathy in morality? Recent developments in psychology, philosophy of mind, and ethics have sparked a renewed interest in this question. The first thought is that it is fundamentally important. We often implore others to "step in our shoes" before they judge. We think that a person who is good at "feeling into" another's mental world is more likely to be kind and caring. And my own moral education from my parents was based largely on a sort of "training" in empathy, for they would always ask, "How would other people feel if you did this?" But while we might see empathy as morally valuable or even necessary for moral action, it can easily go wrong. With whom we happen to empathize, how much we empathize, and what action it leads us to take all seem too arbitrary for empathy to play any significant role in morality, critics charge.[1]

[1] For a "laundry list" of potential problems with empathy, see Jesse Prinz 2011.

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The proponents, however, have a ready response: it is not empathy *simpliciter*, but empathy in some "proper" form, that does the work they claim for it. I think this is a promising move, but it is not yet clear what "proper" empathy is, and whether it too has its own limits. In this paper, I aim to propose a cautiously optimistic position for the proponent of empathy by rethinking the suggested approach. I argue that empathy plays two important roles in morality, one epistemic and the other relational, but the proponent must be careful not to exaggerate the contribution that empathy, even in its "proper" form, can make to our moral life.

2 Empathy

On my view, empathy is a process or activity, where to empathize with a person, A, is to vicariously experience A's internal experience.[2] By "A's internal experience," I mean to include both (a) particular, occurrent mental states such as A's feelings, emotions, beliefs, desires, perceptions, and so on; and (b) a collection of such states that makes up an *experience* of a certain kind, such as an experience of losing one's child or that of struggling to finish a paper.

Empathy is commonly defined as taking (a) as its object, but it seems to me that we do talk of empathizing with someone's experience, which consists of a complex set of mental states. In fact, when philosophers discuss whether empathy is morally good or morally required in a particular case, they typically mean empathy with what the person is "going through" (object (b)) rather than a particular thought or feeling of hers.

This conception of empathy does not restrict empathy to a single psychological process; *how* one is able to vicariously experience the other's internal experience can vary. It can be a voluntary (and often effortful) undertaking involving cognitive processes described as perspective-taking, simulation, or what Alvin Goldman calls "enactment imagination" (Goldman 2011). But it's possible for someone to empathize with a person without "trying" to empathize—her empathy may be spontaneous, rather than reflective. However, for such a "spontaneous" episode to be empathy, it cannot be merely the low-level emotional contagion that we see in a baby who starts crying upon seeing or hearing other babies cry. "Catching" another's emotion (or any other inner state) can be empathy only if one is aware it is *the other's* emotion.[3]

[2] I base my conception of empathy largely on Amy Coplan's definition in her paper, "Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects" (2011). Coplan defines empathy as "a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation (p.5)." I think her definition has the merit of capturing points of substantial agreement in the diverse literature on empathy. The few changes I introduce are meant to highlight features of empathy that pertain specifically to its place in morality.

Tamar Schapiro has suggested an alternative conception of empathy that leans closer to our ordinary usage of the term. She points to the example of a con artist who is an expert in empathizing in the more restricted sense I endorse here. As she sees it, the fact that we would not describe the con artist as "empathizing with his victims" goes to show that "empathy is not a morally neutral concept; moral standards of some kind are already build into it (2011, p.93)." More specifically, empathy involves a *moral attitude* of respecting others as autonomous agents (p.97).

I find Schapiro's construal appealing, although I would think that in our ordinary understanding, empathy is tied more closely to care and concern for others than to respect. I prefer the morally neutral conception mainly because it allows me to engage with more of the contributors (from various backgrounds) to the discussion.

[3] Spontaneous, unmediated empathy is quite common. When we see photos of the Boston Marathon bombings, for example, we immediately "catch" the fear, shock, pain and other feelings of the victims, but unlike the crying baby, we experience those feelings not as our own (except vicariously) but as those of the victims. (Note here that empathy need not be the only experience we have in such cases. It is most likely part of a mix of reactions, which may also include sympathy for the victims and outrage at the bombers.)

3 Empathy and Morality

Proponents of empathy appeal to a close connection between empathy and prosocial behavior. Michael Slote, following psychologists C.D. Batson and Martin Hoffman, takes empathy to be essential to caring or concern.[4] On this assumption he develops a sentimentalist account of ethics that grounds rightness and other moral notions in empathic concern (Slote 2010). Other moral philosophers have also proposed (less ambitious) hypotheses regarding empathy's role in morality. Nancy Sherman (1998), for example, suggests that we need to cultivate empathy in order to cultivate altruistic virtues like benevolence. Alisa Carse (2005) goes one step further, arguing that properly cultivated empathy itself is a moral virtue.

Yet, serious problems with empathy abound. We are naturally biased in empathizing with others: we empathize more with people who are more similar to us, or closer to us in terms of physical distance or personal relations than those with whom we are less familiar or involved. Given that morality demands at least a reasonable degree of (if not perfect) impartiality, the familiarity and proximity biases threaten to undermine appropriate moral action.

