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Is Empathy Necessary for Morality?

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1. Introduction

It is widely believed that empathy is a good thing, from a moral point of view. It is something we should cultivate because it makes us better people. Perhaps that's true. But it is also sometimes suggested that empathy is somehow *necessary* for morality. That is the hypothesis I want to interrogate and challenge. Not only is there little evidence for the claim that empathy is necessary, there is also reason to think empathy can interfere with the ends of morality. A capacity for empathy might make us better people, but placing empathy at the center of our moral lives may be ill-advised. That is not to say that morality shouldn't centrally involve emotions. I think emotions are essential for moral judgment and moral motivation (Prinz, 2007). It's just that empathetic emotions are not ideally suited for these jobs.

Before embarking on this campaign against empathy, I want to say a little more about the target of the attack. What is empathy? And what would it mean to say empathy is necessary for morality? With respect to the first question, much has been written. Theories of empathy abound. Batson et al. (1995: 1042) define empathy as, "as an other-oriented emotional response congruent with the perceived welfare of another person." This is not the definition I will be using. Batson's construct might be better characterized as "concern," because of its focus on another person's welfare. Indeed, in much of his research he talks about "empathetic concern." Notice that this construct seems to be a combination of two separable things. Being concerned for someone is worrying about their welfare, which is something one can do even if one doesn't feel what it would be like to be in their place. One can have concern for a plant, for example, and an insect, or even an artifact, like a beautiful building that has into disrepair. Empathy, seems to connote a kind of feeling that has to be at last possible for the object of empathy. If so, "empathetic concern" combines two different things—a find of feeling-for an object and a feeling-on-behalf-of an object. Much of the empirical literature, including the superb research that Batson has done, fails to isolate these components, and, as a result, some of the existing studies are confounded. They purport to show the value of empathy, but may really show the value of concern. My focus below will be on empathy, and I leave it as an open possibility that concern is highly important, if not necessary, for morality. Indeed, concern often seems to involve an element kind of moral anger, which I will argue is very important to morality.

It is also important to distinguish empathy from sympathy. Suppose I feel outraged for someone who has been brainwashed into thinking she should follow a cult leader who is urging mass suicide. That would not necessarily qualify as empathy. As Darwall (1998: 261) points out, sympathy is a third-person emotional response, whereas empathy involves putting oneself in another person's shoes. But

Darwall's definition is also somewhat problematic. He says, "Empathy consists in feeling what one imagines he feels, or perhaps should feel (fear, say), or in some imagined copy of these feelings, whether one comes thereby to be concerned … or not." This definition has two features, which I would like to avoid. First, the appeal to imagination seems overly intellectual. Imagination sounds like a kind of mental act that requires effort on the part of the imaginer. As Darwell recognizes, empathy in its simplest form empathy is just emotional contagion: catching the emotion that another person feels (Hatfield et al., 1994; Hoffman, 2000). It seems inflated to call contagion an imaginative act. Also, I want to resist Darwall's application of "empathy" to cases where one has a feeling that someone *should* feel, but does not feel. The problem is that this tends to blur the distinction between empathy and sympathy. Suppose I encounter a member of a cult who is delighted by the cult leader's nefarious plans. The cult member *should* by afraid, but is not. If I feel fear on the cult member's behalf, that is not putting myself in the cult member's shoes. As I will use the term, empathy requires a kind of emotional mimicry.

I do not wish to imply that empathy is always an automatic process, in the way that emotional contagion is. Sometimes imagination is requires, and sometimes we experience emotions that we think someone *would* be experiencing, even if we have not seen direct evidence that the emotion is, in fact, being experienced. For example, one might feel empathetic hope for a marathon runner who is a few steps behind the runner is first place, or anxiety for the first place runner, and the second place runner catches up. We can experience these feelings even if the runners' facial expressions reveal little more than muscular contortions associated with concentration and physical exertion. A situation can reveal a feeling. The core idea, as I will use the term, is that empathy is a kind of vicarious emotion: it's feeling what one takes another person to be feeling. And the "taking" here can be a matter of automatic contagion or the result of a complicated exercise of the imagination.

I don't think there is anything anachronistic about this notion of empathy. I think it has a long tradition in moral philosophy, even though the term "empathy" is only 100 years old. The British moralists, including David Hume and Adam Smith, used "sympathy" in way that is similar to the way I want to use "empathy." Here is Smith (1759: II.i): "Whatever is the passion which arises from any object in the person principally concerned, an analogous emotion springs up, at the thought of his situation, in the breast of every attentive spectator." My question, in the pages that follow, is whether empathy so-defined is necessary for morality. I should note again, in advance, that the empirical literature does not always distinguish between the constructs I have been discussing, but I do think that all the studies I discuss below can, by inference at least, shed some light on empathy as defined here.

The suggestion that empathy is necessary for morality can be interpreted in at least three different ways. One might hold the view that empathy is necessary for making moral judgment. One might think empathy is necessary for moral development. And one might think empathy is necessary for motivating moral conduct. I think each of these conjectures is false. Empathy is not necessary for any of these things. We can have moral systems without empathy. Of course, it doesn't follow directly that empathy should be eliminated from morality. One might think the modal question—Can there be morality without empathy?—and the related

descriptive question—Do our moral responses depend on empathy?—are uninteresting. One might even think that the answers to these questions are obviously negative and don't need to be argued for. The interesting question, one might think, is whether empathy *should* play an integral role in morality. In the final part of this paper, I will offer a skeptical response to this question, and I will draw of the lessons of earlier parts in making this case. I don't think the answers to the necessity claims are obvious. I think empathy looks on initial reflection like an integral part of morality. In seeing why it isn't, we will also begin to see why it shouldn't be.

