

Empathy and Morality

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INTRODUCTION

Notable theorists from various walks of education have begun to call for the cultivation of empathy for the purposes of moral education.¹ These advocates of empathy suggest that its educational value pertains to its connection to morality. In calling for empathy, educators not only (mistakenly) assume agreement on what empathy is and which empathic phenomena (sympathy? compassion? emotional contagion? aesthetic empathy?) to foster, they also assume that these phenomena always qualify as moral.

And why shouldn't they? Empirical studies from developmental psychology seem to suggest this conclusion; after all, they supply ample evidence of a positive correlation between empathy and pro-social action.² Experience also suggests that a connection between empathy and morality exists. In its capacity to open us to the perspectives of others, empathy enables us to perform acts of moral concern and caring. We see this mirrored in literature. Juliet's Nurse agrees to be a messenger to Romeo at considerable risk to herself. Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* sacrifices a life with the man she loves to deter the devastation it would wreak on her cousin, Lucy.

However, pro-social action does not necessarily qualify as moral. And a host of examples may be found in life and literature in which empathy seems not only non-moral but at times even immoral. There is the sadist, the Marat Sade, whose pleasure depends on sensitively gauging the other's pain. There is the manipulator, the Iago, whose revenge requires an intimate understanding of Othello's mental states. And yet, side-by-side with the sadists stand those who rescued Jews at enormous risk to themselves during World War II — people who say they were motivated by empathy.³ Given this conflicting evidence, how are we to answer the questions, "What is the moral status of empathy?" and "What does this status imply for moral education programs?"

To examine these questions, a minimal conception of morality must be stipulated. Morality is wanting the best for the other for the other's sake and acting in accordance with this desire when such action is possible. Moral concern spurs actions that prevent or relieve the pain and suffering of others. It also precludes acting in such a way to cause unnecessary pain or suffering, terror or cruelty.

Assuming this conception of morality, what follows explores the moral status of empathic phenomena as a general class. I begin by describing established moral approaches in which empathy possesses moral status. I then present the challenge that Kantian moral theory puts to those who claim empathy is moral. However, Kant's moral theory is not without its own set of problems, problems concerning moral motivation. Ultimately, I suggest that although limits exist in the connections between empathy and morality, these limits ought not deter us from cultivating

empathy as moral motivation. Understanding the moral limits of empathy is critical, though, when considering how to cultivate it for the purposes of moral education.

COMFORTABLE MORAL HOMES FOR EMPATHY

Much Western moral philosophy of the past two hundred years focuses on moral agency. The theories of this period generally concern obedience to rules or formulas by which one may preserve one's freedom. Concern for proper moral motivation and "right action" characterize many of these traditional approaches.

MARGARET URBAN WALKER — EMPATHY AS A MORAL PRACTICE

In *Moral Understandings: A Feminist View of Ethics*, Margaret Urban Walker rejects more traditional moral approaches by embedding morality in social practice, not theory.⁴ Within her view, morality is *not* a "compact, propositionally codifiable, impersonally action-guiding code within an agent" that offers a "template and interpretive grid for moral inquiry."⁵ Instead, morality arises from and plays out between persons in everyday activities. Morality is defined by the work it does in "recruiting human capacities for self awareness and awareness of others;...feeling and learning to feel particular things in response to what one is aware of;...[and] expressing judgment and feeling" in these appropriate responses.⁶ Social practices, and the moral understandings that such practices entail, shape and determine moral action. Our experience of daily interpersonal interactions provides us with the tools and substantive considerations for moral inquiry, deliberation, and understanding. In this view, empathic phenomena are modes of moral inquiry leading to moral understanding. Empathy is a moral *practice*.

"OK," the traditional philosopher would say, "but are the phenomena themselves moral?" Walker tells us,

The skills on which these understandings rely are many and varied and not necessarily specific to morality. Skills of perception...discursive skills...responsive skills *are not unique to moral competence*....[These skills include] every kind of cognition, sensitivity, and aptitude we need to get around competently in any social-moral surround.⁷

Empathy is one such skill and so may be shared with and shaped by other modes of inquiry. This view easily explains why empathy can be seen as alternately moral, non-moral, and even immoral as mentioned above. Although a practice of moral competence, it is not "uniquely" moral.

