

The Moral Dimensions of Empathy

Limits and Applications in Ethical Theory
and Practice

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1

The Empathy-Morality Connection

In recent years, empathy has received significant popular attention from scholars and pundits who believe it is the basis of the moral life, and who suggest that developing empathy will be the solution to our moral failings. When Phoebe Prince, a 15-year old from South Hadley, Massachusetts, committed suicide after being bullied by her schoolmates, TIME magazine ran a story stating that research in empathy suggests that it is a “key, if not *the* key, to all human social interaction and morality.”¹ Psychologists and moral educators interviewed for the article argued that to prevent severe bullying in schools, students needed to be taught how to “put themselves in another person’s shoes,” so that they can consider others’ feelings and stop abusing their peers. In a similar vein, political advisor and activist Jeremy Rifkin states in *The Empathic Civilization* that empathy is the “social glue” that keeps society functioning as a cohesive whole. “Without empathy it would be impossible to even imagine a social life and the organization of society...Society requires being social and being social requires empathic extension.”²

Does empathy really make people nice to others and keep us together as a society? If so, how does it do this? Over the last several decades, psychologists have investigated the relationship between empathy and pro-social behavior, and have concluded that the more one identifies with another person or is similar to that person, the more likely she is to empathize with her and be altruistically motivated toward her.³ Although this sounds good, the problem is that empathy is also biased. People tend to empathize to a greater degree with family members, members of their primary group, close friends, and people whose personal needs and concerns are similar to their own. They also tend to empathize more with victims in an immediate situation—in other words, with those who are

present, rather than those who are absent.⁴ If this is the case, an ethics built on empathy in the way that Rifkin suggests cannot, at least without correction from moral principles and concerns, be the “social glue” that keeps society functioning together as a cohesive whole. It is certainly not the sole basis for morality. Many of our emotions, such as resentment, indignation, and guilt play a central role in providing a motivation and interest in morality. In addition, fear of others and concern for our own self-interest motivate us to cooperate with others and set limits regarding our interactions with others, so that our social engagements are more stable. Empathy is certainly part of the story of morality, but by no means the whole of it.

The view that I will articulate in this book is that empathy is essential to the moral life, and is instrumental to developing a wide range of moral capabilities as they are defined by a variety of ethical theories. Empathy has the potential to enrich and strengthen moral deliberation, action and moral justification to others. But empathy is not intrinsically moral and does not always lead to moral thought or action. An empathizer that is simply motivated to act *pro-socially* in favor of the person with whom she empathizes does not necessarily act *morally* or prudently. To support this thesis, I examine empirical psychological studies on empathy, theories of empathy in the philosophy of mind, normative ethical theories of right action, and contractual ethical theories of moral deliberation and justification, to show how empathy can be ethically “educated” or informed by moral principles and criteria to be useful in moral judgment and deliberation. But before I elaborate, let me put my thesis in the context by examining how other moral philosophers have viewed the role of empathy in the moral life.

1.1 Empathy and ethics

Moral philosophers have always been interested in the role of emotions in ethics, but empathy is different from emotions like guilt, fear, anger, joy or sorrow. Our colloquial usage of the term empathy suggests that it involves “feeling another’s pain” or “stepping into another person’s shoes,” but the original definition of empathy suggested that it involved “feeling with” another person. The term empathy was introduced into the English language by Edward Titchener in 1909 as a translation of the word *Einfihlung*, which was originally specified by the German psychologist Lipps to describe “feeling one’s way into another” or resonating with another person.⁵ Titchener views empathy as feeling one’s way into another’s perceptions or imagination.⁶ This

makes possible the transfer of emotion from one person to another.⁷ For now, let us suppose that empathy can involve any of these ideas—taking up another’s perspective, feeling another’s emotion, or feeling *into* another’s emotion and perceptions.

So what is the connection between empathy and ethics? Perhaps the most obvious connection between empathy and ethics is “golden rule-style” reasoning, which involves figuring out what to do in a situation by imagining what you would want done if you were in the other person’s position. On this view, moral deliberation involves imagining the other person’s perspective and what it would be like to be in that position, or feeling the emotion they feel in that situation, determining what you would like to happen in if you were in that position, and then performing that action. But it is not at all clear that this kind of empathetic perspective-taking would be moral. Suppose for example that a student makes a bad grade on a test, and comes to the professor’s office crying and requesting to do extra work to improve the grade. The professor empathizes with the student and feels her distress about the bad grade, and determines that, if she were in the student’s position, she would want the professor to offer an opportunity to change the grade, or to do extra credit to change the grade. But should the professor change the grade, or offer the student an opportunity to do extra work? Most people think that she should not, because it would be unfair to the other students who also did poorly on the exam. In this situation, empathy and the golden rule do not generate the correct moral answer.

But this does not mean that empathy is inappropriate in all moral deliberation. The view I will endorse in this book is that empathy should figure centrally in moral deliberation, reflection, motivation, and action, but that empathy *alone* is insufficient as a moral guide. While empathy is instrumental to moral action, it must be used in tandem with specific moral principles and directives to generate a moral response. My argument here is that empathy ought to play an *instrumental* role in defining and motivating normative moral principles and obligations, and it can plausibly do this in many ethical theories, even rationalist ones. I will maintain that empathy is instrumental to bringing about the motives, actions, and virtues that are advocated by a variety of moral theories because it performs a number of *epistemic* functions that enable us to reflect on our beliefs about others in a new way. These epistemological processes and products are distinct from altruistic cognition, motivation or behavior,⁸ and are evident in the more cognitively developed kinds of empathy. Empathy enables people to

understand how others see the world, helps them to appreciate others' perspectives and connect with them emotionally, eliminates the perception of conflict between oneself and others, and makes possible the perception of similarity between oneself and others.

Focusing on empathy's epistemic dimension is an approach that has the resources for explaining how empathy and empathic thinking are relevant to ethical reflection, deliberation, and justification. Empathy understood in this way is instrumental to finding opportunities to act on the moral law, justifying moral principles, justifying oneself to others by showing that certain principles and practices are reasonable to others, and taking up the "moral point of view." These are tasks required by several ethical theories, including Kantian ethics, utilitarian ethics, and contractarian ethics, and not just ethical theories that emphasize care and altruism. Since empathy's most important functions are epistemic, empathy alone is insufficient and undesirable as a sole moral criterion; empathy is a psychological experience, not a normative principle. Thus, it cannot serve as a criterion of morally good action.

This view regarding empathy's contribution to ethics is distinct from others made regarding the normative role of empathy in the moral life. For example, care theorist Michael Slote argues for the centrality of empathy to care ethics, and claims that "empathy plays a crucial enabling role in the development of genuinely altruistic concern or caring for others."⁹ Empathy should be the basis for the ethics of care, for in his view, empathy generates empathic caring, and empathic caring can be used as "a plausible criterion of moral evaluation."¹⁰ I discuss Slote's view in greater depth in [Chapter 4](#), but essentially, he argues that empathy should serve a *constitutive* role in defining normative moral principles and obligations. In the ethics of care, empathy does not need "correction" by more objective, systematic, or principled moral concerns, or even by general care principles.¹¹ Empathic bias is not a limitation of empathy, but a source of justification of care ethical principles. The degree of "natural" empathetic engagement with others corresponds to our obligations to them; differences in the strength of empathy for others correspond to "differences of intuitive moral evaluation, and that fact...will allow an ethics of caring that brings in empathy—an ethics of empathic caring—to give a fairly general account of both public/political and private/individual morality."¹² This position is difficult to defend, because it seems intuitive that empathy's biases need correction by considerations that are external to the empathetic experience.