In addition, we are prone to having "too much" or "too little" empathy. We have "too much" empathy when excessive identification with someone inclines us to endorse her values or reasons, and thus compromises our moral judgment. While it may be a relatively minor fault for a father to indulge his son's desire for junk food because he knows how much the child craves it, it seems dangerous for jury members to be so gripped by the dreams and aspirations of the self-confessed rapist as to tilt their judgment in his favor. "Too much" empathy could also do harm to the self. If one lets the other's feelings and thoughts overtake one's own as a result of excessive empathy, "self-effacement" (or "self-denial," both in Carse's terminology) occurs, undermining one's integrity. We can imagine a perfectly empathetic but subservient wife, who submits completely to her husband's wishes and values at the expense of giving up her own. At other times, however, we have "too little" empathy, even to the extent of *failing* to empathize at all. This may result from our similarity or proximity bias – we easily ignore letters asking for charity donations—or simply from our tendency to be too self-absorbed.

Even when we do empathize, we often do it poorly. Alvin Goldman notes two kinds of errors we tend to make – the "error of omission" when we fail to include sufficient information about the target in empathic imagination, and the "error of commission" when we project our own experience on to the target (Goldman 2011, p.44). Inaccuracies in empathy have other sources too; ironically, people in close relationships sometimes do worse in empathizing with their partner than strangers because they are too confident in their knowledge of each other (Ickes & Simpson 1997). Thus, empathy seems a rather unreliable source of information for moral decision.

Finally, the apparently strong link between empathy and altruism remains controversial. Batson's findings have been contested, for his definition of empathy seems closer to feeling *for* the other (i.e., sympathy or concern) than feeling *with* the other.[5] It has also been argued that empathy is neither necessary nor sufficient for doing good. As Heather Battaly suggests, people who are good at empathizing need not also aim at the good (Battaly 2011, p.299). Indeed, we can easily think of a "manipulative genius" whose success depends precisely on his mastery of empathy. Jesse Prinz argues that on a sentimentalist view, moral emotions like

[4] Batson claims to have established empirical support for the "empathy-altruism hypothesis" – that the feeling of empathy gives rise to the motivation to promote another's well-being purely for that person's sake (see, for example, Batson et al. 1997). Hoffman, taking a developmental approach to the topic, affirms empathy's contribution to prosocial response and proposes that parents can facilitate the internalization of moral norms in their children by tapping into the latter's growing capacity for empathy (2000).

[5] See Prinz 2011 and Darwall 2002.

anger and guilt are well capable of motivating right action, and they do a better job at it than empathy (Prinz 2011).

4 What the Proponent of Empathy Can Say

Proponents are well aware of much of the criticism leveled at empathy. Hume, who saw clearly our biases towards the "near and dear" in empathizing, suggested a "common point of view" as a corrective, which we can come to adopt through encounters with others.[6] More recently, other strategies have been proposed. Slote's discussions of rightness, obligation and other moral notions turn out to center on what he calls "fully developed empathic concern" rather than simply empathy.[7] Carse too posits an ideal form of empathy – "morally contoured empathy"—which is "empathy properly felt and expressed (2005, p.171)" and which she considers a moral virtue.

Despite the differences in these accounts, they share a common idea, that it is not empathy *simpliciter*, but empathy in some proper form, that gives rise to correct moral judgment and action. This is a plausible response to critics' complaint that our empathy is too volatile. A proponent can very well say that all these problems come about because the person in question isn't empathizing *well*, or *properly*, but if she did, we would expect just the right results. Slote, for example, claims that agents with fully developed empathic concern are capable of empathizing with the right people to the right degree, and hence know better than giving unfair advantage to those close to them.[8] Carse's introduction of morally contoured empathy is also meant to resolve problems of *improper* empathy such as having too much or too little of it.

The proponents' turn towards "proper" empathy is promising. However, the idea of a "proper" kind of empathy needs further scrutiny. For Carse, it is empathy constrained by certain *moral* principles. Slote, on the other hand, seems to get at an ideal in some *psychological-developmental* sense, for he takes fully developed empathic concern to be "the kind of empathy that would exist in human circumstances favorable to the overall development of empathy (2007, p.30)." Both hint at some truth about how we are to correct for problems of empathy, but their different approaches raise questions about the nature of "proper" empathy: What's the connection between fully developed empathy and morally constrained empathy? Are they the same thing? If so, how might that be the case? Or if not, which one gives us the true "proper" empathy needed to meet critics' challenges? I do not intend to settle these questions here, but only to take the first step in exploring them, which is to point out that the notion of "proper" empathy is ambiguous – both Slote and Carse miss the fact that different normative standards are invoked in critics' catalogue of the ways in which we can fail to empathize "properly." Sorting out these standards will not only help us diagnose problems involving "improper" empathy, but also shed light on the moral significance of empathy.

[6] See 3.3.1 and 3.3.3 of his *Treatise* (2000).

[7] Given the limited scope of the paper, I'm setting aside issues with his problematic move from empathy to empathic concern.

[8] Slote believes it's not wrong to be partial to our family and friends, but maintains that "[r]efusing to save a drowning child one has never seen before in order not to disappoint one's daughter by being absent when she returns home from school" shows a lack of fully developed empathic concern (2007, p. 31). This applies at the national level too. Slote argues that legislators with fully developed empathic concern should pass laws that "reflect a substantial amount of concern for the welfare of people in other countries" although such concern is justifiably less than their concern for their own people (2010, p. 132–33).