The focus on a single moral agent seeking an objective moral action fades in Walker's account, replaced by situated social beings who, through their everyday relations with others, *practice* morality. Instead of viewing empathy's relationship to morality as a direct correspondence between motivation and "right action," Walker perceives it as a mode of moral inquiry leading to moral understanding. Here, empathy becomes one of many moral practices that humans use to negotiate the moral world. Here, cultivating empathy for the purposes of moral education seems to be a reasonable endeavor.

NEL NODDINGS — EMPATHY AS REQUIREMENT OF CARING

Another cozy moral home for empathy can be found in the ethic of care. Nel Noddings, in her book *Caring*, also rejects the detached, universal, impartial, and abstract requirements of certain traditional moral theories.⁸ Instead, relationships

and responsibilities replace rights and rules. Moral relationships are organized in terms of connections between ones-caring and those cared-for. They are characterized by: responding to others, providing care, preventing harm, and maintaining connection.

Caring values emotional response. In fact, Noddings locates “the very well-spring of ethical behavior in the human affective response” (CA, 3). She tells us that the memory “of caring and being cared for sweeps over us as a feeling — as an ‘I must’” (CA, 79-80). This “I must” provides the impulse to act on behalf of the other. Caring also attends to the particular features of a moral situation. “When my caring is directed to living things, I must consider their natures, ways of life, needs, and desires” (CA, 14).

But, how can one consider the particular interests of the other? Part of Noddings’s answer to this question relies on the one-caring’s ability to “apprehend the reality” of the other. She calls this “engrossment” and characterizes it as a “sort of empathy” (CA, 31). She tells us,

Apprehending the other’s reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible, is the *essential part of caring from the view of the one-caring*. For if I take on the other’s reality as possibility and begin to feel its reality, I feel, also, that I must act accordingly; that is, I am impelled to act as though in my own behalf, but in behalf of the other (CA, 16, emphasis added).

Empathy allows one to feel “what [the other] feels as nearly as possible.” Given that engrossment is an “essential” condition for the one-caring, caring strongly connects empathy with morality. Engrossment, a “sort of empathy,” is caring’s first criterion and a component of moral motivation. Thus, cultivating empathy for the purposes of moral education under a caring paradigm seems not only reasonable, it seems necessary.

DAVID HUME — EMPATHY AS MORAL MOTIVATION

As mentioned earlier, traditional moral theory generally concerns itself with moral agency and moral action. This holds true for philosopher David Hume. However, Hume’s moral theory differs radically from the two traditions most popular in the past two hundred years, utilitarianism and Kantian moral theory. Like the feminist theories mentioned above, Hume’s ethic does not reduce morality to rule-following or to a function of reason. Hume is a moral sentimentalist who identifies sympathy as the fundamental moral capacity and primary motive of moral action. Sympathetically experiencing another’s pain disturbs the moral agent enough to cause her to act in the other’s behalf. Here, Hume’s phrase, “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions,” stands as testimony to the strength of his assertion.⁹ Essentially, Hume claims that reason can trigger passions, but it is the passions that motivate action. Humian sympathy resides in the constellation of empathies, and the relation between it and morality is strong and direct; it is the prime moral motivator. This third moral approach makes cultivating empathy for the purposes of moral education seem reasonable as well.

SUMMARY

Although the type of connection between empathy and morality may differ between the three approaches, all connect empathic phenomena directly with

morality. In Walker's approach, empathy can be seen as a mode of moral inquiry and a practice leading to moral understanding. Noddings's approach requires the empathizer be placed in direct relation with the cared-for through engrossment, a form of empathy. The passions stimulated by sympathy constitute moral motivation in Hume's approach. If educators labor under the assumptions and structures of any of these three moral approaches, cultivating empathy seems a highly sensible endeavor. However, there are other moral approaches that challenge the notion that we ought to cultivate empathy for the purposes of moral education, most notably Kant's.