My position regarding empathy and its epistemic functions is also distinct from feminist philosopher Diana Meyers' moral theory.¹³ Meyers puts forward a normative theory of moral deliberation called "empathic thought," which involves imagining the other person and her situation in order to produce sensitive understanding and recognition of the other, oneself, and the relationship; this will determine the values and goals that are important and relevant in the situation.¹⁴ The moral agent then uses her own personal moral ideals and commitments, rather than utilitarian or Kantian principles, to make a moral judgment. I examine her view in greater detail in [Chapter 5](#), but for now let me state that while Myers' theory of moral deliberation is compatible with my thesis that empathy is instrumental to performing a number of tasks in normative moral deliberation, her main argument, that empathic thought should supplant "impartial reason," understood as universalizable reasoning that does not recognize differences between individuals and is applied systematically, without recognition of difference and cultural prejudice, is not.¹⁵ I agree with Meyers that our perception of others frames the terms and conditions of moral deliberation, and that we ought to advocate for empathy, since empathy with others reframes our understanding of them, and enables us to understand them in relation to ourselves. But I will make the case that traditional moral theories that construe moral subjects as rational deliberators are not the main problem; using empathy, these theories can be corrected so that they do not sustain systematic cultural prejudices.

1.2 Defining empathy

Before elaborating my thesis further, it is necessary to define empathy more carefully and explicitly. There are many definitions of empathy, and the plausibility of any claim regarding empathy's relationship to morality depends entirely on how it is defined. There is no one accepted definition of empathy in the academic literature, and this is likely due to the fact that empathy has been researched from a variety of disciplines—social psychology, experimental psychology, personality theory, counseling theory, moral theory, cognitive neuroscience, primatology, and philosophy of mind—so that there is no one definition that suits the needs of the specialists who study it. Psychologist C. Daniel Batson distinguishes eight different uses of the term empathy that have emerged in the psychological, philosophical, and neuroscientific literature:

1. Knowing Another Person's Internal State, Including His or Her Thoughts and Feelings

2. Adopting the Posture or Matching the Neural Responses of an Observed Other
3. Coming to Feel as Another Person Feels
4. Intuiting or Projecting Oneself into Another's Situation
5. Imagining How Another Is Thinking and Feeling
6. Imagining How One Would Think and Feel in the Other's Place
7. Feeling Distress at Witnessing Another Person's Suffering
8. Feeling for Another Person Who is Suffering¹⁶

These phenomena are all identified as empathy by different types of researchers. But there is no agreement that they are all *really* empathy; in fact, most philosophers would describe concepts 7 and 8 above as *sympathy*, which involves feeling care or concern for someone's well-being, or feeling sorrow, or sorry, for another. Sympathy is different in that it involves direct concern for another person as a subject, and is motivated by an interest in the other person and her well-being; empathy does not require this kind of concern.

Since there are so many definitions of empathy, it will be useful for me to give an overview of how other disciplines view the relationship between empathy and morality. This will clarify how my investigation of empathy and the development of moral capabilities connect—or do not connect—with other fields of research. I briefly describe the empirical studies of empathy that relate to behavior, and then state whether I will use this information (a) to elaborate a philosophical understanding of empathy, (b) to develop my thesis regarding the role of empathy in normative ethics, or (c) not at all.

One of the most interesting areas of research on empathy is in cognitive neuroscience, where researchers investigate the biological and neurological bases of empathy, understood as (2) adopting the posture or matching the neural responses of an observed other. To do this, scientists first used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) in rhesus monkeys to determine which parts of the brain are activated when observing another's emotional state.¹⁷ The resulting discovery was of "mirror neurons" that fire when a monkey performs an action, as well as when they observe another being perform that same action. Similar mirror neuronal systems have been found in humans; groups of neurons are stimulated during both the performance of certain actions and the mere observation of those actions in other beings.¹⁸ The claim by researchers is that mirror neurons contribute to our ability to (1) know and understand another person's internal state, including his or her thoughts and feelings, and (3) feel the emotions that other

people feel. While mirror neurons may contribute to social cognition, this research is better used to investigate the biological bases of our interest in and concern for others.¹⁹ I am interested in developing an ethical theory that takes the perspective-taking features of empathy as central to moral deliberation (concepts (4)–(7)), and since neuroscientists focus on concepts (1)–(3), this literature will not figure prominently in my work here.

Epistemologists and philosophers of mind interested in social cognition and our knowledge of other minds also study empathy. “Simulation” theorists such as Alvin Goldman first expressed an interest in empathy and defined it as simulation of another’s point of view.²⁰ Empathy in this context is defined as (5) imagining how another is thinking and feeling, or (6) imagining how one would think and feel in the other’s place. Although Goldman and philosopher Robert Gordon are in favor of using empathy in moral deliberation, they imply that moral deliberation involves simulation of what you would like to happen if you were in another’s situation, and acting accordingly.²¹ I have already suggested that this is an inadequate view of how empathy should function in normative ethics, and will substantiate my view in Chapters 4 and 5. More relevant to my project here is philosopher Karsten Stueber’s defense of empathy as (4) intuiting or projecting oneself into another’s situation, as the primary way that we get information about others.²² I build on Stueber’s defense of folk psychological views of knowing others in [Chapter 3](#), and articulate the view that empathy has specific epistemic functions that are relevant to ethical deliberation.

Finally, the field of psychology boasts a century’s worth of research on empathy—in social psychology, experimental psychology, personality theory, and counseling theory. Psychologists in the first half of the 20th century saw empathy as a capacity to feel another’s emotion, to feel one’s way into another’s life and perspective, and as such, it is a skill that one can develop over time. Sigmund Freud described empathy as when “we take the producing person’s psychical state into consideration, put ourselves into it and try to understand it by comparing it with our own” and “that which plays the largest part in our understanding of what is inherently foreign to our ego in other people.”²³ And the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut says that in empathetic experience, “we think ourselves into his place” and take by “vicarious introspection,” or empathy, the experience of another “as if it were our own and thus revive inner experiences” in order to arrive at “an appreciation of the meaning.”²⁴ This definition of empathy is important to Karsten Stueber’s defense of empathy as a method of getting knowledge about

others in the social sciences, and is appropriate for a context in which one has a motive to get knowledge about another for the purposes of historical research or social science. It was also important to clinician Carl Rogers, who believed empathy played a central role in counseling theory: "To sense the client's inner world of private, personal meanings as if it were your own, but without ever losing the 'as if' quality, this is empathy."²⁵ Since both the social scientist's relation to her subject and the therapist-client relationship are unique, and based on the therapist's (or researcher's) desire and interest in understanding the client's (or subject's) "inner world," this definition of empathy will be less relevant to my purposes here.

More recent psychological research on empathy will figure prominently in my work here. Research on empathy's role in social cognition, how we match emotions, and perspective-taking and its consequences are relevant to my thesis regarding empathy's role in moral development, and I discuss it throughout the book. Specifically, I employ contemporary moral psychologist's Martin Hoffman's distinctions of five modes of empathic arousal to show how the cognitively advanced types of empathy have both an epistemological function and a normative one.²⁶ In addition, I use social psychologist Daniel Batson's empirical studies regarding the relationship between empathy and altruistic action to show that some modes of perspective-taking are more effective than others in eliciting different kinds of "moral" responses, and that these differences in perspective-taking should be taken into account when teaching empathy.²⁷

Psychological research on empathy in different populations of people, such as those with autism or psychopathology, has also gained significant attention from philosophers interested in meta-ethical issues such as the nature of moral agency and the nature of moral judgments (as rational or sentimental).²⁸ Philosophers are interested in this research because they believe empathy involves both emotion recognition and emotion matching, and that its affective dimension contributes to moral judgment; thus, those who lack empathy will lack the ability to make moral judgments, and this should tell us something about moral agency and whether morality is ultimately grounded in affect or reason.²⁹ Although these are important philosophical issues that have implications for normative ethics, I will only address them insofar as they are relevant to my thesis regarding empathy's role in moral deliberation. While I do believe empathy is very important to moral deliberation and judgment, I agree with Martin Hoffman that being incapable of empathy does not "doom one to manipulating or killing others."³⁰

Those who lack empathic abilities may use other methods to learn people's emotions and understand their point of view, if they are interested in doing so.

