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Against empathy

Article · September 2011

DOI: 10.1111/j.2041-6962.2011.00069.x

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AGAINST EMPATHY

JESSE PRINZ

ABSTRACT: Empathy can be characterized as a vicarious emotion that one person experiences when reflecting on the emotion of another. So characterized, empathy is sometimes regarded as a precondition on moral judgment. This seems to have been Hume's view. I review various ways in which empathy might be regarded as a precondition and argue against each of them: empathy is not a component, a necessary cause, a reliable epistemic guide, a foundation for justification, or the motivating force behind our moral judgments. In fact, empathy is prone to biases that render it potentially harmful. Another construct—concern—fares somewhat better, but it is also of limited use. I argue that, instead of empathy, moral judgments involve emotions such as anger, disgust, guilt, and admiration. These, not empathy, provide the sentimental foundation for morality.

1. THE HUMEAN VIEW

We would all like to have empathetic friends. It is nice when your “near and dear” can pick up on your moods, revel in your achievements, and mourn your losses. Such shared feelings express a deep bond that can make others feel like an extension of the self. But it does not follow that empathy is desirable as a *moral* emotion. Would it be good to have empathetic juries and judges? What about empathetic activists or hospital ethicists? Should we pay special attention to the moral theories of empathetic philosophers? Intuitively, the answer might be “yes.” Empathy is a thick concept, and it connotes praise. But an endorsement of empathy requires more than a warm fuzzy feeling. We need an argument for why empathy is valuable in the moral domain. I think empathy is not all it is cracked up to be. The assumption that

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empathy is important for morality can be challenged. Indeed, empathy may even be a liability. That is the case I want to make here.

To focus the debate, I will restrict my critical attention to a broadly Humean view. I call it “Humean” because it picks out two things that were central to Hume’s project. The first concerns the definition of empathy. Hume uses the word ‘sympathy’, but his usage forecasts an important theme in discussions of empathy in contemporary philosophy and psychology. The core idea is that empathy is not the name of a specific emotion but refers, rather, to the experience of another person’s emotional state, whatever that emotion might be. More precisely, I will say that empathy is a matter of feeling an emotion that we take another person to have. Following Hume, we can think of empathy as a kind of associative inference from observed or imagined expressions of emotion or external conditions that are known from experience to bring emotions about.

When I see the effects of passion in the voice and gesture of any person, my mind immediately passes from these effects to their causes, and forms such a lively idea of the passion, as is presently converted into the passion itself. In like manner, when I perceive the causes of any emotion, my mind is conveyed to the effects, and is actuated with a like emotion. (Hume 1739, 3.3.1)

The second Humean thesis, which will frame this discussion, is that empathy is, in some sense, a precondition for moral approbation and disapprobation. For example, Hume tells us that, “the good of society, where our own interest is not concerned, or that of our friends, pleases only by sympathy. . . . [A] true philosopher will never require any other principle to account for the strongest approbation and esteem” (1739, 3.3.1). Because of this alleged link with approbation, empathy has an exalted position within Hume’s moral philosophy. As a sentimentalist, Hume thinks that moral judgments essentially involve approbation and disapprobation. He would put this as a constitution claim: to believe that something is morally right or wrong consists in having moral approbation or disapprobation of it. Sentimentalism continues to be a popular position, though contemporary views are often a bit weaker than Hume’s. So-called neosentimentalists drop Hume’s constitution claim and say instead that moral judgments are judgments that express or assert endorsements of norms according to which feelings of approbation/disapprobation are warranted (D’Arms and Jacobson 2000; Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton 1992). On either version of sentimentalism, Hume’s precondition thesis has a striking implication: if approbation and disapprobation depend on empathy, then empathy is the foundation of moral judgment. Opponents of sentimentalism would demur, but they can hardly deny that approbation and disapprobation are real and important

phenomena. So Hume's precondition thesis has implications for everyone interested in moral psychology.

As it happens, I am a sentimentalist. I am not even a neosentimentalist. As a good old-fashioned sentimentalist, I accept the Humean equation of moral judgment and feelings of praise or blame (Prinz 2007). Thus, I am about as Humean as Hume on this matter. But I take issue with the Humean thesis that empathy is a precondition to moral judgment. In fact, I will argue that Humeanism about moral judgment provides good reason for being anti-Humean about empathy. I will also push things a bit further and argue that empathy is, by and large, bad for morality. This may raise some brows of suspicion. Perhaps my definition of empathy has smuggled in some problematic property. Perhaps we need only replace my definition with a cousin construct that survives my critique and does justice to the Humean intuition. I explore this possibility in a concluding section on concern, which I regard as empathy's most appealing relative. I argue that concern is admirable but that it does little to vindicate the Humean precondition thesis. The arguments that follow build on work in a companion paper (Prinz 2011), and the two together can be read as a plea for an antiempathic sentimentalism.