THE KANTIAN CHALLENGE

Morality is, first and foremost, an enterprise of reason for Kant. Countering Hume, Kant claims that reason alone must determine and justify moral action; acting morally involves acting from pure *a priori* principles derived from practical reason. The single, overriding principle is called the Categorical Imperative. It grounds all of morality. The Categorical Imperative formulates how a fully rational being acts irrespective of desires or preference. This principle tells us that one should, "*Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a Universal law.*"¹⁰ To sum up Kant's position, morality must be: universal (valid for all rational beings); impartial (to the interests of other's and self); prescriptive/normative (possess an intrinsic obligation/duty to act morally); and absolute (not contingent upon ends or the empirical world).

Empathic phenomena satisfy few of Kant's moral requirements. His moral theory provides the greatest challenge for perceiving a relationship between empathy and morality. To illustrate this challenge, I construct a Kantian-like argument using a series of examples to counter the claim that empathic phenomena serve as moral motivation the view that Hume and Noddings hold. In what follows, I make assumptions that Kant would make. For example, I assume that there is a single universal "right" action that any rational being ought to take in a given moral situation and that this action can be known through *a priori* reason. Other similar assumptions will become evident.

First, a Kantian would argue that the experience of empathy neither obligates the empathizer to act to relieve the distress of the other, nor *guarantees* that the empathizer will act morally. An example helps clarify this point. Say I am walking down Haight Street in San Francisco and see a teenage girl sitting with her back against a building sobbing. I stop and spend time talking with her. She tells me that her mother kicked her out of the house a week ago, after her mother found out that her husband had been physically abusing her daughter. The girl has been sleeping in the park ever since. Last night, someone stole the backpack where she stored everything she owns. I notice in her the small telling details of a person attempting to maintain human dignity under trying circumstances. The helplessness and despair of this sixteen-year-old resonate with me. As I converse with her, she confirms my intuitions of her feelings. I empathize with her.

Let us assume the things the young woman told me are true. Let us assume I believe her. Let us also assume there are no other compelling claims on my attention,

energy, or money. Further, let us take a giant leap and assume the situation morally obliges me to help the girl in some way.

The problem remains that my experience of empathy does not *require* me to act in any of these ways. Even if it makes me desire to perform these actions and will possibly make me feel bad if I do not, I can experience empathy and still walk away from a situation where I ought to act. Nothing in empathy itself commits me to act morally; it may compel me toward such action, but it does not *commit* me. A Kantian would argue that the strongest claim I can make about the relationship between empathy and moral action is that the former can, but does not necessarily, motivate the latter.

A second objection a Kantian might make about empathy's relationship to moral action is that although empathy may motivate an empathizer to relieve another's distress, it does not necessarily determine how to do this (which action to take) or whether such an action is itself moral. A different example clarifies this particular problem. Say that a friend comes to me and tells me the following story: Last night, after drinking heavily in a bar, she got in her car to drive home. On the way, she accidentally hit a pedestrian crossing the street. My friend, terrified about what she had done, drove on without stopping. Fear and anguish overwhelm her as she relates this story. If I empathize with my friend's anguish at having hit this person and her fear of the ruinous personal results of turning herself in, my empathy might inform me that I could best relieve her distress by sharing it and agreeing to keep what she has told me a secret. Let us suppose that informing the police about the accident is the moral thing to do. A Kantian would argue that engaging empathically in this does not lead me to this moral action.

Remember, morality is a reliable, consistent, principled, and rational enterprise for Kant. The emotions I experience in the empathic situation described above are none of these; therefore, they cannot function as moral motivation. As in this situation, they might, as Lawrence Blum says, "divert [me] from morally directed thinking and judgment. In order to obtain a clear view of the rights and wrongs in a situation we must abstract or distance ourselves from our feelings and emotions."¹¹ Not only are emotions unreliable for Kant, they can endanger moral reasoning.