4.1 Proper Empathy

What is it to empathize properly? From the objections raised, I find at least three senses in which one's exercise of empathy can be judged as proper or improper.[9]

First, one exercises empathy properly to the extent that she emphasizes *correctly* or *accurately*. If we think of empathizing as an activity, then to empathize properly is first of all to empathize well, to successfully perform the activity it is. And one cannot be said to succeed in an attempt at empathy without reaching a sufficiently high degree of accuracy in approximating (a part of) the other's experience. Hence, we can take accuracy to be a constitutive norm of empathy.

It's easy to see that there may well be something improper about one's empathy even if she has achieved almost perfect accuracy. Empathy can be excessive in the sense that too much focus on the other may lead to a breakdown of one's sense of the self. Sandra Bartky cites a study on flight attendants, who work under considerable pressure of attending to passengers' needs and making them feel comfortable. Juggling between taking care of the passengers and managing their own feelings, the flight attendants in the study are driven to the point of feeling "falseness or emptiness, and estrangement from her own feeling self, even a confusion as to what or whether she is feeling anything at all (Bartky 1990, p.104)." With respect to the constitutive norm of accuracy, these flight attendants may well be excelling in the task of empathy. Yet we find their empathic engagement problematic, for they have violated (at least) a *psychological* norm applicable to empathy.

I take it that psychological norms are norms aimed at one's psychological well-being. They are particularly relevant to empathy because the activity of empathizing exposes one to the mental states of another, and renders one vulnerable to their influence.[10] One such norm is the preservation of the boundaries of the self, i.e., preserving one's desires, thoughts, values, and so on against interference from the outside.[11] One way the boundaries of the self can be compromised is through excessive identification with someone else, where much of the other person's inner states take such a strong hold on one's attention that it drowns out their counterparts in the self. Alternatively, one may be so focused on the experiences of others that she has trouble recognizing her own, as is in the case of the flight attendants. Of course, temporary suspension of one's own point of view occurs when one empathizes. But the suspension must only be temporary for one's empathy to be *psychologically* proper.

The breach of psychological norms, like that of constitutive norms of empathy, may or may not also be *morally* significant. In the case of the subservient wife, we may say that she is morally at fault for failing to respect herself by allowing her husband's perspective to overtake her own; whereas for someone who is overcome with empathic distress after reading about school shootings, her prolonged sadness and even depression does not necessarily constitute a moral problem.[12] On the other hand, one can still fail to empathize "properly" even when there is no breach of constitutive or psychological norms. Failing to empathize when we *should* (or empathize "too little") is one such case. Empathizing, but for a wrongful end, is another. Thus,

[9] My view here is in part inspired by Adrian Piper's paper, "Impartiality, Compassion, and Modal Imagination," where she distinguishes between *moral* judgments of a person's involvement in the object of her (modal) imagination (e.g., a possible event, a future event, another person) and judgments of it on *psychological* grounds (1991).

[10] Both Hoffman (2000) and Piper (1991) have stressed the importance of maintaining a self-other differentiation.

[11] This is not meant to rule out changes in one's self as a result of interactions with the external world so long as the changes and the subsequently changed self can be claimed as one's own.

[12] So long as she's still capable of fulfilling her obligations in day-to-day life.

one can also be considered to empathize properly or improperly in the *moral* sense, whether or not one meets all the constitutive and psychological norms.

Exactly what the moral norms should be is up for debate—the foregoing examples suggest principles or rules such as impartiality, self-respect, and care for one's child—but whatever they are, they differ from the constitutive and psychological norms in that they go beyond telling us how we should empathize to how empathy should fit into our moral response in a situation. To say that we should empathize "to the right degree" or "in the right way" is not just to say that the *activity* of empathizing itself must be carried out in this manner (in conformity with constitutive and psychological norms), but also that this activity and its product must fit into our *response* "to the right degree" or "in the right way." This point is neglected by the critics, who tend to treat all morally improper instances of empathy (or lack thereof) as problems internal to empathy when in fact most of them are problems in how we *employ* empathy in moral decision. Instead of hoping a general notion of "proper" empathy solves all the problems, proponents can give a stronger and more nuanced response to the critics by first analyzing the sorts of concerns underlying their objections and then addressing the concerns individually. If the concern is with accuracy or one's psychological wellbeing, proponents can deploy resources from psychology and other disciplines to give concrete suggestions as to how we can better meet the constitutive and psychological norms of empathy. But if the concern has to do with whether one empathizes with the right people, from the right motive, or forms the right judgment based on empathy, proponents can identify this as a concern about how empathy figures in our moral decision and action. They can point out that our improper uses of empathy are not unique to empathy, since our capacity for empathy, like other capacities we rely on to navigate through our moral life, can be used well or poorly. For this reason, proponents do not carry the burden of vindicating empathy in such problematic cases, where what goes wrong is not the agent's exercise of empathy, but rather her practice of moral decision-making.

Nevertheless, since their solution to problematic cases of empathy retains rather than rejects (which is the critics' solution) employment of empathy for moral decision and action, proponents do carry the burden of showing why (and how) empathy should figure in our moral life in the first place. This is the question I will now turn to.