2. Is Empathy Necessary for Moral Judgment?

Let's begin with the conjecture that empathy is necessary for making moral judgment. For simplicity, let's restrict the account of judgments that are expressed with the term "good" and "bad." For example, one might judge that charity is good, or that wife beating is bad. According to the view under consideration these judgments depend on empathetic responses: we empathize with the positive feelings experienced by the recipients of charity and with the negative feelings of those who fall prey to domestic violence. It is these empathetic responses that allow one to see these actions as good and bad respectively. Without empathy, we could mouth the words that "charity is good" and "abuse is bad," but we wouldn't speak with true understanding; we wouldn't be grasping the judgments that such sentences have the function of expressing.

A view like this can be attributed to David Hume. He writes,

> We partake of [victims of injustice's] uneasiness by sympathy; and as every thing, which gives uneasiness in human actions, upon the general survey, is called Vice, and whatever produces satisfaction, in the same manner, is denominated Virtue.… [S]ympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation, which attends that virtue. (Hume, 1739: II.ii)

As I read him, Hume's theory of moral judgment, can be broken down into the following claims: a virtuous action is one that intentionally brings about pleasure and a vicious action is one that intentionally brings about pain; when we contemplate the pleasure or pain of another person, we feel empathy (what Hume calls "sympathy"); our empathetic response to the recipients of virtuous and vicious actions arouses in us feelings of approbation and disapprobation, respectively; these feelings of approbation and disapprobation constitute our judgments that something is morally good or bad. On this interpretation, empathy is an essential precursor to moral judgment. If we had no empathy, the pain brought about by a vicious action would leave us cold, and no disapprobation would follow. Thus empathy, while not a component of moral judgment, is a precondition.

Whether or not this is an accurate reading of Hume, the account has an initial ring of plausibility. It is plausible that empathy plays an epistemological role, leading us to have negative regard for those actions that harm people and positive regard for those actions that help. If moral judgment consists in a certain kind of

negative or positive regard, empathy looks like it might be fundamental to moral cognition. But close analysis severs this link.

First, consider cases where deontological considerations overrule utilitarian principles. For example, one might judge that it is bad to kill an innocent person even if his vital organs could be used to save five others who desperately need transplants. Here, arguably, we feel cumulatively more empathy for the five people in need than for the one healthy person, but our moral judgment does not track that empathetic response. Second, consider the moral judgments one might issue from behind a Rawlsian veil of ignorance; you might decide it's good to distribute resources to the needy because *you* might be needy. Here there is no empathy for the needy, but rather concern for the self. Third, while on the topic of the self, consider cases in which you yourself are the victim of a moral transgression. You judge that you've been wronged, but you don't thereby empathize with yourself, whatever that would mean. Fourth, consider cases in which there is no salient victim. One can judge that it would be wrong to evade taxes or steal from a department store, for instance, without dwelling first on the suffering of those who would be harmed. Fifth, there are victimless transgressions, such as necrophilia, consensual sibling incest, destruction of (unpopulated) places in the environment, or desecration of a grave of someone who has no surviving relative. Empathy makes no sense in these cases. As a descriptive claim it seems wrong to suppose that empathy is a precondition for moral judgment.

Moreover, there is reason to believe that other emotions are sufficient for moral judgment even when empathy is absent. Recall the Humean model on which empathy leads to disapprobation. A simpler alternative would say that disapprobation can arise directly upon consideration of various kinds of action. To see this, it's helpful to have a firmer idea of what disapprobation is. Elsewhere, I offer the following analysis (Prinz, 2007: chap. 2; drawing on Rozin et al., 1999). Disapprobation, I claim, is a sentiment, rather than an emotion. Sentiments are dispositions to have emotions. Disapprobation is a disposition to have emotions of blame towards self and others. If I have a sentiment of disapprobation towards stealing, I am disposed to have bad feelings towards my self if I steal and bad feelings towards you if you steal. The feelings depend on the kind of action under consideration. Stealing is a crime against a person, and when such actions are performed by others they elicit anger, and when performed by the self, they elicit guilt. In contrast there are crimes against nature: such as necrophilia, incest, or bestiality. In these cases, the dominant emotional response is disgust, when the action is performed by another, and shame if we perform or even consider performing such an action ourselves. In addition, there are crimes against community, such as the violation of public trust, which tend to elicit contempt or some kind of self loathing. On any given occasion, when I judge that something is wrong, that judgment token derives from a sentiment, and consists in the appropriate emotional response. If I judge that I was wrong to eat the last cookie, my judgment consists in a feeling of guilt about my action. That guilt is a manifestation of my disapprobation of last-cookie-eating, or, more likely, an indirect manifestation of a more generalized disapprobation of greed.

With this picture in hand, we can formulate the alternative to the empathy-based theory of moral judgment as follows. A (negative) moral judgment arises when an action elicits an emotional response in virtue of the fact that the judger has a sentiment of disapprobation towards actions of that kind. (Positive moral judgments may sometimes involve sentiments of approbation, which may dispose us to positive feelings, such as gratitude, pride in good conduct, or admiration). So the question at hand is, is empathy needed for disapprobation if this story is right? For example, do I need to empathize with anyone in order to feel guilty about taking the last cookie? It seems plausible that I do not. If I construe my action as greedy, I may immediately feel a pang of guilt. It might be objected that empathy is needed to construe an action as greedy, but I find that implausible. I can recognize an action as greedy without putting myself in someone else's shoes. It's cognitively cumbersome to think I route through the simulation of another person every time I classify some behavior as greedy (or thieving, or murderous, or incestuous, or nepotistic, or indecent, and so on, for everything I am apt to condemn as morally bad). Morally significant actions can be recognized without empathy, even if those actions are ones that involve harm. We need not reflect on the harm to see that the action is bad. Perhaps you are delighted that I ate the last cookie. I recognize that, empathetically, and I still feel guilty; I still think I should have offered the cookie to you.