I might argue that embedded in my friend's own response to her actions and in the very fact that she came to me with this problem, is the possibility that empathizing with her could lead me to conclude that she wants me to help her turn herself in. A Kantian could reasonably respond that although this seems plausible in this instance, in generalizing this line of argument, one must assume that the distress of the other is always morally grounded. A counter-example arises. Say I run across a man who is disconsolate over the fact that his wife abandoned him without a word after fifteen years of marriage. As we talk, I begin to empathize with him. What happens to the moral rightness of his distress when I find out that he had physically abused her during those years? Engaging empathically with a distressed other does not necessarily guarantee that the other resides on high moral ground. Nor does engaging empathically necessarily mean that the empathizer approves of the other's behavior.

A Kantian would also point to the fact that locating moral motivation in the affect of empathy means that empathizers are acting from inclination or desire. Acting from inclination is not moral. In the following illustration, Kant tells us directly what to make of empathy's moral status:

[T]here are many spirits of so *sympathetic* a temper that, without any further motive of vanity or self-interest, they find an inner pleasure in spreading happiness around them and can take delight in the contentment of others as their own work. Yet I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however right and however amiable it may be, has still no genuinely moral worth. It stands on the same footing as other inclinations...[which] deserve praise and encouragement, but not esteem; for its maxim lacks moral content, namely the performance of such actions, not from inclination, but *from duty*.¹²

For Kant, empathy has no moral standing because it is intrinsically connected to inclination. The Categorical Imperative is the single law of morality. It is our duty to act in accordance with it. It is not contingent on circumstance or on inclination. Kant's doctrine is one of obligation; moral worth has to do with dutiful actions performed from the motive of duty. Empathy, for Kant, possesses *no* moral worth.

From a Kantian perspective, if we are to judge empathy in its role as moral motivation as a basis for its moral standing, the problems mentioned above rear up in protest: (1) empathy does not necessarily require moral action; (2) empathy does not necessarily determine which moral action one should take; and (3) empathy cannot impartially view the situation — the moral agent can be side-tracked by inclination and the empathic process can produce moral bias. Although empathy may lead us to moral action, it cannot be on moral grounds.

A RESPONSE TO KANT

Kant's moral framework is not without its own set of problems. Under the Categorical Imperative, specific duties are attached. "Perfect" duties are strict and allow no exceptions. These duties include respecting in action the rights of others and not violating the dignity of persons as rational agents. Truth-telling is another perfect duty; one must never lie. "Imperfect" duties, on the other hand, afford a moral agent considerable latitude in execution. Beneficence, or helping others, is an imperfect duty. Because acting in accord with imperfect duties goes beyond what is strictly demanded by morality, individuals can decide who they will help, when they will help, and how they will help. They are, however, not obligated to help.

Situations can arise where a moral agent, deliberating on how to act, encounters tensions between the imperfect duty to aid others who are in need and a perfect duty, like lying. Kant provides a stark and much discussed illustration.¹³ Imagine you are harboring a prisoner from an abusive authority. An officer knocks on your door and asks you whether the person is in your home. The truthful answer is "yes." If you say "yes," the officer will remove the person and take her to her certain death. If you say "no," the officer will leave and look elsewhere. What would you say?

Kant tells us that we must not lie in this situation; we must tell the officer that the fugitive is in our home. This seems strange. Issues involved in the duty to aid raise substantive moral considerations for most of us. Care theorists and moral sentimentalists (like Hume) rightly challenge Kant on this issue. Care theorists, in particular, have a far more powerful and encompassing criterion of obligation than Kant. The

“I must” that arises internally is more compelling than the Categorical Imperative. In fact, the Categorical Imperative can be used to talk us out of responses that are not classified as “perfect duties.” For example, a moral agent could talk herself out of helping an old woman who has fallen down when doing so gets in the way of a required act, such as being on time for work. Care theorists expand the domain of obligation to include positive duties like beneficence. Kant’s approach can be seen to narrow the moral domain beyond what our moral intuitions tell us is reasonable.

In a previous section, I described the girl on Haight Street to show that Kantians do not deem empathy as moral because, although empathy may compel one to act morally, it does not commit one to do so. Given that the duty to help others is imperfect, we see that Kant himself does not require acting to relieve another’s distress except in a very narrow set of circumstances (ones where the duty to help is in accord with a perfect duty). In contrast, caring’s criterion of obligation requires such action when it is possible. In wanting the best for the other for the other’s sake and acting in accordance with this desire when such action is possible, the moral agent has a strong obligation to relieve the other’s distress.

