#### Empathy Skills and Habits

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# 1. Introduction

Empathy is widely praised by public figures, psychologists, and philosophers. These empathy boosters point out the many positive effects of empathy. Individuals who are more empathetic tend to be socially and psychologically better off than people who are less empathetic. Moreover, empathy seems to be a promising tool to cut through partisanship and division insofar as empathy allows us to understand others’ perspectives and lived experiences. According to some scholars, empathy is central to our species becoming less violent, more cooperative, and may be an essential ingredient in our humanity. Despite the praise, it is easy to find examples of empathy’s shortcomings. Critics of empathy argue that it is fragile, easily manipulated, entrenches an us vs. them mentality, and, in reality, makes conflict worse.

These observations raise the following question. Can we improve empathy? That is, can we get better at employing empathy in contexts where it would be beneficial while avoiding the dark sides of empathy? Answering this question requires that we understand the cognitive components that underlie empathy, the motivations that drive us to empathize in some cases and not in others, and the aims of empathy. I will argue that we can in fact improve empathy and that doing so requires that we understand which elements of empathy are skill-based and which elements are habitual. Reflection on improving empathy invites the comparison to Aristotelian virtues. In the final part of this paper, I will examine whether empathy is a virtue.

# 2. What is so great about empathy?

Broadly speaking, empathy is understanding and sharing the feelings of others. More precisely, on the view I shall adopt, empathy has two necessary and jointly sufficient components: perspective taking and affect sharing, sometimes called cognitive empathy and affective empathy (Coplan 2004; Goldie 2000). To empathize is to (try to) imaginatively adopt a target’s mental states and, as a result, come to share the target’s affect. The empathizer’s mental state attributions may not be complete or completely accurate, and her affect may be diminished or slightly different from the target’s affective experience. Perfect correspondence is not required. As long as the perspective taken and affect experienced mostly correspond to the target’s perspective and affect, this will count as successful empathy.

Empathy, on this view, is distinct from sympathy or compassion, which do not involve perspective taking or affect sharing (Eisenberg and Eggum 2009). Empathy may generate these emotional responses, but sympathy and compassion are cognitively different from empathy. Empathy is also distinct from emotional contagion and personal distress (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987). Emotional contagion involves affect sharing without perspective taking, and personal distress is a self-oriented response to another’s negative affective response. Each of these capacities differs from empathy. In this paper, I shall focus specifically on empathy.

Many public figures and scholars hold the capacity for empathy in high regard. The praise of empathy highlights the many benefits of empathy for the empathizers, the targets of empathy, and society. For decades, psychologists have documented the many positive effects of empathy. In developmental psychology, it is well established that as children develop the capacity to understand and share others’ feelings, they begin to display more pro-social behaviour, such as expressing caring responses to distressed individuals and spontaneously helping others in need (Eisenberg 2000). Moreover, the two components of empathy, perspective taking and affect sharing, seem to be tightly connected with the development of morality in children (Hoffman 2001). For adults, empathic behaviour is associated with increased emotional wellbeing, greater social connectedness, better health, cooperation, helping behaviour, and altruism (Batson 2011; Eisenberg 2000; Eisenberg and Fabes 1991). In sum, people who are more empathetic are better off personally and engage in more pro-social behaviours than people who are less empathetic.

Empathic behaviour is negatively correlated with narcissistic behaviour (Watson et al. 1984, Burgmer, Weiss, and Ohmann 2021). That is, individuals who are more empathetic are less narcissistic, and vice versa. Narcissism involves a grandiose feeling of self-worth, exaggerated sense of entitlement and superiority, tendency to be impulsive and aggressive, and a willingness to manipulate and exploit others to achieve one’s own personal goals. Whereas empathy seems to be good for the empathizers *and* the targets of empathy, narcissistic behaviour is associated with a few positive effects for the narcissist but many negative interpersonal effects. This negative correlation between empathic behaviour and narcissistic behaviour scales up to the societal level. Societies that have populations with higher levels of empathy have correspondingly lower levels of narcissism, and vice versa (Konrath, O'Brien, and Hsing 2011).[[1]](#endnote-1) Thus, if empathy and narcissism are polar opposite behavioural patterns, it is much better overall to have more empathetic individuals in a group.

The empirical findings above point to many positive effects of empathy. Some scholars take these findings to indicate an even more central role for empathy in human society. Steven Pinker (2012) notes that violence has declined over the last millennia, and he argues that the explanation for this decline of violence is that our circles of empathy have expanded far beyond our immediate kin. The philosopher Michael Slote (2007) argues that empathy is at the centre of our ethical obligations to others. His ethics of care grounds moral development, individual moral obligations, and political rights in empathy. Relatedly, Heidi Maibom (2022) argues that empathy is key to making us less biased creatures by allowing us to consider and balance diverse perspectives and lived experiences. Martha Nussbaum (2016) argues that empathy is an essential element of our humanity. On her view, literature exercises our moral imagination and helps us to empathize with those who differ from us.