If this is right, then empathy is not a necessary precursor to moral judgment. I emphasize this point, because it is sometimes presumed that sentimentalist theories of moral judgment must be empathy-based theories. The tradition that includes David Hume and Adam Smith has placed empathy in a central place. It is even sometimes suggested that empathy is the fundamental affective response involved in moral judgment. That is a mistake. The emotions just mentioned have been demonstrated to play a major part in morality. One can advance a sentimentalist theory based on such emotions as anger and guilt, while giving only marginal import to empathy. Empathy may help us come to the conclusion that a particular action is wrong on a particular occasion, but it hardly seems necessary for that purpose.

3. Is Empathy Necessary for Moral Development?

The Humean theory of moral judgment that I've just been discussing is a synchronic theory: it's a theory of what moral judgments are like when we make them here and now. I argued that the theory is false; we often make moral judgments in the absence of empathetic responses. But this conclusion is consistent with the possibility that empathy plays a diachronic role: emotions may be necessary for the development of the capacity to make moral judgments in the first place.

The idea that empathy plays a role in moral development has been pursued by some developmental psychologists. The emergence of empathy has been extensively investigated, and some developmentalists speculate that empathy plays an essential role in developing a sense of morality (Hoffman, 2000). Conceptually, the idea has much appeal. Morality centrally regards the regulation of behavior towards others, and one can acquire a concern for others' well-being by

empathizing with them. If a child were not empathetic, she could not fully appreciate how her actions affected others, and, without that, she might not come to appreciate when her actions were wrong.

It's somewhat difficult to find evidence for developmental hypotheses of this kind. Most studies of normally developing children measure relationships between empathy and morally relevant *behaviors* such as aggression and helping behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 2006). But what's really at issue here is whether empathy gives rise to the capacity to make moral *judgments*. Studies do show that children engage in empathetic reasoning when making moral judgments (Eisenberg-Berg, 1979), but they do not show that empathy is essential to moral judgment. Even a high positive correlation between empathy and healthy moral judgments would not speak directly to the necessity thesis. Such correlations would not show that, without empathy, a capacity for moral judgment would not be acquired.

To assess the necessity thesis, researchers must consider pathological populations. They must identify people who lack empathy and see whether they lack moral competence as a result. Blair (1995) takes on precisely this challenge. His study investigates morality in psychopaths. Lack of empathy is a diagnostic criterion for psychopathy (Hare, 1991), and Blair shows that psychopaths also suffer from a profound deficit in moral competence. In particular, they do not draw a distinction between moral rules (e.g., don't hit people) and conventional rules (e.g., rules about what clothing to wear in school). Blair concludes that psychopaths' failure to draw this distinction indicates that they do not comprehend the essence of moral rules. When they say that something is "morally wrong," they don't really understand what these words mean. Blair speculates that this failure is a direct result of the empathy deficit. His developmental modelsgoes roughly like this: normally developing children have an innate tendency to empathize with observed distress. So, if one child causes another child to cry, the offending child will catch the observed emotion and feel badly. This bad feeling serves as an inhibition signal that causes her to cease the actions that are causing the distress and to associate bad feelings with that kind of action in the future. Blair conceptualizes this as a violence inhibition mechanism, akin to what we observe in non-human animals. If two dogs are fighting, the stronger will stop aggressing when the weaker bears its throat. Blair thinks that violence inhibition is mediated by empathetic distress, and, in humans, distress becomes associated with moral rules, but not conventional rules, because conventional violations do not cause distress. Normally developing children can distinguish moral and conventional rules because the former are emotionally grounded. Absent emotional grounding, the distinction would not be drawn. Absent empathy, moral rules would never acquire emotional grounding. Thus, Blair concludes, empathy is necessary for moral development. He does not, however assume that empathy arises whenever moral judgments are made in adulthood. Once negative emotions have been associated with an action type, one can recognize its wrongness without contemplating any one in distress.

Blair's account can be challenged in various ways. First, it is not clear that there is a violence inhibition mechanism. The status of such a mechanism is controversial in ethology and has not been established in human beings. Second, many of the moral rules we learn involve non-violent behaviors, such as stealing or

sexual impropriety. One of the diagnostic criteria for psychopathy is "criminal versatility," which suggests that psychopathy does not stem from a specific deficit in violence inhibition, as Blair's model suggests. Third, there is evidence that normally developing children draw the moral/conventional distinction well before they associate empathy with morality. Smetana and Braeges (1990) show sensitivity to the distinction before the third birthday, and Eisenberg-Berg (1979) shows that empathy does not enter actively into moral reasoning until high school. Fourth, there are other explanations of why psychopaths have deficits in both empathy and moral competence: these two deficits may arise from a third cause. In particular, psychopaths suffer from a more general deficit in moral emotions. "Shallow Affect" is one of the diagnostic criteria on psychopathy. Here's how Cleckley (1941/1976: 364) puts it:

> Vexation, spite, quick and labile flashes of quasi-affection, peevish resentment, shallow moods of self-pity, puerile attitudes of vanity, and absurd and showy poses of indignation are all within his emotional scale and are freely sounded as the circumstances of life play upon him. But mature, wholehearted anger, true or consistent indignation, honest, solid grief, sustaining pride, deep joy, and genuine despair are reactions not likely to be found within this scale.