2. IS EMPATHY A PRECONDITION FOR APPROBATION?

Hume clearly implies that empathy (what he calls "sympathy") is a precondition for sentiments of approbation, but it is not always clear in what sense. Sometimes he uses the word 'source' and elsewhere 'cause'. In the quoted passage, he suggests that empathy "accounts for" approbation. These terms are ambiguous, and it is not clear that we will find a stable interpretation of the text. There is no need to get bogged down in exegesis, however. There are various kinds of precondition relations that can be distinguished, and each can be considered separately.

2.1 *Is Empathy a Constitutive Precondition?*

One possibility is that approbation is *constituted*, at least in part, by empathetic emotions. There is some hint of this in Hume: "When any quality, or character, has a tendency to the good of mankind, we are pleased with it, and approve of it; because it presents the lively idea of pleasure; which idea affects us by sympathy, and is itself a kind of pleasure" (1739, 3.3.1).

One interpretation of this passage goes as follows. When we think of the happiness in some group of people, we experience empathic pleasure. This pleasure then becomes a component of approbation, which is a pleasure we

take in the character or action that has produced happiness in the group under consideration. Approbation, on this view, is just empathetic pleasure redirected outward onto the source of observed well-being. Similarly, one might propose that disapprobation is redirected displeasure, brought on by an empathetic response to the suffering of others.

It is difficult to find contemporary defenders of Hume's constitution thesis, but one current view comes close. Michael Slote (2010) argues that approbation is constituted by empathy with the person who performs an action rather than being the beneficiary of that action. Thus, if Mother Theresa gives to the needy, our approbation consists in empathy for her motives, not empathy for the needy people who receive her gifts. Call this the "agent empathy" constitution thesis and distinguish it from the "patient empathy" constitution thesis that I attribute to Hume. Similarly, Slote defines disapprobation as a felt lack of empathy with the motives of a wrongdoer. If Bernie Madoff steals from the needy, we experience a lack of empathy for his motives, and our disapprobation consists in this discordant feeling.

I think the constitution thesis is quite hopeless in both Slote's agent version and Hume's patient version. It is easiest to see the problem by attending to the actual phenomenology of moral judgments. Hume and Slote are right that moral judgments are constituted by emotions, but they are wrong to think that those emotions resemble the emotions of an agent or patient in an action under consideration. Suppose you help someone in need. That person will presumably feel gratitude. If I approve of your action, I will not feel gratitude. I will feel admiration. Gratitude and admiration are clearly different emotions. They have different causes, phenomenology, and action tendencies. When grateful, there is a feeling of indebtedness and a tendency to reciprocate or express thanks. Admiration, on the other hand, has an upward directionality—we look up to those we admire—and tends toward expressions of respect rather than reciprocation. Admiration cannot be regarded as an empathetic response to the recipient of your generosity (the moral patient) because that patient feels gratitude and, perhaps, relief. Nor can admiration be regarded as an empathetic response to your motives (the moral agent). The feelings that motivate you are kindness or perhaps some anxiety or pity for the person in need. Admiration is not a feeling of kindness, anxiety, or pity. It is, again, a feeling with an upward direction. Pity is a feeling with a downward direction, and I certainly do not feel pity when I express approval for your act. My feeling is very different from yours. In fact, if you feel a sense of self-directed admiration while giving a donation, I might regard your act as self-serving and cease to admire it; the more admiration you feel, the less I feel. In summary, I do not think that moral approbation involves any kind of

congruence between the emotions of the one who approves and those on either side of the action being approved of.

The case is even clearer when we consider disapprobation. Consider first the patient empathy constitution thesis. If disapprobation were constituted by empathy for a moral patient, it would be analogous to the emotions we feel when considering the victim of a transgression. That is clearly not the case. Suppose you rob someone. If I empathize with the victim, I may feel a sense of vulnerability and despair. But I do not feel these emotions toward you. Instead, I feel anger toward you. It might be countered that the anger in question could be empathic. After all, your victim may be mad at you as well. But this reply is unsatisfying for two reasons. First, in many cases, we do not experience the victim's anger; consider the victim of a pickpocket who does not realize she has been robbed or the victim of a homicidal sniper who never had a chance to get mad. Second, anger is already an emotion of disapprobation. If my anger toward you is empathetic, it does not follow that empathy is a precondition for disapprobation; rather, in this case, disapprobation would have been a precondition for empathy.

The claim that disapprobation is not empathy with the victim can be underscored by considering victimless crimes. Suppose you have a sexual attraction to animals, and you decide to use your pet cat as an instrument for masturbation. I might judge that act to be wrong, and research suggests that the disapproval we experience toward sexual transgressions is constituted by disgust ([Rozin et al. 1999](#)). In this case, it seems preposterous to assume that my disgust at your sexual depravity comes from the vicarious disgust I experience when contemplating the reaction of your cat; for all I know, little Tigger enjoys the experience. Or suppose you paint graffiti in a public park. Such crimes against the community elicit contempt (*ibid.*). But my contempt for your act may not involve any empathy for victims because others in the community may think graffiti is wonderful; they may regard your creation as a great work of art.