Carse suggests two roles for empathy when she says, "without proper empathy, the epistemic task of reaching wise moral decisions in particular contexts becomes that much harder; more than that, within certain normatively rich roles and relationships *proper empathic connection is itself part of what morality demands* (p.171)." It is a plausible view of what empathy can contribute to morality. On the one hand, empathy has been a strong contender in the ongoing debate over how we understand other people's minds. Regardless of how the debate is settled—whether or not our mind-reading ability is primarily a matter of applying a theory of mind or that of simulating another's mind (through empathy)—we can all agree that empathy does serve *some* epistemic function in understanding the inner life of another person. However, the nature of this function needs to be spelled out more clearly. What sort of understanding does empathy yield? And in particular, how does empathy aid our deliberation about what to do in a moral situation? On the other hand, the idea that empathy fosters a kind of connection also seems right. The almost exclusive focus in the literature on the relation between empathy and altruistic—"*for* the other"—behavior obscures the possibility that empathy is first and foremost a kind of being *with* the other.[13] It orients us towards the other person, shifting our attention from what we ourselves are going through to what someone else

[13] I'm focusing on Carse's account, not Slote's, because I think he leans too closely to identifying empathy with empathic concern. The two are not the same, and the link between the two remains controversial.

is going through, but it does not entail actions to benefit that person. No doubt the attitudes and actions that are *for* the other such as sympathy, compassion, and care are morally valuable, but those that embody a kind of being *with* the other can be so as well. As with its epistemic role, I want to take up the discussion from where Carse leaves off and clarify how empathy plays this relational role.

4.2 The Epistemic Role of Empathy

A basic epistemic task for moral judgment is the identification of relevant facts about the situation at hand. Regardless of which normative ethical theory one favors, we can all agree that one cannot make a sound judgment about what to do without sufficient knowledge of specific features of the situation she is in—in particular, relevant facts about the *people* who are involved in it. Sometimes it's enough to know what happened to someone, such as that the earthquake survivors are in desperate need of food and shelter, or that a child is drowning in a pond. Most of the time, however, others' internal experience is also relevant—and often of paramount importance—to one's moral judgment. First, one's psychological well-being may be equally at stake as her physical well-being. The victim of bullying lives in fear, whether or not she also suffers any bodily harm. Unemployment is not only a blow to someone financially, but possibly a blow to his sense of self-worth. In the case of the earthquake survivors, their feelings of loss and despair should not be overlooked either. Furthermore, we often need to find out *why* someone acted a certain way, and not just *what* they did. In order to understand their reasons for doing what they did, we also need to look into their inner states. For the parents of a child who's been bullying other kids, they must first figure out why he is doing it. Perhaps he feels self-conscious about his appearance, or he is simply trying to get the attention of his workaholic parents. Only when they understand his inner world can the parents adequately deal with the issue. Finally, what is a morally appropriate response is often in part a function of how it is likely to be received. When I approach my recently unemployed neighbor about his increasing violence towards people around him, I should be careful in expressing my concern, aware that what would otherwise sound completely normal could come off as condescending or pitying to him.

In addition, it is not just *knowledge* of someone's inner states that we need for determining the right moral response. I mentioned "understanding" as though it was interchangeable with "knowledge," which is not uncommon in the literature on empathy, but I think the two are distinct concepts denoting distinct though related epistemic achievements. I want to suggest that it is *understanding* of someone's inner states that we need for determining the right moral response. Empathy is essential for this task. In the rest of the section, I will first clarify what it means to understand someone's inner states, and then explain how empathy contributes to this end.

Much of the current work exploring the concept of understanding builds upon the intuition that to understand something is to make sense of it, which goes beyond having information, or data, or (propositional) knowledge about the object. Understanding is essentially tied to the notion of intelligibility while knowledge isn't. The predominant view holds that making something intelligible roughly amounts to making certain connections between pieces of knowledge of the object. These connections may be, in Jonathan Kvanvig's words, "explanatory, logical, probabilistic, and other kinds of relations that coherentists have thought constitute justification (2003, p.192–193)." Or they may also be part-whole relations. Wayne Riggs, for

example, writes that "Understanding … requires a deep appreciation, grasp, or awareness of how its parts fit together, what role each one plays in the context of the whole, and of the role it plays in the larger scheme of things (2003, p.217)." Put in a different way, understanding involves apprehending the structure of one's knowledge, seeing the "order" or "pattern" (in Riggs' words), or tracing the "geography of knowledge" as Neil Cooper calls it (Cooper 1994, p.4). Thus, to understand someone's inner states or internal experience is not just a matter of knowing facts about the nature of her experience, but also being able to see how they relate to each other. As we saw earlier, moral deliberation often requires figuring out one's reasons for doing something, which requires precisely grasping explanatory relations between one's inner states and her behavior, or among her inner states themselves. Our deliberation is also likely to call for a sense of one's point of view, which is more general than the individual mental states she undergoes, and resembles a kind of "structure" underlying them. So to get a sense of her perspective, we need to understand the way in which her inner states "fit together" or exhibit a "pattern."[14]