Psychopaths are also poor at recognizing emotions, especially fear and sadness—and recognition deficits are known to be correlated with deficits in emotional experience (Blair et al., 2002). These affective abnormalities could explain both the low levels of empathy in psychopaths and the lack of moral competence. Empathy requires a disposition to experience emotions appropriate for another person, and a person with shallow affect and poor emotional recognition will have a diminished capacity for empathy as a result. The emotion deficit will also make an individual comparatively insensitive to common methods of moral education: they will be relatively indifferent to punishment, because they have low levels of fear, and they will be unmoved by love withdrawal, because they have low levels of sadness. They will also have a diminished capacity for emotions like guilt, which seem to have sadness as a component (Prinz, 2004), and moral anger. So psychopaths will lack emotions that facilitate moral education as well as the emotions that constitute moral judgments on the model that I outlined in the previous section. Therefore, the deficit in moral competence can be explained without appeal to the empathy deficit.

Given the availability of this alternative explanation, Blair's hypothesis that empathy is necessary for moral development is in need of further support. And given the fact the empathy enters into moral discourse fairly late in development, the alternative explanation is to be preferred. Young children are empathetic, but there is little evidence linking their empathetic responses to their capacity to make moral judgments. At best, empathetic responses in young children have been linked to moral behavior. But, even here, the links are quite limited, as we will now see.

4. Is Empathy Necessary for Moral Conduct?

So far I have been arguing that empathy is not necessary for making moral judgments, either synchronically or diachronically. Still it might be conjectured that empathy is necessary in another way: it might be necessary for moral motivation. Let's suppose someone arrives at the judgment that it would be good to give charity. It might be possible to make such a judgment without feeling motivated to act on it. Perhaps empathy with the recipients of charity is what converts moral judgment into moral conduct. Or suppose someone comes to think it's bad to abuse his spouse. Without empathy for her, he might continue to be abusive. It seems plausible, on the face of it, that empathy is the key to converting judgment into action.

There are good reasons to resist this picture. First of all, on the account I sketched above, moral judgments have an emotional basis. Token moral judgments contain emotions such as anger, disgust, guilt, and shame. Emotions are motivating states, and each of these moral emotions has a behavioral profile. Anger promotes aggression, disgust promotes withdrawal, guilt promotes reparation, and shame promotes self-concealment. More generally, these emotions are negatively valenced, and negative emotions are things we work to avoid (Prinz, 2004). If we anticipate that an action will make us feel guilty, we will be thereby inclined to avoid that action. The guilt-prone would-be wife beater might learn to overcome his abusive rages. It follows from this that moral judgments, which contain emotions, are intrinsically motivating states. A person who judges that stealing is wrong, for example, will be motivated to resist the urge to steal, even when it would be easy and lucrative. Such a person will also be motivated to prevent others from stealing; for example, those who think stealing is wrong might report a shoplifter to store clerk even though this intervention carries some risk and no direct reward. And this is just half the story. I have been focusing on disapprobation. There may also be a suite of positive emotions associated with moral approbation. Good behavior by others elicits admiration and gratitude, as remarked above. And the person who engages in good behavior feels pride or gratification. Anticipating these good feelings can lead to good actions. On this view, moral judgments have plenty of motivational impact in the absence of empathy.

Moreover, the emotions involved in approbation and disapprobation may have greater motivational force than the emotions associated with empathy. That empathy leads to action is actually quite weak. Let's begin by considering research on empathy in children. In an extensive meta-analysis, Underwood and Moore (1982) show that there is a positive correlation between emotion *attribution* and prosocial behavior in children, but no correlation between *empathy* and prosocial behavior. Indeed, a number of the studies show negative correlations between empathy and altruism. Critics have worried that the studies contained in this meta-analysis are flawed because they measure empathy by self report (though measures include non-verbal self report, such as asking children to point out a facial expression corresponding to how they feel). In lieu of self report, Eisenberg et al. (1989) used observers' reports and found that prosocial behavior is positively correlated with "concerned attention" in children. A child who wrinkles her brow when watching someone in need, is more likely to help. But no correlation was found for "shared emotion." Empathy essentially involves sharing emotions, so this

result suggests that empathy does not contribute to prosocial behavior in children. Attention and concern matter, but empathy does not.

The situation is a little less bleak when it comes to adults. There are modest correlations in adults between prosocial behavior and shared sadness (Eisenberg et al., 1989). Adults who looked sad while watching a film about a woman whose children had been in a car wreck were slightly more likely to offer to help that woman with yard work when, later in the experiment, they read a letter from her requesting help. But this study does not establish that empathy, in general, relates to altruism, because it is restricted to sadness. And curiously, there is no correlation between expressions of sadness while reading the letter, and the decision to help, which is made just afterwards. So, empathetic sadness is not the immediate cause of helpfulness. Moreover, many people who showed no shared emotions were helpful as well, so the study provides no evidence for the conclusion that empathy is necessary for moral conduct.

The Eisenberg et al. (1989) study is typical. A meta-analysis shows that empathy only weakly correlated with prosocial behavior (Neuberg, et al., 1997). More strikingly, the correlation appears only when there is little cost. If someone has to do something as easy as crossing a street to help someone in need, they are not especially likely to, and those who are empathetic show no greater tendency to help in such circumstances than those who are not. Now it must be noted that most of the research summarized in this meta-analysis does not carefully distinguish between empathy, sympathy, and concern. One can't be sure that the studies in question are ones in which the participants actually experienced emotions akin to those of the people they were in a position to help. But I think the failure to find strong motivation associated with the various forms of fellow-feeling, provides evidence for thinking that empathy is not a great motivator. It's overwhelmingly likely that empathy is experienced by participants in many of the studies reviewed by Neuberg. Moreover, there are independent reasons for predicting that empathy should have limited motivational force. First, an emotion caught from another person is likely to be far weaker than an emotion that originates in oneself. Second, when we consider others in need, the emotions we are likely to catch are things such as sadness, misery, and distress. These emotions may not be great motivators. Misery might even promote social withdrawal. So there is little reason to think empathy, defined in terms of vicarious emotions, would do much to make us work on behalf of people in need.