In addition to these academic arguments, many public figures such as Barack Obama, Hannah Arendt (1964), Mohandas K. Gandhi (2012) regard empathy as crucial to a functioning society. These public figures consider empathy to be the most powerful tool for cutting through partisanship and division and speculate that without empathy societies would collapse. In sum, there is a great deal of support for the idea that empathy is developmentally, personally, morally, and socially important.

Although empathy is widely praised by scholars and public figures, not everyone is an empathy booster. Critics of empathy argue that empathy will not save us from interpersonal and intergroup conflict. In fact, they argue, empathy makes such conflicts worse (Bloom 2017; Prinz 2011). These critics maintain that empathy can be exhausting and lead to burnout, numbness to suffering, or worse (Corcoran 1989; West et al. 2006). They argue that we tend to empathize strongly with our in-group and resist empathizing with out-groups, and even enjoy the suffering of outgroups in competitive or threatening contexts (Cikara, Bruneau, and Saxe 2011; Bruneau, Cikara, and Saxe 2017). Thus, the prescription for more empathy is often counterproductive in cases of conflict. Empathy, they argue, can further entrench conflict and force us into an us vs. them mentality (Breithaupt 2019). Finally, even when we try to empathize with others who are dissimilar from us or in unfamiliar contexts, sometimes we are unable to accurately empathize with their experiences (Tullmann 2020), causing further misunderstandings and frustration.[[2]](#endnote-2) Critics of empathy argue that we should give up on empathy and employ other tools in pursuit of social harmony, e.g., rational compassion (Bloom 2017) or moral emotions like fear, anger, and shame (Prinz 2011).[[3]](#endnote-3)

Empathy has many positive, prosocial outcomes for the empathizers and the targets of empathy, but empathy can be challenging and used in a way that makes conflict worse. A question naturally arises here: can we improve empathy? If we could improve how we empathize, perhaps we could reap the pro-social benefits without making interpersonal and intergroup conflict worse. In the next section, I will consider this possibility.

# 3. Improving Empathy

Is it possible to improve how we empathize, and if so, how? The answer to this question depends on how you conceive of the capacity for empathy (Cuff et al. 2016). One critical question concerns whether we conceive of empathy as a trait or a state. A trait is a property of an individual; it is an individual’s stable disposition to think or act in a certain way. In contrast, a state is a property of an individual in a situation. A state reflects much more contextual variance. Whether we characterize a given cognitive phenomenon as a trait or state depends on many factors, including our explanatory interests (Steyer et al. 2015). If one is interested in explaining the reliable individual factors that produce a certain disposition, a trait characterization would be appropriate. However, if one is interested in examining the variability of thoughts and behaviour, a state characterization is more apt. On both a trait and state construal, genetic and environmental factors are part of the causal story. The difference between the two construals is how much effect situational factors have on the phenomena in question.

With that prelude in place, we can consider the significance of situational factors on our empathic behaviour and ask whether empathy is more like a stable disposition or more like a transient state. If we conceive of empathy as a trait, i.e., a stable disposition determined by genetic and environmental factors beyond our control, then there is little one could do to improve it. On this conception, empathy is a bit like introversion or extraversion. An introverted individual could, perhaps, engage in practices that are more energetic and sociable, but there is little she can do to alter the dispositions to be reserved and find extended social interaction tiring. The situations she is in have little effect on her disposition to be introverted. If empathy is like that, the capacity is mostly determined by genetic and environmental factors beyond our control, and the situations we are in have little effect on our willingness or ability to empathize. If this view of empathy is correct, we can employ strategies to limit the degradation of empathy, but there is not much we can do to positively improve empathy.[[4]](#endnote-4)

However, we may conceive of empathy as less trait-like and more state-like. On this view, empathy is an attribute of a person in a situation, and thus the activation of empathy is influenced by various situational factors. Empathy would be like moods on this view. Genetic and developmental factors certainly play a role in determining the range of an individual’s moods, however environmental factors play a predominate role. And if one wants to change one’s mood, there are numerous changes one can make to positively improve one’s mood. If empathy is more like this, then prospects for improving empathy are quite promising.

So, is empathy more like a trait or a state? Although clearly there are genetic and developmental factors that influence empathy and stable differences amongst individuals in the inclination for empathy (Davis 1983), there is good reason to think that empathy is an attribute of a person in a situation, i.e., more state-like than trait-like. Jamil Zaki and colleagues have amassed an enormous amount of data – from studies in developmental psychology, evolutionary science, social psychology, and social neuroscience – indicating that empathy has both automatic and context-dependent characteristics that dynamically interact. Zaki and colleagues persuasively argue that the best way of making sense of these characteristics of empathy is by conceiving of empathy as a motivated capacity (Weisz and Zaki 2018; Zaki 2014). On this view, empathizing is deeply influenced by our own personal cares, goals, and motivations, which drive us avoid empathizing in some contexts and seek out opportunities to empathize in other contexts. Zaki, et al. identify three universal approach motivations and three universal avoidance motivations for empathizing. When empathizing with others will lead us to experience positive affect, strengthen affiliation with others, and display socially desirable traits, we are more inclined to empathize. In circumstances where empathizing will lead us to experience suffering, material costs, or interference with competition, we tend to avoid empathizing. These patterns arise in behavioural, psychological, and neurological data. We carry out these avoidance and approach motivations through regulatory strategies like situation selection (e.g., choosing where you walk, who you are around, which stories you read), attentional modulation (e.g., shifting what you look at, tuning in or out of social interaction), and appraisal (e.g., judging that an experience is or is not authentic, is or is not deserved, etc.).