These observations suggest that disapprobation does not require empathy with a moral patient. But what should we think about Slote's *agent* empathy thesis? On initial analysis, this is more promising because Slote's account does not require that every crime have a victim. If you masturbate using your cat, my disapproval may involve a failure to relate to your motives as the agent of the act, regardless of whether the cat is perturbed. On closer analysis, however, Slote's view is difficult to defend. First of all, there are cases where disapprobation occurs without any failure to empathize with the moral actor. A recovering pedophile may empathize with another pedophile while harshly condemning his actions. As nonpedophiles, we might empathize with pedophiles, when we see them as victims of prior abuse, but we still think their

actions are wrong. Second, it is difficult to understand why Slote's proposal counts as an empathy constitution thesis at all. Slote says that disapprobation involves a *lack of empathy* with a moral transgressor. But, if we *fail to empathize*, then our disapproval is not constituted by empathy. This raises a third concern. If disapproval is not empathy, what is it? Is it a kind of *dis-empathy*? Is it a feeling of disconnectedness, perhaps? That is implausible. Using survey methods, Rozin et al. argue that moral disapprobation involves emotions of blame: anger, disgust, and contempt (1999; see Prinz 2007). The form of blame that we experience depends on the type of transgression under consideration. Anger arises when someone is harmed or rights are violated; disgust occurs when we construe an action as polluting the body; and contempt is elicited by crimes against the community, including the destruction of public property, abuse of public trust, and violations of social status hierarchies. There is a rich empirical literature linking these emotions to moral judgment. This suggests that disapprobation is constituted by emotions of blame, not by empathy or dis-empathy. Finally, it must be pointed out that dis-empathy is insufficient for disapprobation. We may fail to empathize with moral transgressors, but the judgment that they have done something wrong consists in a feeling of blame, not just a lack of attunement. After all, we also fail to empathize with those who have different taste, but we do not think they are morally culpable. Failures of empathy are at best a precursor to moral judgment.

2.2 *Is Empathy a Causal Precondition?*

I have been arguing that moral judgments are constituted by emotions such as admiration and anger rather than empathy or dis-empathy. But this is consistent with the view that empathetic processing is a causal precondition to moral judgment. Stated counterfactually, we might propose that on any given occasion in which we experience a feeling of (dis)approbation, that feeling would not have arisen had there not been a prior empathetic response. This causal precondition thesis seems plausible in certain cases. I might feel morally compelled to give money to a homeless person after contemplating the horror of her situation.

But it is equally easy to generate counterexamples. Many cases of disapprobation arise without prior empathy. Consider a case in which you yourself are the victim of a crime; you feel moral outrage but not empathy; it makes little sense to suppose that you empathize with yourself. The proponent of empathy might reply by arguing that outrage is not *moral* until we contemplate how the offending act might affect others, but this line of objection only exposes another difficulty. Let us suppose that moral outrage, as opposed to mere reactive aggression, involves some kind of

generalizing move. When you steal from me, I get mad, not just because I want my stuff, but because stealing is a bad thing to do. Would this show that my moral response routes through empathy? On the contrary, it would suggest that my moral response is linked to action-types. If I classify your behavior as an instance of “stealing,” then that is enough to instill moral ire. Disapprobation can follow directly from certain types of action without any need to contemplate the suffering of victims: stealing, murder, rape, vandalism, terrorism, torture, and tyranny are examples. Notice that these are all thick concepts: they evaluate as they describe. The very possibility of thick concepts depends on a direct link between a form of behavior (taking property, taking life, etc.) and a negative response. We are conditioned to immediately despise these action-types without having to contemplate the suffering they cause.

Counterexamples to the causal precondition thesis can be multiplied. Consider again cases where a crime has no victim, such as the disgust one might feel about consensual incest between two adult siblings. When presenting such a scenario, Haidt, Bjorklund, and Murphy (MS) report a high rate of disapproval but no stable appeal to the suffering of the parties involved. Consider cases where victims are too numerous and too distant to contemplate. We might denounce Nero as a debauched despot without thinking about anyone whom he might have harmed. We can also make moral judgments at a high level of abstraction, without thinking about specific victims, as when we say that murder is wrong. And there are intuitional crimes that have potential victims, in some sense, but they are too indirect to bring readily to mind: larceny, fraud, and tax evasion. The last of these is a case of distributive justice, and research suggests that empathy is not a principle contributor to reasoning in this domain (e.g., Juujärvi 2005). If I find a tax policy to be unfair, I may contemplate how various people are affected, but I need not empathetically imagine anyone suffering. Unfairness is not wrong because of the misery it musters but because it doles out benefits without proper regard for desert.