1.3 Moral dimensions of empathy

With this overview of the different connections between empathy and ethical concerns, I now turn to clarifying what I will do in this book. My interest is in the normative role of empathy in ethics, or the appropriate role for empathy in moral deliberation and action. Since my focus is on how empathy impacts moral evaluation, and since empathy is not an emotion *per se*, I will not address the relationship between emotions and moral evaluation in general. The central issue I will examine is empathy's role in making a moral decision. My thesis is that empathy should play a supporting role, i.e. an instrumental role in making a moral decision or in moral judgment, but that it cannot be the sole basis for moral judgment.

Chapter 2 begins by defining empathy. This chapter is a rather technical analysis of the philosophical definitions of empathy, because as we have seen, many distinct but closely-related phenomena are identified as empathy. Some philosophers, especially philosophers of mind, have equated empathy with simulation, and I show that while the most cognitively-advanced kinds of empathy may include simulation, simulation is neither necessary nor sufficient for empathy. In light of ordinary language usage that suggests empathy is in some way emotional, I make the case that some kind of "affect" should be included in the philosophical definition of empathy, which could include, for example, one's sharing another's emotion. The reason this addition is crucial is that otherwise, a sadist's "simulation" of another's state could be considered "empathy," and this goes contrary to the way people commonly use the term empathy. Then, I articulate a multi-dimensional *functional* account of empathy that can serve as a broad framework for how to define empathy in philosophical studies. The functional account defines empathy as the correspondence between various inputs (empathy's "triggers"), processes (what it means to experience empathy), and outputs (empathy's epistemic and behavioral consequences). The advantage of this definition is that it allows for a variety of phenomena to be considered "empathy" but also allows for the identification and specification of one particular type of empathy.³¹

Part II explores the kind of experience empathy involves—what empathy does and what it doesn't do. Chapter 3 examines what empathy does, the

kind of attitude that is involved in empathy, and how these features relate to moral judgment and deliberation. The central question I address is whether empathy involves strong “approval” of another’s emotion, or whether it is the kind of experience that can be used to learn about another’s emotion. I contend that certain kinds of empathy, namely, the cognitively-advanced types of empathy³² do not require strong approval—they require what I will call “prima facie” approval of another’s emotion—and that the most important function of empathy is epistemic: empathy can be used to acquire justified beliefs about others’ mental and emotional states. The cognitively advanced types of empathy have the requisite cognitive content needed to impact one’s beliefs and thus have epistemic functions. These include information gathering and understanding others. Most importantly, the knowledge gained through empathy is different from knowledge gained about others with theories or in a strictly rational way. Knowledge gained with empathy is framed in reference to oneself, and this is why it is important for moral deliberation: empathy can transform one’s view of others, one’s view of what is valuable, and one’s view of what matters, both to others and to oneself.

After describing empathy’s positive dimensions, [Chapter 4](#) discusses empathy’s limitations or negative qualities, and explains why, given these limitations, empathy cannot be the sole basis of moral judgment. To support this thesis, I make two arguments: first, that the research showing that empathy motivates altruism is limited to a certain range of situations (such as clinical settings), and so we cannot conclude that empathy *generally* generates altruistic outcomes. Second, I claim that, given empathy’s tendency to bias and prejudice, as suggested by the empirical studies, it cannot be an appropriate *foundation* for morality; it should be understood as playing an *instrumental* role in moral deliberation and judgment. My line of argumentation in this chapter will examine and rebut Michael Slote’s view that empathy’s purported connection to altruism recommends a *constitutive* role for empathy in defining normative moral principles and obligations.

[Chapter 5](#) lays out my view of the appropriate normative role of perspective-taking empathy in moral deliberation and judgment. To support my thesis that empathy cannot be the sole basis of morality, I assert that what makes empathy relevant to moral deliberation is its *salience effect*: empathy makes salient another’s particular emotions, concerns, reasons, interests, and considerations in such a way that they are relevant and important to the empathizer, so that she is motivated to respond to these considerations. When empathy’s salience effect is at work, it can generate *empathetic deliberation*, which involves acquir-

ing a sensitive appreciation of another's feelings, reasons, beliefs, and point of view. But empathetic deliberation is not tantamount to moral deliberation, unless it is informed by moral principles, reasons, or commitments. *Empathetic* deliberation is *moral* deliberation when these concerns are taken into account in combination with personal moral commitments, or an impartial decision procedure. Empathetic deliberation is not simply hypothetical deliberation, and theories that incorporate empathy should allow empathy's salience effect to play a significant role in the deliberative process.

After describing how empathy can contribute to moral deliberation as it is defined from a wide range of ethical theories, [Chapter 6](#) examines the role of empathy in *contractual* ethical theories in particular. Contractual ethical theories are distinct from other normative ethical theories because they are based on the idea of rational agreement and seek the public justification of moral principles. My thesis is that the philosophical contract theories of John Rawls, John Harsanyi and David Gauthier seek to provide grounds of agreement for points of view that are thought to be irreconcilable, and they do this by engaging in interpersonal justification and providing deliberation that *models* different types of empathy. This is a rather surprising thesis, given that these contract theories are supposed to be grounded in rationality or reasonableness; nevertheless, I show that the reasoning modeled in three social contracts is *empathetic*, insofar as it involves thinking about, imagining, or reflecting on another person's feelings, reasons, and responses in a certain situation to discover their reasons for supporting different principles. There are different ways of imagining oneself in the perspective of others, and these differences are captured and expressed in different kinds of contractual reasoning. Ultimately, the contractual method's goal of public justification is best understood as interpersonal justification, a process of justification that seeks to take into account all points of view and perspectives.

Once empathy's contribution to moral deliberation and justification has been articulated, I explain how this contribution can be enhanced when empathy is *taught*. [Chapter 7](#) examines the different kinds of empathy that can be taught, the methods of teaching empathy (rationally, through induction, through interaction with a baby), and the purposes for which empathy can be taught (for the purposes of generating care, for cultivating understanding and diversity, or for developing the skill of reading others' emotions). I contend that these differences in method and context are important because the moral context of empathy varies from one program to another, so teachers of empathy,

including parents, need awareness of what they are asking students to do when they “empathize” with others. Citing empirical evidence, I conclude that the cultivation of empathy must begin early in life in order for people to be inclined to use empathy in making a moral decision.

Chapter 8 reflects on the implications of my argument regarding the normative role of empathy in moral deliberation and judgment for feminist ethics in particular. I argue that the goals of feminist ethics would be well-served by focusing more attention on empathy, but simply because a theory implements empathy does not mean it automatically satisfies the goals of a feminist ethic. I also examine the idea that empathy is “gendered”—that is, the claim that women are more empathetic than men—and show that while women may have better *expressions* of empathy than men, women are not necessarily more empathetic than men. Moreover, gendered stereotypes of empathy should not recommend disparate moral expectations for men and women. I briefly explain how empathy can be used to teach a variety of virtues, such as respect for difference, diversity, tolerance, and non-violence, and suggest that these could be integrated into a framework of social virtues that could promote social cooperation.