Another main feature of understanding seems to be that when we understand something, we are able to apply our knowledge of it.[15] This is why a good way to test whether students have actually understood a topic and not just memorized it is to test their ability to perform certain tasks with the knowledge they have presumably acquired, such as solving a problem, defending a view, explaining a phenomenon, and so on. The ability to apply what we know is indispensable for making an appropriate response in a moral situation. In the wake of a deadly earthquake, it may seem insensitive (and perhaps even wrong) for a journalist to press survivors for memories of the loved ones they lost, whereas it would be a good decision to provide counseling services as part of the disaster relief effort. The difference between the two responses need not stem from a difference in knowledge about the survivors' distress. Rather, the insensitive journalist does not seem to *understand* their distress in the sense that she doesn't seem to get what is to be done about it. However, this is not to say that understanding guarantees correct moral response. An expert on network security can guard a computer system against hacking, but she could just as well be a hacker (or both at the same time). Similarly, one who understands the earthquake survivors' feelings would be in an excellent position to provide care, but she is just as capable of exploiting those feelings for malicious purposes.[16]

There may be more to understanding one's internal experience, but I think knowledge of the experience, appreciation of relations (among bits of that knowledge), and an ability to apply the knowledge lie at the core of the understanding.[17] I will now turn to the next question, how does empathy contribute to this end? In short, empathy is essential to understanding a person's internal experience in virtue of its being a first-person experience of it—"first-personal" in the sense that we treat the other person's inner states as if they were our own, and "experiential" in that we (vicariously) experience them ourselves.

[14] It may seem circular to say that we are to get a sense of one's point of view through empathizing, for empathizing involves taking up that point of view in the first place. I agree there is a circle; it is inevitable, but not vicious. As with understanding (of any subject matter), we can improve our empathic efforts in light of new information we learn either about the parts (i.e. mental states) or about the whole (i.e. overall perspective).

[15] Although understanding involves this practical aspect, it is to be distinguished from knowledge-how. Knowledge of how to do something is a practical skill, which does not necessarily require propositional knowledge about the activity. Understanding involves the ability to apply what one knows about a subject matter, where the application can range over many different activities.

[16] In the case of the insensitive journalist, I'm assuming she does not have malicious intent.

[17] Since one can be better or worse in any of these areas, one's understanding would be deeper or shallower accordingly.

These two elements mark empathy out as an embodied, rather than purely intellectual, cognitive process and as giving us insight into the other's subjective point of view from within it rather than from the outside.[18] Both aspects will help explain how empathy can play the epistemic role I attribute to it.

We naturally rely on empathy to learn about a person's inner states. Granted it's not the only source of information—for we can learn about what someone is feeling or thinking by directly asking her, inferring from her actions and facial expressions, or inferring from general rules of how humans behave in certain situations—empathy as an embodied cognitive process can yield more nuanced information about the quality of one's experience. I may infer that my jobless neighbor must feel awful, knowing that it took him two years to find a full-time job after graduating from college (with a liberal arts degree, of course, and a sizable student loan debt). Without empathizing with him, it seems quite unlikely for me to grasp the complexity and depth of the "awful" experience, a messy mixture of feelings ranging from self-directed anger, disappointment, and doubt, to disillusion and despair, to resentment, jealousy, and perhaps even hatred towards other people (or the "one percent"?). Empathic imagination is apt to pick out such details in one's experience, especially one's emotional experience, which might otherwise get lost in thinking or theorizing alone. Not only that, the first-personal aspect of empathy ensures that we go beyond what might *generally* be true of one's experience given her situation or her behavior, and pay attention to what is *specific* to this particular person's experience. Jodi Halpern describes an example where a medical team's sympathy for a patient is met with hostility (2001, p.86–88). Even though the patient, Mr. Smith, is indeed upset about his condition, he is upset that it robs him of the strength and power he used to hold at work and at home, and sympathy is the last thing he wants from others. It is through empathic imagination that Halpern is able to get at the particular kind of distress Mr. Smith experiences with his illness.

Empathy does not only yield knowledge of what it is like to go through the experience someone has. Occupying that person's point of view also gives us insight into how she makes sense of her own situation and comes to respond to it as she does. Karsten Stueber argues that our thinking is essentially indexical and contextual such that it can be understood only from within the first-person's point of view, that is, through empathy.[19] Roughly, the point is that the thought process one engages in is opaque to another person because its content is selected and organized in relation to that particular person's point of view. Without entering into her point of view, it is not entirely clear to us which features of her situation appear salient to her, how she construes them, and how they figure in her reasoning—we would find it hard to make the right connections among her thoughts and other mental states.[20] We can of course make fairly intelligent guesses based on our general knowledge of human psychology, but they do not always capture what may be unique to someone's situation or her way of thinking. I once had students discuss the peculiar case of a man, "Alex," who developed an apparently irresistible

[18] My coming to see empathy as embodied cognition is much influenced by Alvin Goldman's work in this area (especially Goldman 2013). To say that empathy is embodied is to say that the process of coming to gain knowledge and understanding of the other's internal experience through empathy is encoded not in propositions but in bodily changes that make up one's vicarious experience.

[19] A rich discussion of the contexuality and indexicality of thoughts as reasons can be found in Chapter 4 of Stueber's *Rediscovering Empathy* (2006).