Pushing this further, I think there are many cases in which empathy precedes (dis)approbation but lacks a counterfactual-supporting link. Suppose that, on contemplating a burglary in your neighborhood, you come to form the judgment that the burglar did something wrong. Would you have arrived at this verdict without empathy? Perhaps. If the crime had been drawn to your attention without any thought of the victims, it might have appeared more harmless. But burglary seems bad whether or not we pause to contemplate the suffering it causes. Empathy for suffering may make certain transgressions salient (more on this below), but it often plays a contingent role in the immediate etiology of moral discontent.

Doubts about the causal thesis arise concerning approbation as well. Hume tells us that moral praise is often caused by contemplating societal happiness: virtues such as justice “acquire our approbation, because of their tendency to the good of mankind” (1739, 3.3.1). There is, on the face of it, something weird about this. How can we empathize with a collective? How can “the good of mankind” excite in us a like emotion? Empirical evidence suggests that we do not experience much compassion when we consider victims *en masse* (Small, Loewenstein, and Slovic 2007); in fact, people seem to have less empathy when presented with two identifiable victims rather than one (Slovic 2007). If we muster concern for the well-being of a population, it presumably comes about by some other route. We do not *catch* the pleasure of the population (the way we might succumb to the ebullient mood at a wedding); rather, we contemplate some abstract indicators of societal success—peace, affluence, and equality opportunity—and these directly incite our approval. We might, on some occasions, think about the hedonic states of our neighbors, but this probably plays a limited role in the judgment that our government should decrease poverty or provide healthcare.

2.3 *Is Empathy a Developmental Precondition?*

We might concede that empathy does not lie in the immediate causal path of every moral judgment but insist that it plays an essential causal role earlier in life. Perhaps, without empathy, we would never acquire a moral sense. It is no coincidence, some surmise, that psychopaths are decidedly deficient in this capacity. Lack of empathy is a diagnostic criterion for psychopathy, and there is an attractive story about how this deficit might eventuate in moral blindness (e.g., Blair 1995). If a child with psychopathic tendencies hurts another child on the schoolyard and fails to experience empathetic distress, she may fail to understand why her behavior was bad. She might learn that teachers punish kids who harm others, but she will not understand what makes harm so bad in the first place.

I think this developmental story underestimates the resources that are available in moral education. Suppose a child is punished for hurting someone. The punishment may take several forms. She might be spanked, yelled at, sent to her room, or deprived of some privilege she enjoys. All these interventions will cause her to suffer. Aggressive punishment instills fear, deprivation instills sadness, and ostracism instills shame. In each case, she will also recognize that the love she depends on from her caregivers has been threatened, and the potential loss of love can be a source of considerable anguish. Moreover, children are inveterate imitators. A punished child will observe adult outrage at her actions and imitate that outrage when

interacting with others in the future. In all these ways, the young transgressor learns to associate negative emotions with harm. But none of these forms of learning requires empathy. The victim often drops out of the picture as soon as the punishment begins. We might think of punishment as inculcating a sense of disapprobation directly without any essential empathetic involvement.

This brings us back to psychopaths. Young psychopaths are notorious for their lack of empathy, but another diagnostic criterion is the “flattened affect.” Psychopaths have broad emotional deficiencies, including abnormally low levels of fear and sadness. To explain their failure to obtain moral competence, it is wholly inadequate to cite their lack of empathy. After all, the forms of punishment just mentioned should be effective even in a child who shows little interest in the well-being of others. Failure to learn moral rules probably owes more to deficits in fear and sadness than to a deficit in empathy.

This conjecture is borne out by other research in child development. For example, high functioning children with autism seem to acquire an understanding of moral rules, but there is inconsistent evidence pertaining to their degree of empathy. [Blair \(1995\)](#) reports that children with autism exhibit both moral competence and a normal capacity for empathy, as measured by their distress response to disturbing photographs. In contrast, [Lombardo et al. \(2007\)](#) show that individuals with autism show significantly lower scores than control subjects on six different empathy scales. The authors also show that the autistic group rates high for personal distress, which may make sense of the Blair data. Individuals with autism are personally upset when seeing disturbing photos, but this does not mean they attribute suffering to the people depicted in those photos. If this interpretation is right, acquisition of moral competence may not depend on a robust capacity for empathy.

2.4 *Is Empathy an Epistemic Precondition?*

One might concede that empathy is not needed for developing a capacity for moral praise and blame while still insisting that it plays a crucial epistemic role. On this approach, empathy helps us see when approbation and disapprobation are appropriate by drawing our attention to the human enhancement and degradation. By seeing that an action has caused joy, we are led to recognize that it warrants praise, and by seeing that an action has caused suffering, we recognize that it warrants blame. Without such empathic responses, we might approve and disapprove of various actions, but we would neglect others that merit those attitudes because we would be blind to the affective benefits and costs of human conduct.