This concludes my summary of the arguments that are to come. Ultimately, my aim here has been to persuade the reader that empathy should be at the center of our reflection on ethics. Empathy enables us to more accurately perceive and appreciate others’ emotions, feelings, and situations, and such experiences facilitate our understanding of others and their needs. Since empathy has attributes associated with both “thinking” and “feeling,” it is a unique experience that can make a powerful epistemic contribution to moral judgment. Nevertheless, this contribution should not be overstated. Empathy is not a cure for the human condition. But the more we can understand it, apply it, and teach it, the more we can improve human interaction.

2

What is Empathy?

The previous chapter mentioned eight different ways that empathy has been defined in philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience. How should empathy be defined in philosophy and normative ethics in particular? Several proposals have been made. Ethicist Justin D'Arms defines empathy as both an act *and* a capacity: empathy involves responding “to the perceived feelings of another with vicarious emotional reactions of one’s own, and empathy is the capacity for, or the occurrence of, such a vicarious experience.”¹ This definition captures the idea that empathy involves responding to another’s emotion by acquiring a similar emotion, and focuses on the “feeling another’s emotion” aspect of empathy.

On the other hand, philosophers of mind Peter Goldie and Robert Gordon emphasize the imaginative or simulative aspect of empathy. Goldie defines empathy as “a process or procedure by which a person *centrally imagines* the thoughts, feelings, and emotions (what I will call the *narrative*) of another person.”² And Gordon says that an empathetic simulation involves an “imaginative shift in the reference of indexicals’ where the imaginer ‘recenters his egocentric map.’”³ While Goldie and Gordon’s definitions are plausible, they fail to include the affective dimension of empathy—arousing feelings or transferring emotion—which D’Arms includes, and which developmental psychologists, cognitive neuroscientists, and laypersons take to be characteristic of empathy. Goldie and Gordon imply that empathy involves “stepping into another’s shoes,” but does not require feeling a resulting, congruent emotion.

Excluding the affective dimension of empathy is a mistake, and my goal here is to explain why definitions of empathy should include the idea that empathy involves experiencing a *congruent* emotion in regard to another’s perceived state, but not necessarily the other’s *exact* emotion.⁴

Although this feature may seem unimportant, if empathy is understood to be mere simulation, then it is possible to interpret a sadist's simulation or imagination of her victim's pain as "empathy." But this interpretation goes contrary to common usage of the term empathy; what is different in this case is that the sadist does not really "feel" her victim's pain. Psychologists who study empathy recognize that this type of simulation is not empathy as we usually think of it, and thus define empathy in a way that involves an affective dimension.⁵ Philosophers ought to do the same, and so my goal is to clarify the concept of empathy by defending a *functional* account of empathy that has already been adopted by a number of psychologists. This definition outlines the features required for empathy, and at the same time allows for a wide range of experiences to be called empathy. The functional account defines empathy as a multidimensional process involving (a) mental events such as imitation, projection or pictorial representation, (b) affective components, and (c) epistemic or behavioral outputs.

To articulate this view of empathy, I explain the difference between empathy and sympathy, describe the philosophical roots of the idea of empathy, and differentiate the two dominant conceptions of empathy, *emotional contagion* (which involves the spontaneous transfer of emotion) and *imaginative perspective-taking* (which involves perspective-swapping or role-taking). Then I distinguish three main types of perspective-taking empathy: *other-focused empathy*, *self-focused empathy*, and *dual-perspective empathy*. Next I describe the importance of shared emotional response, and explain why empathy should be understood as including an emotional response of *matching* another's emotion. Finally, I articulate the functional definition of empathy and outline the advantages of using this definition in the philosophical study of ethics.

2.1 Empathy as emotional contagion

Although the term empathy did not emerge into the English language until the 20th century, both Adam Smith's and David Hume's discussions of sympathy mention qualities that are now considered to be empathy.⁶ Thus, the two dominant approaches empathy outlined at the beginning of the chapter can be traced to Smith and Hume. The first conception of empathy—an affective response to another person's feeling, namely, feeling the other's emotion—can be traced to David Hume's definition of sympathy: a capacity of human nature to "receive by communication" the "inclinations and sentiments" of others,

“however different from, or even contrary to our own.”⁷ This is why Hume describes sympathy (our concept of empathy) as a capacity for communicating emotions; the point of empathy is to “take us so far out of ourselves, as to give us the same pleasure or uneasiness in the characters of others.”⁸ Hume’s discussion of the *transmission of emotion* provides conceptual roots for empathy understood as an affective transfer of emotion, even though other features of his concept of sympathy do not apply to empathy.

Before clarifying this view of empathy further, let me briefly describe how contemporary thinkers view the difference between empathy and sympathy. Sympathy involves care or concern for the other, and is often described as “feeling sorry for” the other.⁹ Stephen Darwall usefully defines sympathy as “a feeling or emotion that responds to some apparent threat or obstacle to an individual’s good and involves concern for him, and thus for his well-being, for his sake.”¹⁰ This definition captures what is distinctive of sympathy, namely, that it involves feeling *concern* for someone’s well-being, or feeling sorrow, or sorry, for another, while empathy involves the transfer of emotion, and in some cases, perspective-taking that is absent in sympathy.¹¹ Most importantly, sympathy involves direct concern for another person as a subject distinct from oneself, in a way that empathy does not. In principle, it is possible to feel sympathy without empathy and vice versa.¹²

So how are emotions transferred from one person to another, according to Hume? He argues that when one person observes another’s passions, “the idea is presently converted into an impression, and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion, as any original affection.”¹³ For example, Amy’s impression of Zack’s affective state is immediately or non-inferentially converted into a copy of Zack’s feeling, without inference or conscious cognition. In this experience, Amy comes to feel Zack’s emotion spontaneously, non-cognitively, and in virtue of her having an idea of Zack’s experience, so that the passion arises “in conformity to the images we form of them.”¹⁴ Though Hume’s argument here is philosophically complex, the model he proposes suggests that the observer’s (Amy’s) own ideas of the other’s (Zack’s) experiences are duplicated into affective experiences that reflect her observation by force of the imagination.¹⁵ Hume’s theory serves as the basis of the modern view of empathy as *emotional contagion*, where one person non-inferentially “catches” another’s feeling simply in virtue of perceiving it.¹⁶

Empirical research has been conducted on young infants and toddlers, and these studies suggest that it is plausible for emotions to be

transmitted in this way, in that certain types of empathic arousal occur via a sort of trigger-response. In these studies, 10- to 14-months old infants responded to the distress expressions of others with crying, and seemed to imitate the distress cues of the other as if they were “trying on” their emotional expressions.¹⁷ Studies show that young children “catch” the emotions of others by performing a kind of *motor mimicry* of the other agent, and by mimicking the facial expressions of adults.¹⁸ In fact, it seems more likely that emotional contagion would occur in infants and toddlers who lack sophisticated linguistic skills and a robust concept of “self,” since infants (usually up to age two) cannot yet distinguish their own experiences from the experiences of others. Thus, their empathetic responses are plausibly described as non-cognitive and non-inferential. These responses are evidence for the “triggering” of an emotion in a non-inferential, immediate way, via perceptions or Humean conversion of ideas into impressions.

Recent research in neurobiology suggests that there is another explanation for this type of emotional contagion—mirror neurons. Cognitive scientists have recently been touting the “mirroring” capacity in both animal and human minds.¹⁹ This capacity is of some neurons to activate during both the performance of certain actions and the mere observation of those actions. These neurons replicate the neural stimulation of actual action during the observation of those actions, and they also fire when we feel affective sensations or observe such affective sensations in others. Essentially, when Amy observes Zack crying, the stimulated regions of Amy’s brain and the signal patterns of those regions are similar to Zack’s regions and patterns. The theory is that merely observing emotions can trigger neurobiological responses that are a primitive kind of empathy like emotional contagion. Since these responses trigger an emotion via perception or direct representation, they should not be interpreted as equivalent to *understanding* another’s emotions, as Remy Debes maintains.²⁰ The mirror neurons that fire when we observe emotions cannot account for the more robust mental content needed for the more cognitively advanced kinds of empathy that involve a transfer of emotion in virtue of Amy finding Zack’s emotion intelligible and appropriate.²¹

2.2 Empathy as imaginative perspective-taking

The second way of defining empathy is traced to Adam Smith’s view of sympathy. According to Smith, we come to feel the emotions of others not merely by perceiving what they are feeling, but by imagining ourselves in their position and simulating their experiences.