[20] Stueber's arguments are meant to be *a priori* in the sense that the nature of thinking determines that someone's thoughts and her reasoning with thoughts can be intelligible only internal to her point of view. So Stueber would say it is in principle *impossible*, not just difficult, to understand one's thought process without empathizing. I think he's probably right, although for my purposes, I can grant that in our everyday life, we can and often do get a pretty good idea of why someone did what she did without empathizing, by drawing on our past experience with similar cases.

sexual interest in children after a tumor developed in his brain.[21] Some students blamed him for his pedophiliac activities, arguing that he should have done something about his problem since he retained enough control over his actions that, as indicated in the article, he "worked to hide his acts." A couple of students, however, saw a different reason for his failure to properly deal with it. Given the social stigma attached to pedophilia, they said, Alex might be afraid of disclosing his problem to his family or health professionals for fear of condemnation and perhaps ostracism. This possibility was not obvious to us, readers of normal mental conditions. What we saw was a man knowingly engaging in morally abhorrent actions as a result of a brain malfunction. The social meaning of pedophilia was not made salient to us until we started imagining what it was like for him in that situation; neither was the thought process that used this meaning as a further reason for hiding his problem. It does not follow that we must then alter our judgment of his actions, but whatever we judge of him, it should be based on as accurate an understanding of his case as we can reasonably achieve.

Whereas the first-personal aspect of empathy enables us to follow the connections in one's thought process, the experiential aspect of it serves as the basis for our ability to apply our knowledge of her experience. Not just anything we do given the knowledge counts as *application*. In Noël Carroll's words, understanding involves the capacity to use knowledge of the object "intelligibly and appropriately (1998, p.143)." I take him to mean that the information is used in a way that is befitting of the object.[22] This means one must have a sense of what possibilities might obtain for the object, such as the changes it might undergo, or effects it might produce in different situations. When it comes to another's mental states, we have no better access to their possibilities than through empathy, for they are given in our (vicarious) experience—given, because our own experience of mental states registers the causal connections they have. In the case of Mr. Smith, putting herself in his position reveals to Halpern the different possibilities of Smith's response to different attitudes communicated by the medical team.

4.3 The Relational Role of Empathy

While empathy as a way of accessing the other's inner states plays a crucial epistemic role in morality, it can also be seen as a form of sharing (the other's inner experience) through which it seems to foster a sense of connection with the other.[23] In Carse's example of a mother who is oblivious to her partner's abuse of her daughter, a failure to empathize with the daughter's suffering would, as Carse suggests, hinder the restoration of her connection with the daughter and the latter's trust in her (p.188). It would be "tantamount to egregious abandonment (ibid.)"—abandonment not just in the sense that the mother would fail to care for the daughter, but also that she would fail to accompany the latter's struggle to recover. Here, the mother's being there both *for* the daughter and *with* her is needed to address the harms of the abuse as well as the feelings of isolation the daughter has gone through as a victim. I think Carse is right in locating the value of empathy in enabling connection, for it seems that even if the mother's empathy isn't all that accurate, her efforts at empathizing might well be appreciated by the

[21] This is a real life story described in David Eagleman's article, "The Brain on Trial," from *the Atlantic* July/August 2011.

[22] As I said earlier, the application need not be *morally* appropriate. I think what Carroll has in mind by "appropriate" is something like "appropriate with respect to the kind of thing the object is."

[23] Empathy has also been characterized as a kind of (imaginative) "participation" in another's inner life (see Deigh 1996 and Halpern 2001), a notion similar to "sharing" in that both mark the empathizer's position as one of being *alongside* or *with* the other person.

daughter as a gesture of reaching out to her. The further question is, how does empathy foster a sense of connection?

We might think that at a minimum, to be with someone is to keep her company. Of course not just any sort of "company" gives rise to a connection between people. One can be in the presence of others and yet feel utterly lonely—just imagine (or recall) feeling completely out of place at a crowded party. To be someone's company in the strict sense of the term, then, means that one is together with the other person in some meaningful way or more specifically, that one *shares* something meaningful with the other. The object of sharing must be somewhat "meaningful" since the point of company is to address the other's sense of loneliness, which has more to do with how she construes it than her being physically alone. I may feel isolated in a foreign country where no one speaks my language, but this feeling is only stronger when I meet up with old acquaintances who cannot stop talking about their babies or their state-of-the-art gadgets. Hence, one's company is more or less deep depending on the extent to which what is shared is meaningful to the other. Since what matters most to us is what we think, feel, care about and aspire to, we feel deeper company when our internal life, more than anything else, is shared by another person. This is where empathy comes in, for it involves precisely sharing (vicariously) the other's internal experience, something that is profoundly and intimately personal.[24] Take what happens in friendship, for example. Aristotle thinks that ideally, friends should live a shared life, participating in activities and projects together. It seems to me that the key to maintaining a strong bond with a friend lies in sharing each other's *inner* life, for friends who live apart are still able to feel connected as long as they communicate their thoughts and feelings regularly with each other.[25] Empathy on the receiving end of the communication effectively says, "You're not alone in this experience." When my friend complains about the hostile environment she works in, where aggressive colleagues constantly pick faults with her while the supervisor turns a blind eye, her frustration is partly that she alone endures this. Part of my response, in addition to lending her an ear and offering support, is to alleviate her sense of loneliness by empathically sharing (or at least attempting to do so) what it feels like for her to work in that environment.