I do not want to overstate my response to this suggestion. It is undeniable that empathy sometimes leads us to see good and bad actions whose status we might have otherwise missed. This is especially clear when we move beyond paradigm moral categories, such as murder and charity, and consider isolated cases whose worth depends on emotional impact. If in the course of conversation, I say something that hurts your feelings, my capacity to recognize your distress may lead me to regret my words and judge that I said something inappropriate.

Granting that, I want to insist that empathy plays this epistemic role contingently and that it is epistemically unreliable. Suppose I learn that my words hurt you by your testimony, but I do not feel an empathetic response. Might this be enough reason for me to engage in some sort of appropriate self-censure? To assume otherwise is to buy into a controversial theory of mental state attribution. It is tantamount to suggesting that we can know another's mind *only* by simulating it. But there is no reason to think that this is true. Some authors have been impressed by the fact that deficits in emotional experience are often co-morbid with deficits in the capacity to recognize emotional facial expressions ([Adolphs 2002](#); [Goldman and Sripada 2005](#)). This suggests that we often perceive emotions by experiencing them vicariously. But it would over-interpret the evidence to suggest that we *need* simulation in order to attribute emotions. People with emotional deficits can learn to recognize emotional expressions by their appearance, and there is no principled obstacle to attributing mental states without simulating them. We can attribute sonar abilities to bats, musical sensitivity to those whose abilities vastly outstrip our own, and moral values that are entirely anathema to anything we would be willing to imaginatively entertain. Likewise, there is no principled obstacle to recognizing that you are distressed without feeling your distress. Indeed, doing so may have certain advantages.

First, there is evidence that vicarious distress can interfere with prosocial behavior (Eisenberg, McCreath, and Ahn 1988). If I am rendered unhappy by your unhappiness, I may just withdraw and become avoidant. I may also become defensive and accusatory. On the other hand, if I register your displeasure dispassionately, I can contemplate more clearly whether it is an appropriate object of moral concern, and I can adjust my response accordingly.

Second, our capacity to experience vicarious emotions varies as a function of such factors as social proximity and salience. Hoffman (2000), a champion of empathy, warns about the "similarity bias" and the "here and now bias." If you are a stranger or if you are located in a distant land, my degree of empathy may be correspondingly reduced. If disapprobation were proportionate to my degree of empathy, it would be

distributed inequitably. That suggests I cannot rely on empathy as an epistemic guide. I must use some more equitable measure of ill-effects and anguish.

Third, the mere fact that my remarks make you suffer may not be grounds for self-directed disapprobation. If I use empathy as an epistemic guide, I may ignore more important criteria of blame. Perhaps my remarks offend you because of some defect in your values; perhaps offending you could spur you on to positive moral change; perhaps it is you who should be blamed for interfering with my right to free expression.

Thus, even in cases where we do use emotion as an epistemic guide, we may be led astray. This point magnifies when we move beyond interpersonal interactions and consider those moral judgments that arise when considering distant others. Do I need empathy to realize that some far-off attempt at genocide is wrong? Hopefully I do not, since empathy is hard to evoke for foreign masses. If we use empathy as an epistemic guide, we would be more likely to condemn a good friend's insensitive spouse than to condemn the leader of a murderous regime on the other side of the planet. Of course, this is precisely what happens. We are grotesquely partial to the near and dear. But that does not confirm the epistemic status of empathy. On the contrary, it shows that we use empathy as an epistemic guide at the risk of profound moral error.

Would we be worse off if we did not use empathy as an epistemic guide? Would we become cruel and inhuman to those around us? It is important to recall that I am not challenging the value of empathy in friendship. Perhaps it is even morally praiseworthy to be an empathetic, and hence partial, friend. The claim is that empathy is not a precondition for knowing which actions should be morally praised or blamed. We may use it as a heuristic, with some success, but it is dangerously error prone when it comes to determining the scope of appropriate moral concern. Empathy can help us see that some particular action deserves blame, but it would not be a good general guide, and we may be better off using some other epistemic tool. If we measure the moral merit of an action by quantifying harm, rather than empathy, we may allocate blame in a way that better tracks our considered standards of wrongness.

2.5 *Is Empathy a Normative Precondition?*

In arguing against the epistemic role of empathy, I claim that it is descriptively plausible that we use empathy as a guide to moral assessment but normatively dubious. Empathy is unreliable when deciding which actions should be condemned. But empathy may make a normative contribution when it comes to justification. On this proposal, we appeal to empathy when

trying to justify why an action is right or wrong. This might play a role in both first-person reflection and third-person discussion. To see for myself why something is wrong, I may engage in an act of empathetic imagination, in which I experience, though vicarious emotions, how some action might have caused another person to feel. My confirmation of the moral status of that act consists in the availability of these empathetic feelings. Likewise, in defending my moral judgment to others, I may enjoin them to empathize with people affected by an action and, thereby, help them to see that my judgment is correct.