Smith's discussion, like Hume's, is technically on *sympathy*, but his writings on the topic are widely recognized by philosophers and psychologists alike to refer to our modern term empathy. Smith says that when, for example, we observe someone balanced on a tightrope:

By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.²²

By imaginatively projecting oneself into the perspective of others, one imagines, simulates, and feels what it would be like in that situation, and as a result, experiences in some degree the emotion the other person feels. Smith argues that the transmission of emotion is a result of the imaginative experience of the other's internal states, because by entering into another's perspective and imagining how he views the world, one can understand how he views the world at least momentarily.

Smith's description of empathy—like Hume's—implies that physical proximity to the other person augments empathy, for direct observation or physical closeness makes salient the other person's emotions and experiences in a way that motivates the imaginative experience. Physical proximity and interaction with the other is indeed crucial for empathy.²³ What distinguishes Smith's accounts of empathy from Hume's is its emphasis on a conscious awareness of the other's internal states, and imagination of the other's internal perspective; thus, it is thought to be a more "cognitive" account of empathy. The primary difference between empathy as *imaginative simulation* and empathy as *emotional contagion* is that the former requires conscious cognition of the other person's internal states and the latter does not. Since there are a variety of ways one might take up another's perspective, I now distinguish the ways one can simulate another's perspective.²⁴

2.2.2 Self-focused imagination²⁵

There are at least two ways to take up another's perspective: (a) imagining *oneself* in another person's situation and circumstances, or (b) imagining what it is like to be *someone else* in his situation and circumstances. Philosophers of mind have different terms for these kinds of imagination, some of which are called empathy, but the terms I use to describe these two kinds are *self-focused imagination* and *other-focused imagination*. Once

I have distinguished these two imaginative viewpoints, I will explain how they relate to empathy.

Self-focused imagination involves imagining *oneself* in another person's position. For example, Amy imagines being in Zack's circumstances (but doesn't think about being Zack himself), and imagines *herself* in *his* situation. This way of imagining situations is quite common. People sometimes ask for advice, and the response is, "Well, if I were in your situation, I would...." In this case, we imagine ourselves in the *circumstances* of another person's position, but use our own desires, beliefs, psychology, and personality to guide the imaginative process and determine a response. Self-focused imagination is illustrated in an oft-cited experiment performed by Kahneman and Tversky. In this experiment, they asked respondents to answer questions about people's emotional responses in a hypothetical case of "missed flights."²⁶ The situation people are told in the experiment is the following: Mr. Crane and Mr. Tees both arrive at an airport 30 minutes late. Upon arrival, Mr. Tees learns that his flight left on time, so he missed it by 30 minutes. But Mr. Crane learns that his flight was delayed, and he missed it by only five minutes. The respondents are then asked who would be most upset about missing the flight. Consider for a moment how you might respond. If you answered that Mr. Crane would be more upset than Mr. Tees, then your response is in line with 96 per cent of the respondents.

This experiment has some interesting implications. Kahneman and Tversky originally thought the experiment was important because it showed that people had *the same* response to a hypothetical situation, and were frustrated by the same kinds of scenarios. But Peter Goldie notes that what is interesting is that people answered the question about Mr. Crane and Mr. Tees not based on what *the two men* would feel, but on what *they* would feel. The respondents were not given any special information about Mr. Crane and Mr. Tees, like whether either of them was unusually patient or extremely irascible. Thus, when faced with a hypothetical situation, they imaginatively projected themselves into the situation and answered based on what *they* would feel in the situation. Goldie argues that since the respondents didn't have any information about the two men, this cannot be an example of simulation or "in his shoes" imagining. And yet, this kind of self-focused imagination *can* be a forerunner of empathy.²⁷ In fact, when people do not have much information about another but observe someone in distress, they often project themselves into another's situation, draw on their own experiences to predict the other's emotion, and respond. Whether they *accurately* predict or feel what the other person is feeling is another question.²⁸

2.2.3 Other-focused imagination

The second way of imagining oneself in another's perspective is what I call *other-focused imagination*. Here, Amy focuses on Zack's psychological features and imagines "what it is like" to be Zack, with Zack's beliefs, desires, and concerns. She doesn't judge Zack's mental states, but imagines them from his internal, first-person perspective. She imagines how he is thinking and feeling. This sort of imagination requires that Amy have some relevant information about Zack, which she uses to imagine being Zack. This could include perceptual information regarding Zack's situation, such as observing him win a race or fall from a bicycle, first-hand knowledge of Zack and his situation, i.e. that Zack's mother has died, or third-hand information about Zack and his own situation, such as through literature or media. No matter which case, Amy imagines the situation of Zack, and imagines being Zack in that situation. The accuracy of Amy's imagination largely depends on how much information she has about Zack and the extent to which she aims to genuinely imagine being him.

Suppose, for example, that Amy has a friend Ginger, and Ginger's mother has died. Amy imagines how Ginger must feel in this situation, and imagines being Ginger. To do this accurately, she will need to take into account the fact that Ginger has (had) a horrible relationship with her mother, and so when she imagines what it is like to be Ginger, she simulates having Ginger's beliefs (that her mother is a bad person) and attitudes (disdain for her). Amy concludes that Ginger might plausibly be glad of her mother's death. Now if Amy doesn't have the relevant information about Ginger and her mother, then other-focused imagination will be difficult to accomplish. Amy needs some knowledge of Ginger's beliefs, attitudes and other emotions that could provide the content needed for other-focused imagination.

Of course, even if one has information about another person, she can never *really* know whether other-focused imagination will accurately reflect the exact emotions and feelings of that other person. Suppose that Amy imagines herself in the situation Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Though Amy doesn't know Dr. King, she has read about him in books, seen pictures of him in various types of media, and has a lot of information about his beliefs, family relationships, and what he desired with regard to the civil rights movement. Supposing that Amy has a substantial amount of information about Dr. King, she can imagine being him and campaigning for social justice across the South, going to jail, preaching, and befriending fellow civil rights workers. But there is so much information that Amy does not have—knowledge of his personal life and how he acted in outside the public eye—that her other-focused imagination will be limited. In

this case, there is information that she does not have—knowledge of what it was like to be a black man in the Jim Crow South—and which a (non-Black) woman could not get. Although imagination can transport one’s awareness to another’s perspective so that she sees herself “as” another, there is no guarantee that one really sees things “as” the other sees them.²⁹ This is one of the limits of other-focused imagination, but as I explain later, its goal is to focus one’s attention on the *other* and not oneself.

2.2.4 Dual-perspective imagination (combination mode)

A third kind of imaginative perspective-taking is called *dual-perspective imagination*, and it involves taking up the other’s perspective, but still seeing things from one’s own perspective.³⁰ Dual-perspective imagination is when Amy imagines being in Zack’s circumstances, and sees things from both her own and Zack’s perspective; she switches back and forth from her own perspective to his, and in this regard, it is inherently the recognition of two (different) perspectives. Dual-perspective imagination is achieved by acknowledging the other’s emotion, while retaining one’s own perspective in the situation. Philosopher John Deigh captures this type of perspective-taking when he describes *mature* empathy: “taking another’s perspective and imaginatively participating in this other person’s life...without forgetting oneself.” He says that “to empathize with another...one must recognize him as separate from oneself, a distinct person with a mind of his own, and such recognition requires that one retain a sense of oneself even as one takes up the other’s perspective and imaginatively participates in his life.”³¹ I will dub this dual-perspective *empathy*.