The meager effects of empathy are greatly overshadowed by other emotions. Consider, for example, positive affect. Above, I suggested the feelings of approbation are positive and positive emotions may help to explain why people do good things. Empirical support for this hypothesis comes from the large literature on positive emotions and helping (Carlson et al., 1988). For example, Isen and Levin (1982) induced positive affect by planting a dime in a neighborhood phone booth. They then watched to see whether the person who found the dime would help a passerby who dropped some papers. Among those who found the dime, 87.5% helped. Among those in the control condition, where there was no dime planted in the phone, only 4% helped. Other studies have not always shown such a large effect size, but they do tend to confirm that a small dose of happiness seems to promote

considerable altruism. This is often true even when the altruism is costly. For example, Weyant (1978) found that people who are made to feel good by being given an easy test to solve are almost twice as likely, when compared to neutral controls, to volunteer for a charity that requires going door to door collecting donation. Happiness seems to make us work for people in need. This conclusion is embarrassing for those who think empathy is crucial for altruism because vicarious distress presumably has a negative correlation with positive happiness. It could be that vicarious distress reduces helpfulness by diminishing positive affect.

There is also evidence that the emotions associated with disapprobation are highly motivating. Consider anger. Lerner et al. (1998) showed subjects emotion-inducing film clips and then probed their attitudes towards punishment on unrelated vignettes. Subjects who watched anger inducing films recommended harsher punishments than those in the control condition. Studies using economic games have shown that, when angry, people are even willing to pay significant costs to punish those who fail to cooperate (Fehr and Gächter, 2002). This contrasts strikingly with empathy, which does not motivate moral behavior when there are significant costs. Guilt is also a great motivator. In a study by Carlsmith and Gross (1969) subjects were asked to make some fundraising phone calls for a charity organization after they administered shocks to an innocent person. These subjects made more than three times as many fundraising calls as the subjects in a control condition where no shocks were administered.

These studies suggest that empathy is not a major player when it comes to moral motivation. Its contribution is negligible in children, modest in adults, and non-existent when costs are significant. Other emotions, including those associated with approbation and disapprobation appear to have much greater impact. Thus, the hypothesis that empathy is necessary for moral conduct—or even important—enjoys little support.

5. Should we Cultivate An Empathy-Based Morality?

At this point, we can draw an initial conclusion: empathy probably isn't necessary for morality in any of the senses that I have been considering. But that does not mean empathy plays no role in morality. Presumably it does. Presumably empathy can induce a moral judgment, factor into moral development, and facilitate moral motivation. It probably plays all these roles to some degree. I have tried to suggest that the degree may be limited. That is a descriptive claim. One might think that this claim is uninteresting from the perspective of ethical theory. The question that really matters in normative, not descriptive. Even if empathy does not play a central role in morality, perhaps it could. Should we, then, try to increase the role for empathy in morality? Should we cultivate moral systems that are based on empathy?

To address this question, I want to begin by reflecting on what an empathy-based moral system might look like. To keep this plausible, I will reflect on some actual moral systems that seem to place empathy in a position of prominence. So far, in this discussion I have talked about morality (or even "our morality") as if it were just one thing. In reality, there are many different moralities—different

systems of moral rules that have been internalized by different groups of people. These may vary in the degree to which they emphasize morality. Looking at empathetic moralities may help us address the normative question under consideration here. I will consider three examples.

Let's begin by looking at moral values in collectivist cultures. Collectivism can be defined as: "a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives…; are primarily motivated by the norms of… those collectives [and] emphasize their connectedness to other members of those collectives" (Triandis, 1995: 2). Collectivist cultures can be found in the Far East, South Asia, South America, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. The cultures in these regions also differ from each other, but their members tend to share a similar tendency to prioritize group membership in their self-conceptions and values. Individualist cultures, like those found in the United States and Western Europe, are comprised by "loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collective [and] are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and the contract they have established with others" (ibid). In short, collectivists tend to value group cohesion above all, and individualists value autonomy.

Collectivism, by its very nature, may place more emphasis on empathy than individualism. Consider child-rearing practices in Japan. Greenfield and Suzuki (1998) found that, in contrast to Americans, Japanese parents had more contact with their children, were more indulgent and calming, and introduced toys into play as opportunities for sharing, rather than, say, skill mastery. American parenting practices foster independence and probably decrease children's tendency to view each other empathetically, promoting interpersonal relationships that are more likely to be competitive than collaborative. If children view each other as competitors over toys, rather than sharing partners, they may be less likely to respond to each other empathetically. The emphasis on groups also shapes moral values in collectivist cultures. In many, strong emphasis is placed on respect for parents and family. The wrongdoings of the individual are seen as reflecting on the group in a way that suggests deep empathetic connections. Collectivists also differ from individualists when it comes to questions of distributive justice. Leung and Bond (1984) found that, unlike Americans, people in China prefer distributions that are equal as opposed to equitable, i.e., proportionate to individual achievement. This again may reflect a more empathetic and less adversarial orientation towards others. More direct evidence comes from a study by Tobin et al. (1989). They asked Japanese and American parents to list the most important things to teach children. 80% of Japanese respondents listed empathy as opposed to 39% of Americans. This presumably affects moral education and the resulting values. It's reasonable to speculate, then, that collectivist cultures have more empathetic moralities then individualist cultures.