Stated as a descriptive thesis, it is plausible that empathy contributes to justification in some cases. But, as we have already seen, there are cases where appeals to empathy are less prevalent. In reasoning about matters of justice, such as equality of opportunity and rights, a general conception of human dignity may be more important than any vicarious experience of human emotions. Empathy and principles of justice seem to play different roles in moral reasoning, and there may be large swaths of morality wherein the latter is more frequently deployed than the former (cf. Blader and Tyler 2002).

Even in cases where it is descriptively true that people appeal to empathy, the crucial question is whether such appeals do any important normative work. I think they do not. What makes an action wrong in cases where empathy is invoked is the harm it causes, not our vicarious experience of that harm. What makes an action good is the pleasure it brings to beneficiaries of that action, not the shared feelings in those who assess it. Thus, the emotions we feel during assessment cannot be advanced as reasons for a moral verdict. They are, at best, ways of drawing attention to our reasons—that is, to actual harms and benefits. Thus, empathy is playing only an epistemic role in justification. But this brings us back to the discussion in the last section. Empathy's contribution to the epistemology of morals is open to doubt.

2.6 *Is Empathy a Motivational Precondition?*

Even if we admit that empathy is not a good justification for moral judgments, we might think it is a good motivator. People sometimes make moral judgments without acting on them. We come to believe that it would be good to give to charity but then fail to send off any donations. Perhaps empathy is needed to give such judgments motivational force.

Here, again, there is reason for doubt. Empirical evidence suggests that empathy is not very effective in motivating action. Studies show that empathy promotes prosocial behavior but only when there is little or no cost (Neuberg et al. 1997). We might give some loose change to a homeless person

who expresses distress, but we will not buy him lunch, much less subsidize his rent. In fact, few would even cross a city street to give a homeless person a dime.

With respect to motivation, no body of evidence is more impressive than Batson's decades-long research program linking empathy to altruism.¹ Amazingly, after an empathy induction, participants in some of Batson's experiments were willing to endure electric shocks rather than watch one of their peers endure those shocks. Does this show that empathy motivates prosocial behavior at high personal cost? Two limitations of the study must be noted. First, [Cialdini et al. \(1997\)](#) argue that the methods by which Batson manipulates "empathy" may induce "oneness" instead, making participants construe their peers as an extension of the self. I do not find this worry especially damaging because the notion of "oneness" is closely related to empathy insofar as both involve a kind of identification with the victim. A second limitation is that Batson's subjects may have a complex motivational state that involves a mixture of anticipatory guilt, if they do not help; reward, if they do help; and empathy. The empathy manipulations may increase the salience of suffering in a way that promotes these other emotions, quite independently of empathy, and they may drive the motivational effect. There is a sizable empirical literature linking both guilt and reward to prosocial behavior (reviewed in [Prinz 2011](#)). To his credit, Batson has other studies that suggest that anticipatory guilt and reward are not individually sufficient to explain altruism, but he fails to rule out that the joint presence of these motivations drives his famous experimental results (see [Oakberg 2010](#)). An adequate study would need to show that empathy drives prosocial behavior even when there is neither promise of emotional reward nor anticipated guilt. Such a case is difficult to construct.

More to the point, given the established efficacy of guilt and reward in driving moral behavior, the claim that empathy is a precondition for motivation is clearly implausible. Notice too that guilt and reward can guide moral action even in cases where empathy is unlikely to arise. For example, in fighting for justice, we might be motivated by the pride that would come from our activism, and when members of majority groups support minority causes, there may be an element of guilt, even if empathy is hard to muster for out-groups and collectives. Other emotions, such as anger and disgust, may also be moral motivators. Outrage at national policies can incite collective action ([Beyerlein and Ward 2007](#)), and repugnance can lead people to campaign against policies that have no clear victims, as with the conservative outcry against gay marriage (see [Inbar et al. 2009](#)). The latter example is especially interesting because it shows a case where empathy for the parties

¹ See, e.g., [Batson and Shaw 1991](#) for a review.

involved is profoundly lacking, yet some conservatives are highly motivated to block liberalization of marriage laws; their moral values motivate their judgments without any consideration of empathy. This establishes that empathy is not a precondition for moral motivation.

3. THE DARK SIDE OF EMPATHY

So far, I have been trying to suggest that empathy is a precondition for moral approbation and disapprobation, in a variety of different senses. The proponent of empathy might concede the point but opt for a weaker view, according to which empathy is, by and large, a good thing. It is plausible to suppose that empathy is a common precursor to approbation even if it is not essential. The proponent of empathy can simply advance the claim that we are better off as a result. I will not attempt to refute this claim here, but I do want to sow some seeds of doubt. I think we too often assume that empathy is desirable without adequately attending to its dark side.