Dual-perspective *imagination* is the kind of imagination used in role-taking, or putting oneself in another person’s perspective or “shoes.”³² The personality theorist Jean Piaget emphasized role-taking, because it teaches people to learn how to “decenter” and abandon one’s own perspective. This, he notes, is an integral part of social development.³³ In this process, the idea is to take up another perspective while at the same time remembering one’s own. Returning to the example of Ginger whose mother has died, when Amy uses dual-perspective imagination, she imagines having Ginger’s evaluative response to her situation, which may involve feeling relief, satisfaction, and a kind of gladness. But Amy can at the same time acknowledge that she herself does not share Ginger’s feelings and that she has a different evaluation of the situation. Role-taking and dual-perspective imagination reveal evaluative differences in people’s perspectives, and the role-taker sees the conflict between the viewpoints. Psychologists suggest that role-taking is useful because as one takes the other’s role, she can at the same time

evaluate what it is like to be the other person, and thus develops understanding and social intelligence.

2.3 From imaginative perspective-taking to empathy

The foregoing discussion clarifies the variety of ways that a person can simulate or imagine another's perspective. But this is not tantamount to empathy, for we generally use the term empathy to describe feeling an emotion that is congruent with the other person's emotion. Thus, a definition of empathy that includes some sort of simulation, imitation, role-taking, or perspective-swapping *and* the transfer of emotion is superior to the conceptions of empathy as mere simulation.

Are there any *philosophical* theories of empathy that satisfy both of these criteria? Both Alvin Goldman and Stephen Darwall offer views of empathy that include (a) shared emotions and (b) some kind of imaginative perspective-swapping. Goldman argues that what distinguishes empathy from perspective-taking is that "the output states are affective or emotional states rather than purely cognitive or conative states like believing or desiring" and the empathizer "is aware of his or her vicarious affects and emotions as representatives of the emotions or affects of the target agent."³⁴ Stephen Darwall agrees when he maintains, "empathy consists in feeling what one imagines *he* feels, or perhaps should feel (fear, say), or in some imagined copy of these feelings."³⁵ He argues that this is "genuine" empathy, and is distinct from *self-focused* empathy, where "we simulate others' emotions by placing ourselves in their situation and working out what we would think, want, and do, if we were they."³⁶ Darwall here is drawing a distinction between self-focused and other-focused empathy, and only the latter counts as empathy for him. While Darwall is right to think that empathy must involve considering the other person's specific attributes, self-focused empathy is still, on my view, "genuine" empathy, since it involves "thinking oneself into another's perspective," and then feeling an emotion that is congruent to the other's.³⁷

While these philosophers believe that empathy requires the affective transmission of emotion, it is important to distinguish clearly the three ways of perspective-taking. There are three main kinds of simulative or perspective-taking empathy: **self-focused empathy**, **other-focused empathy**, and **dual-perspective empathy**. These distinctions reflect the epistemological "focus" of the empathy. In **self-focused empathy**, Amy acquires Zack's emotion because she simulates being in Zack's circumstances, and responds by feeling an emotion similar to his. This transmission of emotion occurs even though the content of her simulation reflects her own psychology. In **other-focused empathy**, Amy imagines or simulates having Zack's

beliefs and psychology in Zack's circumstances, so that she acquires an emotion that is congruent with Zack's. She imagines having Zack's evaluative stance, and comes to feel an emotion congruent to his. In **dual-perspective empathy**, Amy simulates Zack's beliefs and psychology, sees the differences between those and her own, acquires an emotion that is congruent to Zack's, and works back and forth between her perspective and Zack's. These definitions of empathy are superior to the definitions of empathy as mere simulation, for they include the transfer of emotion that is characteristic of empathy.

Although theorists do not agree on *how* similar the emotional experience of the empathizer and the target should be, presumably there should be a correspondence between the two emotional states. For example, if Amy feels indignant when Zack feels angry, this could count as empathy because the emotions are somewhat similar. Most theorists believe that an exact match of emotion is not required, and say that experiencing similar emotions as a result of responding to another's emotional state is sufficient for empathy.³⁸ In general, psychologists suppose that what William Ickes calls "accurate cognitive assessment of another's feelings" is central to empathy.³⁹ This is correct, because similar emotions are those that have roughly the same cognitive content and affective states, and the difference is in the degree of the emotion experienced, such as in the case of being "afraid" and being "mortified." While we may not *know* whether one's emotion matches the other, these epistemic worries are secondary; the defining feature of empathy is that one person feels an emotion that is congruent or similar to another, as a way of responding to that person. The ability to feel a congruent emotion depends on the empathizer's understanding of the other's situation and emotion, and I discuss this in greater detail in the following chapter.

Empathy needs to be defined in terms of "congruent emotions" because if empathy is defined as mere simulation, then it appears that a sadist's imaginative perspective-swapping with her victim can be considered "empathy," and this goes contrary to everyday parlance. It is a mistake to call the sadist's simulative imagination "empathy," because the sadist does not experience a congruent emotion. This point is worth emphasizing because a number of philosophers have supposed that empathy is tantamount to simulation or perspective-taking.⁴⁰ John Deigh argues that the sadist's imaginative perspective-swapping is empathy but not "mature empathy" because she doesn't *respect* the one experiencing pain and doesn't appreciate the other's autonomy and assessment that the pain is bad. Mature empathy requires "seeing that *from that person's perspective* that his purposes are worthwhile."⁴¹ But this seems like a stronger requirement than is necessary for empathy, and closer to a requirement for sympathy.

Likewise, Martha Nussbaum suggests that a torturer “may be acutely aware of the suffering of the victim, and able to enjoy the imagining of it,” in a way that is empathetic.⁴² But this goes contrary to our common usage of the term empathy, and doesn’t capture the way that empathy includes the transfer of a *similar* emotion. Sadistic simulation lacks the transfer of a similar emotion. This is a crucial point, for most psychological accounts of empathy, as well as our everyday usage of the term empathy, indicate that there is a “match,” broadly understood, between emotional states.⁴³

To see the difference between empathy and mere imaginative simulation, let me briefly describe how empathy works using a cognitive theory of emotion. The question of whether emotions are cognitive or non-cognitive is a central issue in emotion studies, and I am not claiming here that the cognitive theory of emotion is correct.⁴⁴ My point is that the cognitive theory of emotion clearly depicts why the sadist’s emotion should not be considered empathy: his emotion doesn’t match his target’s either in terms of (a) cognitive content or (b) emotional feeling.