Consider a second example that can be found within Western culture. One of the most salient moral divides in the West is between liberals and conservatives. These political orientations can be conceptualized as moral value systems, and the differences are quite pronounced. Lakoff (2002) tries to capture this by suggesting that liberals and conservatives both base their views about how to run a society on

stereotypical ideals for how to run a household, but they draw on different stereotypes. For conservatives, the ideal is a household run by an authoritarian father, and for liberals it's a nurturing mother. This translates into the following moral frameworks. Conservatives value self-reliance and self-discipline; they emphasize the importance of punishment and reward; they strive to protect society from evil; and to uphold "moral order." Liberals, in contrast, want to help the helpless; protect the vulnerable; and promote fulfillment. If some one transgresses a norm, it is not construed as evil, but rather as the result of bad influences, or confusion, or perhaps even a botched attempt at self-expression. The wrong doer should be helped or reformed. For conservatives, there is little tolerance for transgression; three strikes and you're out. Lakoff captures the liberal value system by saying that for liberals, morality is empathy. The construct of empathy is essential. Liberals try to empathize with both victims and transgressors, and, instead of dividing the world into good and evil, they try to put themselves in the shoes of people on both sides of every divide. In foreign policy, conservatives see members of countries that are hostile to their homeland as enemies, where as liberals see them as freedom fighters trying to protect themselves against aggression. In domestic policy, liberals support social welfare programs to help people in need. Conservatives tend to be less empathetic, and they think the needy should pull themselves together and solve their own problems rather than looking for handouts.

As a final example, consider gender differences in morality. Though highly controversial, there is evidence that men and women have different moral orientations that derive from the different roles they play and experiences they have in gender stratified societies. Gilligan (1982) famously argued that women tend to have an ethics based on care, rather than rigid principles. The empirical case for Gilligan's thesis has been mixed, especially when using traditional study methods, which measure gender differences in reasoning style. Walker (1984) found support for Gilligan in only 8 out of 108 Kohlberg-styles studies. Jaffee and Hyde (2000) found more consistent support for Gilligan in their more recent meta-analysis, but the overall contribution of gender that they report is relatively small. One reason for these modest results may be that traditional tests exhibit a male gender bias, insofar as they ask people to argue for their moral decisions rather than probing the underlying feelings. When feelings are examined, differences emerge. First of all, there is strong evidence that women are more prone to empathy than men (Eisenberg and Lennon, 1983). And this seems to have significant implications for morality. Gibbs et al. (1984) found that women made twice as many appeals to empathy in moral justification (53% vs. 27%). Singer et al. (2006) found evidence for this in the brain: when men watched a wrongdoer getting shocked, they showed activity in reward centers of the brains (the nucleus accumbens), whereas women showed no reward activity and significant activation in pain centers, suggesting an empathetic pain response. Correspondingly, women were less than half as likely to desire revenge. Finally, in studies of trolley dilemmas, Mikhail (2002) found women twice as likely to say it is impermissible to sacrifice one life in order to save five people in harm's way (by switching a runaway trolley onto an alternate track).

These differences are quite dramatic, and, in each case, they suggest a moral orientation that is more empathetic. Before moving on, I must add a cautionary note against essentialism. I am not suggesting that gender differences have a biological basis. There is evidence that parents socialize their female children to be more empathetic. Parents use emotion words twice as frequently when talking to their daughters (Adams, 1995), and the observed differences seem to correlate better with gender roles than with biological sex (Karniol et al. 1998). The gender differences in empathy also seem to be motivational in nature, and disappear under some testing conditions (Klein and Hodges, 2001). There are a number of social factors that might promote an empathy-based orientation in women. First, women have lower status than men in male dominant societies, and sensitivity to the emotions of others may be a good coping strategy under such circumstances. Second, because women are often subordinate to men, they may develop more concern for the underdog because they can relate. Third, because women play a disproportionate role in childcare, they may develop more nurturance skills. And finally, lack of employment opportunities may lead to higher degrees of collectivism: individualism is fuelled by competitive marketplaces. The result of these factors seems to be that women are more skilled than men at taking the perspective of others, and this informs women's moral outlook.

These examples help us see how moral systems can vary in the degree to which they emphasize empathy. They also help us see why a more empathetic approach might seem desirable. Given the sociology of academia, most readers of this chapter are probably disposed to think that collectivism, liberalism, and feminism are good things. If collectivist, liberal, and feminist approaches to morality all emphasize empathy, that's an indication that empathy might be something we should actively promote. I think that would be a hasty conclusion.

To see this, it is important to notice that collectivism, liberalism, and empathy-based feminist ethics all have dark sides. Collectivism has been used as a tool to promote dangerous kinds of group thinking and intolerance. In Japan, it is not uncommon for groups of school kids to beat up peers who are perceived as different. Bullying (or *Ijime*) is widespread and often targets those who do not fit in. More disturbingly, Pol Pot exploited collectivist thinking when he got the Khmer Rouge to kill dissenters and intellectuals. Pol Pot made explicit use of collectivist rhetoric and collectivist ideology helped legitimate his campaigns (see e.g. Valentino, 1995: 135f.). Collectivist thinking has also been implicated in suicide bombers. Atran (2003) argues that suicide bombers are bonding by a "fictive" sense of kinship, which allows them to lay down their lives for a group. Arguably, empathy plays a role in establishing the bonds that allow for such collective behaviors.