Moreover, empathy does not just convey to the other that "You're not alone in feeling this or thinking that," but also that "I see that what you're feeling or thinking is real." It's quite possible that I could react to my friend's complaint about her colleagues in other ways: I might think she's just being dramatic, or tell her to be more positive. Either way, my reaction—unless it is preceded by empathic engagement—is likely to drive my friend away from me rather than bring us closer since it simply brushes aside the issue she brings up. It seems to me that we easily downplay, dismiss or even deny other people's experience, especially when it is unfamiliar or unpleasant to us. When we do so, we do not just fail to give company. The more serious problem, which results from a failure to acknowledge the significance of their experience, is that we fail to acknowledge *them*, who are both the author and product of their experience. Although empathy is not the only route to acknowledgment, it is often indispensable for counteracting our tendency to regard another's experience to be less real until it is presented to us in all vividness.

What I mean by "acknowledgment" is similar to Margaret Walker's use of the term in her discussion of moral repair.[26] Walker argues that in the wake of wrongdoing, the community

[24] It's possible for one to share similar emotions as another without empathizing: fans cheering for the same team or survivors of a train wreck may go through the same emotional experience in virtue of being in the same situation. But even in an identical situation, there may well be individual differences in people's reactions.

[25] And for those who do participate in joint activities, such shared times together readily provide opportunities as well as resources for sharing and understanding each other's inner life.

[26] See Ch. 1 ("What Is Moral Repair?) and Ch. 4 ("Resentment and Assurance") of Walker 2006.

has a duty, among others, to acknowledge the fact of wrong and the need for reparation to the victim. Its failure to fulfill this duty amounts to what Walker calls "normative abandonment"—abandonment of the victim from the moral community held together by normative rules since she's not considered to be protected by these rules (p.20). Walker further highlights the importance of communal acknowledgment by suggesting that such acknowledgment may serve as a kind of reparation by itself "even when other forms of satisfaction, such as punishment of wrongdoers or material compensation for injuries, are not easily achieved (p.144)." On Walker's view, the connection between a member of the moral community and the rest depends on latter's recognition of her as a fellow member, which in turn depends on their acknowledging her victimhood when she suffers a wrong. Although I do not focus on the specific context of wrongdoing, the link between acknowledging (as opposed to ignoring) crucial facts about a person and acknowledging the person herself holds true for the kind of acknowledgment I'm interested in here. However, I want to note that acknowledgment need not entail agreement in the sense of endorsement of what the other person thinks or feels. In acknowledging, we do accept that the person feels (or has any other kind of internal experience) a certain way, and even that it makes sense to her to feel that way, but we do not have to also accept that she is right to feel that way. After listening carefully to my friend and imagining the scenario for myself, I may come to the conclusion that she is indeed being overly dramatic and sensitive. This may be the same conclusion I would make if I dismissed her complaint right away, but my disagreement with her affirms her subjectivity (and thus sustains our connection) in one case, but not in the other.

Besides providing company and acknowledgment, empathy also grounds responsiveness to the other. I mentioned earlier that our response in a moral situation often needs to take into account how it might be received. The point there was that empathy provides the epistemic resource we need to do just that. But the value of responsiveness—attentiveness to the reception of one's response from the other's point of view and readiness to adjust one's response accordingly—goes beyond its link to the epistemic outcome. It is also a key element in forging a connection with the other, for one is fine-tuning her response so that it "speaks to" the other, in addition to addressing her situation. We can say that in being responsive this way, one is "doubly" oriented towards the other person: first, it is a response towards the other's situation; and second, it is formulated in light of how the other might receive the response. Even if empathy is not always needed for the first step, it is necessary for the second. Too often, our orientation towards the other is incomplete; even though we look to her for relevant facts about her situation, we turn inwards in considering how to respond, relying on what *we* think—from *our* own point of view—is the best response. We may not be wrong, but our response would fall short of connecting with her. Suppose a student asks for a higher grade on his paper without much of a good reason. I decline his request, citing my grade change policy stated in the syllabus. This is the right thing to do, but we can imagine different ways of expressing my decision, some more responsive than others. I could straightforwardly say, "No," and direct him to the pertinent section in the syllabus. Or I could explain my decision by reminding him of the justification for my policy, as well as address his concern with his grades by suggesting some ways to improve. Either way, I will disappoint the student, but the second kind of reply would send the message that I'm nevertheless *with* the student as he progresses through the course while the first almost sounds like I'm "against" him.

The sense of connection, based on company, acknowledgement, and responsiveness, lies at the heart of our close personal relationships such as those between good friends, life partners, family members, and perhaps some mentors and their mentees. It also has an important place outside of these relationships. The kind of empathic caring recommended by Jodi Halpern for medical professionals is seen as a better form of care not just because it is more sensitive to the patient's needs (informed by empathic understanding), but also because it is more "human"—

more "human," I suppose, because it conveys the message that the doctors and nurses are not just treating a *body*, but relating to a *fellow human*, who resembles themselves in her basic needs and feelings.[27] And yet, precisely because the patient is considered a fellow human, the medical staff is also not just treating *anybody*, but treating this *particular person*, who resembles them in yet another way—having her own particular needs and feelings. In the example of "Mr. Smith," Halpern's realization of his "sense of underlying shame and helplessness" (p.88) through empathic imagination humanizes Smith and helps her establish a kind of rapport with Mr. Smith, as he reveals his vulnerable side ("he turned to look at me with tears in his eyes") and begins to work with her.