Although there are a variety of cognitive theories of emotion, the one I adopt here is that an emotion is an *intentional stance* or propositional attitude *toward some state* or belief.⁴⁵ Cognitive theories of emotion suppose that emotions are not just feelings, but neither are they merely beliefs; rather, emotions are an *affective* response or attitude toward some state with cognitive content. This theory is useful because it treats emotions as intentional stances with rationally evaluable content that are affective in that they involve physical “feelings.”⁴⁶ This approach is particularly useful for examining the perspective-taking empathy, since it enables breaking down the cognitive content of the emotion.⁴⁷

To represent an emotion as an intentional stance toward some state, the cognitive aspect of the emotional state can be represented in the following way: someone’s loving Michael is represented as

X(Love)[Michael] (with affect/feeling)

It is even possible for someone to have the emotion:

X(Fear){I love Michael} (with affect/feeling)

Although the representation here suggests that the emotion is just an evaluative attitude, it is important to remember that the affective part of emotions, namely, the feelings that we have when we experience emotions, are central to the definition of an emotion. The representation is just a useful way of depicting the cognitive attitudes and how they are directed toward a particular state of affairs or beliefs.⁴⁸

Using this scheme, perspective-taking empathy can be described as a situation in which Amy imagines or simulates Zack's emotion by imagining having Zack's attitude toward a particular state. For example, suppose:

Zack(Fear)[Walking on Tightropes]

For Amy to empathize with Zack, she takes up Zack's perspective and sees things and feels things affectively as he does. This can be done quickly, and without conscious effort, but it will involve some kind of simulation. Using the distinctions in kinds of empathy described in the previous section, Amy could do this in three ways:

Self-focused Empathy: Amy imagines {being Amy(Fear)[Walking on Tightropes]}

Other-focused Empathy: Amy imagines {being Zack(Fear)[Walking on Tightropes]}

Dual-perspective empathy: Amy imagines {being both Amy & Zack (Fear)[Walking on Tightropes]}

If Amy's imagining or simulating Zack's situation produces an emotion that is congruent to Zack's fear, then Amy can be said to empathize. If there is no resulting similar emotion, then Amy does not empathize.

Though this is a simplified account of empathy, it shows how imagining being in Zack's situation and acquiring a congruent emotion is at the core of empathy. On this account, the sadist doesn't empathize because she doesn't feel an emotion similar to the object of her imagination. This is primarily because the sadist doesn't have the same thoughts or intentional states as her target, and so her imaginative musings don't count as empathy. This can be shown by using the theory of emotion proposed above. Let us represent the non-sadist's feelings about torture as follows:

Non-sadist Zack(Boo)[Lying on the Rack]

Let us now represent the sadist's imaginative musings, where she simulates Zack's position. This means she would need to imagine Zack's perspective in one of the following ways:

Empathizer: Amy imagines {Amy, Zack, or Amy & Zack(Boo)
[Lying on the Rack]}

But the sadist *does not imagine from the other's perspective in this way, period*. Zack dislikes pain, and for the sadist to take up his perspective, she must imagine disliking pain. This makes it possible for the sadist to feel what her victim feels. But the sadist *enjoys* Zack's pain and doesn't replicate the same attitude. Without the replication of the same attitude, there can be no transfer of a similar emotion. Instead, the sadist Amy has a yea- or pro-attitude toward Zack's boo-attitude:

Sadist: Amy(yea) imagines{Non-Sadist Zack [(Boo)(Lying on the Rack)]}

In this case, the sadist Amy does not see (or feel) things as Zack sees and feels them; she maintains a yea-attitude toward Zack's boo-attitude, and does not take up the perspective of Zack, or simulate his boo-attitude.⁴⁹ This theory of an emotion shows why the sadist's imaginative musings don't count as empathy and distinguishes Deigh's view from my own. His view is that while the sadist might *rationaly acknowledge* that Zack has a boo-attitude toward pain, she doesn't respect that he has his own ends and desires to not have the pain. But on my view, the sadist doesn't empathize because she doesn't have the same thoughts, beliefs, or intentional attitudes that Zack does. This suggests that there is a difference *in kind* between the sadist's imaginative simulation and empathy, and not just a difference *in degree* of emotion involved in empathy versus imaginative simulation. The sadist enjoys imagining Zack's pain but does not have the same attitude or intentional state that he does. This is the simplest explanation for why the sadist doesn't empathize: the sadist's pleasure judgment regarding her victim's pain prevent her from empathizing with him.⁵⁰

For present purposes, it is unnecessary to state whether emotions are cognitive or non-cognitive, or whether all instances of empathy are cognitive or non-cognitive. Given what we have surveyed regarding the two main paradigms of empathy, it is likely that some kinds of empathy, especially the empathy of infants and very young children is non-cognitive, and is a result of impressions or perceptions of other emotions. But as we mature, our empathy and our other emotions become more sophisticated. This is likely due to the development of language. In fact, in his studies of the different kinds of empathy, Martin Hoffman shows that there are developmental changes in cognitive processing capabilities. He shows that certain kinds of empathic arousal, namely role-taking or simulative empathy, require an advanced level of cognitive processing.⁵¹ Perspective-taking empathy requires an ability to focus on another's inner states, and this kind of empathy

doesn't appear until later in development.⁵² I argue in this book that the more cognitively advanced kinds of empathy are relevant to moral deliberation and ethical reasoning; while a baby's contagious cries or laughter may effect moral development, the more advanced kinds of empathy include cognitions that can be instrumental to moral deliberation, reflection, motivation and reasoning.

2.4 A functional account of empathy

Highlighting the difference between empathy as "contagion" and empathy as "simulation" suggests that there are significant differences in what researchers and laypersons alike call empathy. While contagion and simulation are the most widespread conceptions of empathy, they share a common phenomenon—the transmission of an emotion from one person to another—but these are not the only ways that an emotion could be transmitted. Justin D'Arms suggests that simulation and contagion are "mechanisms of empathy" rather than explanations of the transfer of emotion,⁵³ and I agree that there are many *modes* of transmitting an emotion with empathy. The difference, roughly, is in the causal direction of the transmission. In contagion, Zack's feeling an emotion is causally efficacious in bringing about an emotion in (the receptive observer) Amy that is congruent to his own. And in simulation, Amy's imagining Zack's feelings produces the transmission; Zack is merely the "target" of Amy's imagination and her emotional reaction. Thus, empathy in general should be understood as *responding to another's emotion with a congruent emotion, in virtue perceiving the other's emotion with some mental process (such as taking up the other's point of view or simple motor mimicry)*.

Based on what psychologists have surmised about empathy, empathetic transmissions can result from a variety of processes: cognitive representations, simulation, inner imitation, theoretical beliefs, and even non-linguistic pictorial cognitions. Thus, it is useful to have a broad conception of empathy that is agnostic with regard to the *kinds* of cognitions that comprise the empathizer's mental states. The psychologist Martin Hoffman was the first to recommend a definition of empathy that embraced the various modes of mental states and transmissions.⁵⁴ Several psychologists have followed his lead, and have defined empathy as the transmission of emotion from one person to another via some causal process with both intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes.⁵⁵ The following figure is an adapted version of the model of empathy proposed by the psychologist Mark Davis, and describes the empathic process as