Liberalism may have a dark side too. The politics of empathy tends to treat the victims of inequality without targeting root causes. Social welfare does ease the suffering of the poor, but it does not undo the cycles of intergenerational poverty. Poverty is often inherited and social stratification remains in a place across generations. The politics of empathy is also subject to empathetic biases (on which more below); policy makers empathize more with some people than with others. Social welfare programs were introduced to help white mothers, not people of color,

though now people of color are more likely to be on welfare (relative to population size) and more likely to stay on welfare intergenerationally because the existence of such programs promotes a kind of complacency that leads liberal attention away from the challenging problems associated with bias in labor markets and the social capital deficits that result from ghettoization. Ironically, the stigmatization makes the recipients of welfare less easy to empathize with and thus more likely to be blamed for economic hardships. The relevant question here is what kinds of emotional responses would help promote a campaign against the root causes of economic injustice, rather than merely offering the (very helpful) support to its victims? The answer probably isn't empathy, but rather indignation.

A similar point pertains to any brand of feminist ethics that promotes empathy as the central moral construct. The fact that women are more empathetic than men is, I suggested, a consequence of social roles that emerge under conditions of male dominance. This raises an urgent question: is the empathetic orientation in women's morality a useful tool for liberation or does it rather serve to sustain the inequality from which it springs? There are reasons to suspect that the latter might be true to some extent. Liberation, it seems, requires outrage: total intolerance to oppression and a correspondingly aggressive pursuit of change. If "aggression" is treated as a bad (and phallocentric) word, and replaced by a moral stance that is predominantly empathetic, inaction may result. If the emotional response to gender inequality is to feel empathic sadness for those who are adversely affected, the resulting interventions may be limited because sadness tends to reduce motivation, rather than increasing it. If, in contrast, critics of inequality, get angry or "uppity" (as the anger of the oppressed is called), more radical change may be actively sought. A feminist morality bent on liberation should not be an empathy-based morality if that label is meant to describe a morality that makes empathy into the primary emotional resource. An outrage-based morality might be more effective.

The point of these remarks has not been to criticize empathy so much as bring out some limitations. When we look for moral systems that have placed greater emphasis on empathy, we can see that empathy is a double-edged sword: it can promote compliance and complacency. Of course, empathy can also promote moral concern, and that, one might think, is a good thing. But there are some more general problems with empathy that should raise doubts about its role as a central moral emotion. Many of these problems also apply to sympathy and to what Batson calls "empathetic concern." Indeed, some of the studies I will mention now were done with one of these other constructs in mind, though I think they apply to empathy as well. What I offer here is a laundry list of worries about empathy, some of which I have already mentioned. I invite the reader to reflect on whether these worries threaten all species of fellow-feeling.

First, as we have seen, empathy is not very motivating. So even if empathy elevates the level of concern, it doesn't do so in a way that guarantees action on behalf of those in need. Vicarious anger also constitutes a species of concern, and it may be a better motivator.

Second, empathy may lead to preferential treatment. Batson et al. (1995) presented subjects with a vignette about a woman, Sheri, awaiting medical treatment, and then asked them if they wanted to move Sheri to the top of the

waitlist, above others who were more needy. In the control condition, the majority declined to more her up the list, but in a condition where they were encouraged to empathize with Sheri, they overwhelmingly elected to move her up at the expense of those in greater need.

Third, empathy may be subject to unfortunate biases including cuteness effects. Batson et al. (2005) found that college students were more likely to feel empathetic concern for children, dogs, and puppies than their own peers. Batson's notion of empathetic concern is not equivalent to empathy, as I am defining it, because it does not require feeling what the object of empathy should feel, but I think cuteness effects would also arise for empathy. For example, I'd wager that we would feel more vicarious sadness for a dying mouse than a rat, and more vicarious fear for a frog crossing the highway than a lizard. It has also been found that empathetic accuracy—which includes the ability to identify someone else's emotions, and, thus, perhaps, to mirror them—increases when the target is viewed as attractive (Ickes et al., 1990).

Fourth, empathy can be easily manipulated. Tsoudis (2002) found that in mock trials, a jury's recommendation for sentencing could be influenced by whether or not victims and defendants expressed emotions. When sadness was expressed, empathy went up, ingratiating the jury to the one who expressed the sadness. Sad victims evoked harsher sentences, and sad defendants got lighter sentences.

Fifth, empathy can be highly selective. Think about the experience of watching a boxing match. You might feel great empathy when the boxer you are rooting for takes a blow, but great delight when he delivers an equally punishing blow to his opponent. In both cases, you are watching the same violent act, but the allocation of empathy can vary dramatically as a function of morally arbitrary concerns about who will win.

Sixth, empathy is prone to in-group biases. We have more empathy for those we see as like us, and that empathy is also more efficacious. Brown et al. (2006) found that when viewing pictures of faces, people show more empathetic responses, as measured by physiology and self report, for members of the same ethnic group. Stürmer et al. (2005) found that empathy leads to helping only in cases when the person in need is a member of the in-group. In one of their studies, participants learn about someone who may have contracted hepatitis and their willingness to offer support, such as talking on the phone, depended on both empathy and whether the person had the same sexual orientation as the participant. This strong in-group bias doesn't show up in every study, but even if only occasional, it is something that defenders of empathy should worry about.

Seventh, empathy is subject to proximity effects. There was an outpouring of support for the Katrina hurricane victims in the United States in 2005, and passionate expressions of empathy for the victims is still frequently expressed in public discourse here. The death toll was 1,836. A year later, an earthquake in Java killed 5,782 people and there was little news coverage in comparison. I would venture to guess that few Americans remember the incident. Nor is there much discussion of the Indian Ocean Tsunami a year before Katrina. People recall that event, but discuss it here with less pathos than Katrina. This despite the fact that the death toll was 315,000. It might be suggested that Katrina continues to

command our attention because the bungled relief efforts draw attention to the nation's ongoing problems with racial prejudice, and, to that extent, the disaster remains relevant after the fact. But American prejudice can also be implicated in our failure to prevent the attempted genocide in Rwanda, in which at least 800,000 Tutsis were killed. That's more that 435 times the death toll in Katrina, but public discussion of the events is rare here. The best explanation is that empathy increases for those who are nearby, culturally and geographically.