Kantians also dispute empathy’s moral standing because it does not necessarily determine which moral action one should take. As mentioned above, there is considerable latitude for Kantian moral agents in deciding what to do when the duty, such as beneficence, is imperfect. Thus, Kant’s moral framework also does not tell a moral agent what to do in the situations presented above.

Finally, Kantians object to empathy having moral status because a moral agent who experiences empathy cannot impartially view the situation. In contrast, one could argue that in moral situations in which empathy arises, the impartial view provides an exceedingly weak form of moral motivation — one that can be used to talk a moral agent out of acting. Caring’s criterion of obligation in these situations is much more powerful and encompasses what most people commonly include in the moral domain.

EMPATHY’S MORAL STATUS

What then, in light of these complexities, *is* empathy’s moral status? Two things are quite clear: first, the question of empathy’s moral status resists a simple answer and second, a simple answer will obscure much of the complexity of empathy’s moral status. But we need some sort of an answer for pragmatic reasons. In order to cultivate empathy for the purposes of moral education, an understanding of empathy’s connection to morality is required. What follows is a general description of the relationship between empathy (as a general class of phenomena) and morality that holds these complexities in mind.

Empathy seems to be contingently moral. Empathy can, depending upon the circumstances, be moral, immoral, or amoral. In the examples, we have seen that empathy can function to motivate actions that promote the other’s good for the other’s sake. Here empathy serves as moral motivation. Experiencing empathy compels the moral agent to act in a manner that will relieve the suffering of the other. As long as the action taken to relieve the other’s distress is *done from a desire for the best for the other for the other’s sake*, then empathy has moral status as moral

motivation. As noted at the beginning of the paper, we see that the empathy of the sadist is immoral. We also see that empathy can be amoral. The clearest example of this is aesthetic empathy; empathizing with a character in a novel or play can be seen as morally neutral. Empathy is neither necessary nor sufficient for moral action. It is not necessary because one can certainly act morally without experiencing empathy. Nor is empathy sufficient; one can experience and act from empathy without entering the moral domain. When what the empathizer seeks in acting from empathy is moral, then empathy functions as a moral motive and possesses moral standing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

As the contents of this paper suggest, empathy's connection to morality is far more complex and tenuous than generally assumed. Warning flags should be raised for educators who simply assume empathy's connection to morality and show unexamined enthusiasm for cultivating it in schools. If we are to successfully foster empathy in students for the purposes of moral education, we must pay attention to these complexities. To do that, we need to think more deeply and work more systematically in maneuvering empathy's moral terrain.

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1. Nel Noddings, "Thinking, Feeling, and Moral Imagination," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy: The Philosophy of Emotions*, ed. Peter A. French and Howard K. Weltstein (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Press, 1998), 135-45; Deborah Meier, "Supposing That," *Phi Delta Kappan* 78, no. 4 (1996): 271-76; Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1995); John Deigh, "Empathy and Universalizability," *Ethics* 105 (1995): 743-63; and Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).
 2. See in particular: William Damon, *The Moral Child: Nurturing Children's Natural Moral Growth* (New York: The Free Press, 1988) and Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer, eds., *Empathy and its Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
 3. Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: The Free Press, 1988).
 4. Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
 5. *Ibid.*, 7 and 9.
 6. *Ibid.*, 5.
 7. *Ibid.*, 66, emphasis added.
 8. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). This text will be cited as CA, for all subsequent references.
 9. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch, 2d ed. (1739-40; reprint, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 415.
 10. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H.J. Patton (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), 70.
 11. Lawrence Blum, *Friendship, Altruism, and Morality* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 2.
 12. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 66, emphasis added.
 13. Interesting work has been done on the tension created by the perfect duty to tell the truth when it meets the duty to aid. See for example, Sissela Bok, *Lying* (New York: Vintage, 1978); Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Thomas Hill, *Autonomy and Self Respect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Nancy Sherman, *Making a Necessity of Virtue: Aristotle and Kant on Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).