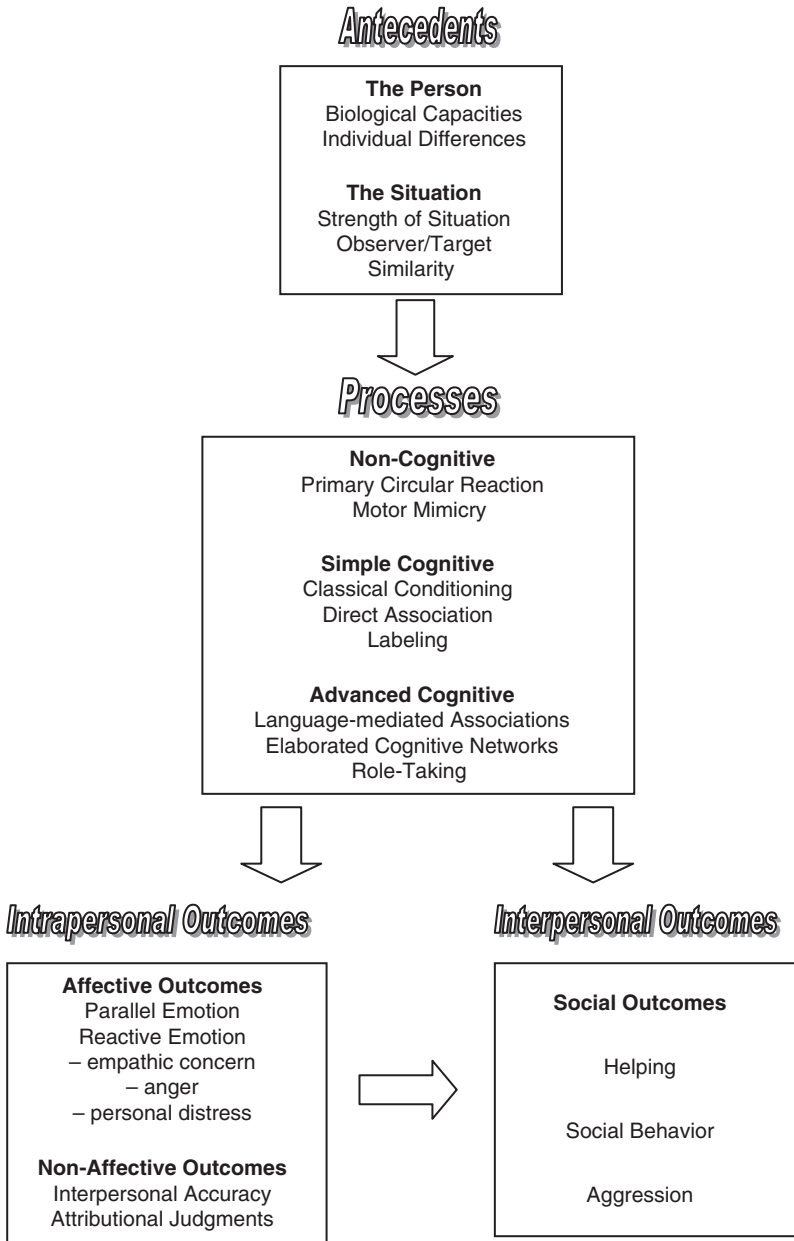


Figure 2.1 A Functional Account of Empathy

consisting in antecedents, processes, intrapersonal outcomes, and interpersonal outcomes.⁵⁶ I call this a *functional* account of empathy because it takes empathy to be a function of certain inputs, processes, and outputs.⁵⁷

This account of empathy supposes that there are a variety of ways of describing the mental states in empathetic transmission, and suggests that empathy can include both non-cognitive transfers of emotion and cognitively sophisticated understanding. This definition of empathy is much broader and more useful than philosopher Elliot Sober and biologist David Sloan Wilson's stringent definition of empathy as: "S empathizes with O's experience of emotion E if and only if O feels E, S believes that O feels E, and this causes S to feel E for O."⁵⁸ Psychologists research transmissions of empathy, such as motor mimicry, that may not include beliefs but which still involve the transmission of similar emotion, and the functional account of empathy is a broad definition that allows more specific definitions of empathy to be distinguished and studied.⁵⁹ The advantage of this approach is that it is agnostic with regard to the *kinds* of cognitions that comprise the empathizer's mental states (described under "Processes"). A variety of factors may trigger empathetic responses: mimicry, primitive response reactions, classical conditioning, simulation, or association with one's personal experience.

Philosophers who debate the nature of these processes will be interested in examining whether empathetic cognitions run via "off-line" simulation, "on-line" simulation, whether they implement "theories" of others' minds, or whether they are essentially pictorial or linguistic representations of another's phenomenal experience. This, for example, is the topic of Karsten Stueber's examination of the place of empathy in understanding others within the "folk-psychological" framework, which supposes that the mental concepts used by ordinary people ought to be used to understand others as minded creatures.⁶⁰ But for the purposes of evaluating empathy's role in *moral* matters, endorsing a particular theory of mind is unnecessary. All that is needed is to accept the idea that *empathy involves feeling another's congruent emotion in virtue of perceiving the other's mental and emotional state*. I take it that there is sufficient evidence for the plausibility of this definition of empathy, for it has been defended by a number of leading psychologists and philosophers of mind.⁶¹

The functional account of empathy has four advantages. First, it highlights the fact that the *causes* of empathy and the *effects* of empathy are distinct. Empathy's effects are not necessarily pro-social or altruistic, but can be cognitive and/or affective; and its processes and outcomes can be epistemic (having to do with our beliefs) and/or behavioral (having to

do with our actions). Second, the functional account of empathy can accommodate the three main types of simulative empathy mentioned previously: *self-focused empathy*, *other-focused empathy*, and *dual-perspective empathy*. Since the functional account depicts the way that empathy involves two distinct perspectives, it can accommodate the ways those perspectives interact. Third, the functional definition of empathy allows for different types: non-cognitive, simple cognitive, and advanced cognition.

Fourth, the functional account has the resources for examining empathy's epistemological function, or role in acquiring justified beliefs about others' mental and emotional states.⁶² Since empathy is a response to another's feelings, beliefs, and attitudes in virtue of acquiring a similar emotion, it is possible to learn more information about others from such an experience, primarily when empathy includes cognitive processes. These processes are present when: (a) the empathic experience has some cognitive content in that it involves higher-order cognitions, or (b) when the empathy does not involve cognitive mediation at the time it is experienced, it has the resources for being cognitively reflected on in that the empathic transmission of emotion can be assessed using higher-order cognition. In these cases, empathy has the requisite cognitive content needed to impact one's beliefs.⁶³

Let me say clearly that my reason for endorsing the functional account of empathy is that it can serve as a broad framework for how to define empathy in philosophical studies. Ideally, philosophical definitions of empathy will fit the functional model of empathy in that they will include antecedents, processes, an emotional match, and various outcomes. I am *not* arguing that the functional account of empathy should replace the eight distinctions of empathy that I discussed in the previous chapter. Rather, my main point has been to say that the kinds of empathy that I will discuss as playing a role in ethics and morality will fit the functional model.

While some philosophers might reject the argument that philosophical discussions of empathy should include some reference to feeling another's emotion, it is crucial that empathy be understood as including emotion *matching* because empathy involves understanding and appreciating another's feeling and not just imagining it. This is what distinguishes empathy from mindreading or simulation. (Of course, in cases where an individual may understand and appreciate another's emotion, but only feel the other's emotion to a small degree, there may be a difference *in degree* between imaginative appreciation and empathy.) My point is that everyday usage of the term empathy implies that it

includes having some degree of similar affective states and most other theorists recognize this. Philosophers should, too.

2.5 Conclusion

We now have in hand a working definition of empathy understood as *feeling a congruent emotion with another person, in virtue of perceiving her emotion with some mental process such as imitation, simulation, projection, or imagination*. Since empathy is a response to others, as opposed to ignoring them, it is indeed an expression of our social nature and what makes it useful to ethics. Let me conclude by considering an objection to the use of empathy in ethics, namely, that it can be an unjustified assertion of knowledge of another's inner life.

Lorraine Code argues that "responsible empathetic knowing can never be assumed," otherwise it is "declared empathy" where, instead of seeking to understand the other's emotions, one *tells* the other how she feels.⁶⁴ I agree with Code that *certain* kinds of empathy, especially self-focused empathy, can be problematic in that they involve projecting one's own beliefs about others onto them, and these beliefs can be mistaken. The worry is that someone might merely *project* her own beliefs and thoughts onto others instead of correctly understanding the other's emotion. Based on what I have said here, other-focused empathy and dual-perspective empathy will be more reliable forms of empathy because they seek to be grounded in true beliefs about others. By imaginatively participating in another's life in a way that one resonates with her emotions, she becomes aware of another's situation, emotions, beliefs, and desires in a way that is responsible rather than self-focused.

Our capacity to share the feelings of others is a way of coming to share another's evaluation of the world, and, as I will show in the following chapter, enables us to "see" or appreciate previously unrecognized evaluative features of our social circumstances. I turn now to investigating the epistemological dimensions of empathy, so as to learn how it can contribute to moral deliberation and moral judgment.