Eighth, empathy is subject to salience effects. Natural disasters and wars are salient, news worthy events. The happen during temporary circumscribed periods in localized areas, and can be characterized in narrative terms (preconditions, the catastrophe, the aftermath). Other causes of mass death are less salient, because they are too constant and diffuse to be news items. This is the case with hunger and disease. To put some depressing numbers on the problem consider the following: malaria is estimated to kill between 1.5 and 4 million people a year; tuberculosis kills 2 million; and AIDS kills 2.8 million. Hunger is the biggest killer of all: 9 million die each year for lack of food. That means that every single day, there are 24 Katrinas. 10.5 times the number of people who died in Katrina die each day from preventable diseases, and 13.5 times as many people die from malnutrition. These deaths are not salient, so they induce little empathy.

In sum, empathy has serious shortcomings. It is not especially motivating and it is so vulnerable to bias and selectivity that it fails to provide a broad umbrella of moral concern. A morality based on empathy would lead to preferential treatment and grotesque crimes of omission. Empathy may do some positive work in moral cognition, such as promote concern for the near and dear, but it should not be the central motivational component of a moral system.

6. Concluding Question: Can We Improve Empathy?

The limitations of empathy can be summarized by saying that empathy lacks motivational strength and tends to be highly selective. Defenders of empathy might argue that these limitations can be overcome. Perhaps we should try to improve empathy rather than giving it a marginal role. Perhaps an improved capacity for empathy would be worthy of exalting to a central position is morality.

An improved empathy would require two fundamental changes. First, we would need to do something to give empathy more force in promoting action: a mechanism of motivation. One possibility would be to train ourselves to combine empathy with the emotions that constitute the sentiments of approbation and disapprobation. For example, we might combine empathy with a pride, so that when we help those in need we feel good about ourselves. We know that people will work to attain positive, and recent research suggests that pride has motivational force above and beyond the fact that it feels good, even when there is considerable cost (Williams and Desteno, 2008). Empathy ca also be combined with various forms of disapprobation. For example, when we learn about people who have been victims of injustice, we could combine empathy with indignation. We know people will incur considerable costs when they are angry. If we got angry when we empathized with those who have been harmed, we might be more likely to work on

their behalf. Second, we would need to overcome the selective nature of empathy by devising a way to make us empathize with a broader range of people: a mechanism for determining moral considerability. For example, we might adopt a Kantian approach to cultivate a cosmopolitan outlook that exposed proximity biases and made distant strangers seem more worthy of moral concern. Or we might try to adopt the position of an ideal observer, in the spirit of Adam Smith, when making moral judgments. Of course, it is difficult to adopt a cosmopolitan perspective, and even more difficult to be an ideal observer. Therefore, my own recommendation would actually be to make use of a less demanding alternatives to these two. If we focus our moral judgments on *types of actions* (stealing, torture, rape, etc.) and make an effort *not* to reflect on the specific victims, when may be able to achieve a kind of impartiality that does not require the epistemic availability of a truly cosmopolitan outlook or a truly ideal position of observation. I cannot flesh out the idea here, but the basic idea is that we make a concerted effort to focus moral reflection on *what* has happened not on *whom* it has happened to, because the whom question invites bias.

In principle, empathy could be improved by combining it with (dis)approbation and some procedure for achieving impartiality. But once we have these other mechanisms in place, empathy might prove superfluous. If we can learn to see distant strangers as worthy of concern, and if we become outraged when their needs are unanswered and delighted when we help them, then we will be motivated act on their behalf. Empathy drops out of the picture. And, on my own recommendation, *any* focus on the victim of a transgression should be avoided, because of potential bias. If I am right, the most reliable method of achieving impartiality actually involves bracketing off thoughts about victims, and, thus, empathy might actually be something we want to avoid.

In response, the proponent of empathy might say that we need to empathize with distant others in order to become outraged when they are harmed. But this suggestion is false and futile. It's false, because we can directly condition each other to be outraged at the thought of iniquity, genocide, and neglect. Like other emotions, anger can be learned directly. For example, anger can be conditioned through imitation. If we express outrage at injustice, our children will feel outrage at injustice. A focus on empathy, as a means to anger, would be futile because empathy is a response directed at individuals, and many of the most urgent moral events involve large numbers of people. We cannot empathize with a group, except by considering each member. The magnitude of some catastrophes is so large that it would be impossible to empathize with all the victims. And, if we could empathize with a large number, the agony of vicarious pain would cripple us into inaction. It is important to remember that death tolls are not just statistics—they involve real people—but empathizing with multitudes of victims is neither possible nor productive. What we really need is an intellectual recognition of our common humanity and combined with a keen sense that human suffering is outrageous. If we could cultivate these two things, we would achieve greater commitment to global welfare.

I do not want to suggest that we should actively suppress empathy. Perhaps it enriches the lives of those who experience it, and perhaps it helps to foster close

dyadic relations in personal life. But, in the moral domain, we should regard empathy with caution, given empathetic biases, and recognize that it cannot serve the central motivational role in driving prosocial behavior. Perhaps empathy has a place in morality, but other emotions may be much more important: emotions such as guilt and anger. When confronted with moral offenses, it's not enough to commiserate with victims. We should get uppity.[1]

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