The point illustrated here, that empathy fosters a sense of connection with another as a fellow human, can be further generalized to a wide range of contexts, including ones where no relationship is present or possible. Empathy humanizes individuals of whom we otherwise know only on a superficial or abstract level. They need not be villains, but anyone we are inclined to think of as being different from us, say, in their religion, sexual orientation, race, income, nationality, and so on. It is one thing to recognize theoretically that we all share something deeply in common—it isn't as if I do not take the homeless person to be a fellow human being who needs a shelter as much as I do. However, it is another to share, in practice and mobilizing my full range of cognitive and affective capacities, part of the other person's experience, however small a part it may be. At the same time, since empathy affords us insight into the other's perspective, what we now feel connected to is not just a generic human who is like us in at least some fundamental way, but a particular person who occupies a perspective no less distinctive than our own. Thus, to refine my earlier suggestion that empathy is a kind of "being with" another, I would say that empathy constitutes being with another subject.

Someone might object that empathy does not enable connection or humanize the other, for why would one bother to empathize with another if one does not already feel she is "with" the other person in the first place? It can be argued that I'm willing to sit down with my friend and listen to her vent *because I'm her friend*, and I'm willing to consider a child molester's point of view *because I see some humanity in him,* not the other way around. This may well be true; empathy does not necessarily create a connection where none existed before. In the case of my empathizing with the friend or the child molester, what empathy does is more likely affirming, renewing, or strengthening a connection. This in no way diminishes its importance, for how we are related to others is not a static, all-or-nothing matter, but requires work. This applies to personal relationships as well as the task of humanizing those who are more distant or different from us. Having said that, I do not wish to rule out the possibility of one's *forming* a new connection through empathy. Sometimes we may find ourselves spontaneously empathizing with people, for example, when we come across photos of earthquake survivors in a foreign country. We may also be prompted to step in someone's shoes. This happened when some students raised the issue of social stigma surrounding pedophilia during the discussion of Alex. The rest of the class was consequently invited to look at Alex's situation from a different angle.

5 What the Proponent of Empathy Should *Not* Say

The above is a sketch of what I take to be a view that the proponent of empathy can plausibly hold. But just as important as what the proponent *can* say is what she *should not* say about

[27] Perhaps not coincidentally, Smith (2002) and Hume (1983) both refer to empathy as a "fellow feeling." However, whereas the meaning of this "fellow feeling" shifts between "feeling with one's fellow (human)" and "feeling for one's fellow (human)" in their writings, I take it to mean only the former.

empathy. It's tempting, when challenged by opponents, to exaggerate the role of empathy. But the proponent would do well to concede to the critics a few things. She must acknowledge that empathy unconstrained can indeed be morally problematic. But more than that, she must also recognize that the place of even *properly* exercised empathy is limited. This is not a problem for the proponent, for such recognition is entirely compatible with her view. In fact, it is entailed by it, for an account of proper empathy spells out when and how empathy can fulfill important roles in morality, thus also marking out when and how it is not necessary or even desirable.

First, the proponent of empathy should not claim that our moral response must *always* involve empathy. Since our exercise of empathy is subject to moral norms, moral considerations not only dictate how empathy should be used, but also whether it is called for at all. Hence, contrary to what critics like Jesse Prinz assume, the proponent need not require that we extend our empathic efforts to all the victims when a natural disaster strikes (Prinz 2011, p.229). While Prinz is right to point out that such an attempt is both practically impossible and potentially counter-productive, a sensible proponent of empathy can well agree that this may not be the best time to empathize with every single victim.

Furthermore, the proponent must also recognize that both roles of empathy are limited. Those who champion its epistemic role are apt to go too far, assuming that empathy supplies all we need for understanding another's experience. But even accurate empathy may still be insufficient for understanding, for the first-personal nature of empathic engagement entails an incomplete and one-sided view of the other. It also means one may be blind to the actual condition of that person if she has a rather distorted picture of herself and the surroundings.[28] Empathy tells us *what it is like* to think or feel like the other person, but it alone does not also inform us of *what it is* for one to think or feel that way. It is only when one steps back from empathic engagement and reflects on the vicarious experience that she can come to understand the person fully. Such limits on the epistemic role of empathy is precisely what the proposed account entails. Given that empathy yields a kind of experiential understanding, it is only reasonable to expect that it may or may not be required or preferable to alternative means for understanding in a particular situation, depending on whether and how much experiential understanding is needed for forming an appropriate moral response. On the other hand, fulfillment of its relational role also doesn't guarantee appropriate moral response. A friend in trouble does not simply need someone who is there with her, but also need support, care, and sometimes admonishment. As for the children with cancer that I read about in a letter calling for donations, I may come to feel connected with them through empathy, and yet fail to send a check because I think *someone* will help.

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[28] The image of a person with mental illness comes to mind when we think of someone with a "distorted" picture of herself. I do not wish to restrict the class of people to those afflicted with mental illness. One may be unaware of certain facts about herself, or self-deceived about them, without being mentally ill. Limited or partially false self-understanding is common, or even an inescapable human condition.

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