One problem with empathy is that it is easily manipulated. Evidence from jury studies suggests that jurors hand down harsher sentences when the victims are visibly emotional and lighter sentences when defendants display regret ([Tsoudis 2002](#)). It is likely that such displays affect our degree and direction of empathy, thereby altering the verdict. But the displayed emotion may have more to do with the expressive capacities of the parties to the case than the actual facts involved. What matters is whether victims were really harmed and whether perpetrators are really responsible. Even in cases where suffering and remorse are legally relevant, displays of these emotions are an unreliable guide.

Empathy has an even greater problem, mentioned above as the “similarity bias.” Empathy is partial; we feel greater empathy for those who are similar to ourselves. This has been shown empirically. Using brain imaging, [Xu et al. \(2009\)](#) showed that Caucasians were more empathetic to the pain of other Caucasians than to ethnically Chinese participants—and conversely. Deficiencies in Caucasian empathy have also been observed in response to South Asians and individuals of African descent ([Gutsell and Inzlicht 2010](#)). These recent findings have long been observed. Even Hume, who was no ethnic egalitarian, was aware of it.

[Where there is] similarity in our manners, or character, or country, or language, it facilitates . . . sympathy. The stronger the relation is betwixt ourselves and any object, the more easily does the imagination make the transition, and convey to the related idea the vivacity of conception, with which we always form the idea of our own person. (1739, 2.1.11)

Hume recognizes that such partiality indicates a potential dissociation between approbation and empathy. He expresses the worry this way: “notwithstanding this variation of our sympathy, we give the same approbation to the same moral qualities in China as in England” (1739, 3.3.1). If so, maybe empathy is a bad thing. It does not track approbation, and if we use it in that capacity, we would make moral mistakes.

Hume’s reply is as famous as it is unsatisfying. He says we can get empathy to come in line with approbation by adopting “the general point of view” (1739, 3.3.1). As attractive as this idea is to a liberal readership, it is bad psychology. The fact is, we rarely adopt such a point of view, and empathy is probably the greatest impediment. We *can* empathize with members of the out-group but only by making their similarities salient. For example, television pledge-drives for hunger relief present vivid pictures of starving individuals that pull on our moral heartstrings. But there is no way to cultivate empathy for every person in need, and the focus on affected individuals distracts us from systemic problems that can be addressed only by interventions at an entirely different scale. Empathy is ineluctably local, and the great efforts that are made to cast its net wider have some positive impact but too often land in the wrong place. This is even more vivid when we consider problems whose effects are incremental or distributed. Environmental destruction and widespread diseases cannot be combated by addressing the plight of a few individuals. With empathy, we ignore the forest fire, while watering a smoldering tree.

We might reply that attention to the individual can be used as a springboard for more global action. Perhaps when we see the plight of one, we are motivated to help many. Here again, there is reason for doubt. [Batson et al. \(1995\)](#) show that empathy leads to unequal treatment. When we empathize with a person awaiting an organ transplant, we let her jump to the front of the queue, elbowing out many who have been waiting longer. Likewise, an empathetic plea for hunger relief might cause us to send checks to one family rather than a village, or we might help one community, when others are in greater need.

The general point of view is not a bad idea, but its greatest hope may lie in the extirpation of empathy. Once we realize that human beings in different places have moral worth, we can come to advocate policies that are good for distant others. Which others? Here, we balance need with feasibility. We do a cost–benefit analysis. We see how far aid efforts will go and which interventions will have the greatest long-term payoffs. It is a life-and-death calculus that would be better done with empathetic blinders on. The screaming baby on the road may lead us to neglect the village up ahead.

But what about everyday empathy, the critic will object. What about treating the people around us decently? What about supporting social welfare programs, raising children well, and being good to your students? It is plausible to think that empathy contributes positively in these mundane domains. But there is still a dark side. Empathy may lead us to recklessly support social programs when toughness is called for. We may give preferential treatment to children who are sweet and cute, neglecting bratty teens who really need our help. We may attend more to the students with whom we identify rather than to the students who need us most. Empathy is good when directed at our friends, but the norms of friendship are all about preferential treatment; for that reason, this is not a paragon case of a moral relationship. Some proponents of empathy embrace its partiality (Slote 2010). Perhaps it is *morally good* to treat loved ones preferentially. But empathy pushes partiality into prejudice. It is fine to be a good friend, but empathetic bias can promote nepotism, negligence, and moral myopia.

It might be countered that all moral emotions have a dark side: anger can lead to unbridled aggression, disgust can be overly sensitive to the unfamiliar, contempt can be used to buttress boundaries between economic classes, shame can lead to suicide, and guilt can arise in survivors of catastrophes who are not to blame. Each of these emotions is also prone to proximity effects. We are more emotionally aroused by things near to us. But there are two crucial differences between empathy and these other emotions. First, empathy seems to be intrinsically biased. Empathy is essentially a dyadic emotion, regulating the responses between two individuals, and its function is, arguably, to align the emotions of people in a close personal relationship. Not so for the other emotions. Second, the biases that lead us to allocate guilt and anger partially may derive from empathy, rather than from these emotions themselves. If I fail to get outraged at mass rape in another part of the world, it may be because I relied too heavily on empathy. If I focus on the crime itself without worrying about whether I see the victims as part of my in-group, it may be easier to feel the anger that is more appropriate to the case. In other words, the dark side of empathy may be intrinsic to it, and it may infect our other moral responses. Empathy is not a suitable tool for morality. We can no more overcome its limits than we can ride a bicycle across the ocean; it is designed for local travel. The biases that burden our other moral emotions may be easier to circumvent. Anger at injustice, pleasure in charity, and guilt about environmental devastation can carry us across seas because their proper objects are action-types, not individuals. We can militate against genocide because it is a monstrous crime, even if the individual victims of mass killings are too numerous and too foreign to instill vicarious terror.

In summary, I think empathy has limitations that make it ill-suited for some moral ends. In some cases, it may do more harm than good. Other moral emotions can get us into trouble too, but investing in their correction may deliver greater returns.

4. SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED?

At this point, you may be gritting your teeth and thinking that I am a cold, heartless, and sanctimonious Millian monster who treats human beings as statistics. That is not my intention. I do not advocate a heartless morality. I have indicated that morality is emotionally grounded. We should rage against the wrong. But fans of empathy may think this is insufficient. Moral sensitivity requires more than a negative response to certain action-types; we should also react to enhance the welfare of those who are affected by transgression and adversity. Empathy is needed to express our recognition that crimes have victims. Here I think a case can be made for fellow-feeling. But I think we need not limit ourselves to empathy. There is another construct that has important advantages: concern.

Concern is a cousin of empathy. It is a fellow-feeling that arises when we consider another's plight. In the empirical literature, concern is usually measured differently than empathy. Empathy, as defined here, is an emotion we share with another. Concern is a negative sentiment caused by the recognition that someone is in need. It does not necessarily correspond to what anyone else is feeling. It is canonically expressed by a knitted brow, akin to worry. The person about whom we are concerned might not be upset in any way. When we see a drug addict take another hit, she may exhibit a euphoric response. Empathy might induce joy in this case, but concern makes us worry about the addict's well-being.

I will not develop the case here, but I think a homework assignment could show that concern overcomes many of the worries we have encountered with empathy. For example, concern may be highly motivating, insofar as it encompasses emotions like fear and anger. Because it is not a form of emotional mimicry, concern is not held hostage to similarity and proximity. We can also be concerned for groups as well as rather than individuals. We can even be concerned about the environment, without any need to think about the potential victims of environmental disasters.

Concern is a cure for heartlessness. In its social applications, it is a feeling we have for another person in need. It is the opposite of mathematical indifference. It is good to be concerned. At this point, fans of empathy might breathe a sigh of relief. They might say that I stacked the deck against

empathy with my Humean definition, and real, genuine, *bona fide* empathy is just this thing I am now calling concern. Well, that is fine. I do not want to get into debates about definitions. But fans of empathy should not get too excited because even if concern is more dependable than vicarious emotions, it will not save the Humean thesis that fellow-feeling is a precondition for (dis)approbation. Here is why.

First, in many contexts, we experience concern when we think something bad has been done to someone—rather than the other way around. The reason for this is connected to the fact that concern is not a vicarious emotion; it is not something we get simply by seeing the anguish of another. It hinges, instead, on the belief that something bad has happened or will happen. One common source of concern is the belief that someone has been morally wronged. In these cases, concern is parasitic on moral judgment. Thus, concern is not *necessary* for moral disapprobation but is, rather, a cart pulled by the moral horse. Neither is concern *sufficient* for disapprobation. We can be concerned in contexts where no moral judgment arises, as when there has been a natural disaster. Therefore, I think it is unlikely that we will find the kind of link between concern and disapprobation that would allow us to say the former is, or is often, a precondition for the latter.

I conclude that the precondition thesis maintained by Hume and many latter-day Humeans is in need of more support. Empathy as I have defined it may even be bad for morality. Concern may be better, but neither construct is an adequate foundation for approbation and disapprobation. Theoretical investment in such fellow-feeling distracts us from the emotions that undergird moral assessments. We would profit more from research on anger, disgust, contempt, guilt, and the positive feelings associated with charity. Practically speaking, the emphasis on empathy may be an invitation to bias. Concern may be less prone to bias, but its elicitation often depends on prior judgments about whether some moral violation has occurred. From a practical perspective, we might be best off trying to cultivate a sense of outrage for injustice wherever it occurs and a sense joy in helping the needy wherever they may be. The assumption that empathy is essential for these ends may be mistaken, and efforts to expand our moral horizons by empathetic induction may make us more vulnerable to errors of allocation.²

² I am deeply indebted to Remy Debes and the Spindel family for involving me in the Spindel Conference and to Julia Driver and Michael Slote for helpful discussion.

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