If these observations about how we empathize and the theoretical framework for explaining these observations are at least somewhat on target, then conceiving of empathy as mostly trait-like is wrongheaded. Our personal goals, motivations, and cares exhibit a great deal of influence on how, when, and with whom we empathize. Unlike our disposition to be introverted or extraverted, exercising our capacity for empathy seems to be a matter of choice that is highly dependent on situational factors. Furthermore, the fact that empathy is generally regarded as praiseworthy is better explained by views that regard the exercise of empathy as at least somewhat under voluntary control. Now, this is not the place for a full analysis and defence of motivated empathy. Instead, what I will do here is take these initial considerations to be prima facie evidence for the motivated empathy framework. The view does not presuppose any controversial philosophical ideas about empathy that are in dispute here, so adopting the framework should not be problematic for my argument. Instead, I shall assume that the motivated empathy view is more or less correct and ask whether and how we can improve our capacity for empathy.

If empathy is indeed a motivated state, how can we improve it? Let’s consider a more familiar task. Suppose we have set a New Year’s resolution to improve our physical fitness. In our quest to improve our fitness, there are numerous sorts of changes we could make. We could start doing yoga to improve our posture. Perhaps we learn proper form for weightlifting to avoid injury. Or we might aim to optimize our gait and foot strike for running or stroke technique in swimming. These interventions aim at improving various skills that are important for achieving better fitness. These skills help to prevent us from getting injured and allow us to reap more of the benefits from our exercise. The acquisition of skills is initially guided by our goals, and through repeated practice we can come to non-consciously exercise spontaneous top-down control over our skilled actions (Fridland 2014; Bermúdez 2017). Skills are improved through controlled practice, clear and rapid feedback, and refined practice. Thus, to improve our weightlifting form, obviously, we must lift weights. But we also need feedback on our form from, say, a trainer, who can tell us in real time what changes to make. And then we need to continue to practice that form and continue to get feedback until our skills plateau.

In aiming to improve our physical fitness, we can and should engage in this sort of process. Clearly, though, focusing only on improving such skills is not sufficient for improving our fitness. We must also develop good exercise habits, e.g., getting to the gym more often, running before work, or regularly meeting a friend to exercise. Habits, like skills, often are initially set by our goals (Douskos 2019). Based on our goals, we repeatedly execute a certain a behaviour in a certain context, and it becomes routinized so that the behaviour is executed spontaneously and without conscious awareness. Once a habit is established, it may persist despite no longer satisfying the goals that initially guided the behaviour. Indeed, a habit may be in conflict with many of an agent’s goals. Improving our habits typically involves disrupting old habits and establishing new habits. To disrupt bad habits, we raise conscious awareness of the undesired activity (Wood and Rünger 2016). Perhaps we have a friend or an app that alerts us when we miss a workout. Some people might even set up a system of negative consequences for missing workouts. To establish better habits, we make the exercise of the desired activity unconscious and spontaneous. We do this by routinizing the activity – working out at the same time every day, sleeping in our gym clothes to reduce the number of steps it takes to get to the gym, structuring our days so that other events do not conflict with our workout time, or temptation bundling, i.e., combining a task one dislikes with something one really enjoys and looks forward to.

If our goal is to improve our physical fitness, clearly, we need to work on improving our skills and our habits. The skills keep us from getting injured and ensure that we are getting the most out of our efforts, and the habits ensure that we make progress on various measurable health outcomes, such as strength and cardiovascular fitness. How we improve our skills is different from how we improve our habits (Amaya 2021, Douskos 2019), but both sorts of improvements are important. Indeed, in some cases, you must establish better habits to make meaningful progress on skill improvement. This case may be obvious to many readers because many people have deliberated on how to improve their physical fitness.

The lesson applies in other domains, as well. Think about a graduate student aspiring to be a professional academic philosopher. Clearly, she must learn many specialized skills, such as how to extract an argument from a long text, how to identify assumptions implicit in an argument, how to succinctly synthesize a wide area of research, and how to make a paper publishable in professional journals. Learning these skills requires practice and timely, clear feedback on her work. However, these skills on their own are not sufficient because the graduate student also needs to learn good scholarly habits. She needs to learn habits that facilitate active critical reading, regular and frequent writing, and effective notetaking. Establishing these good scholarly habits may require disrupting old habits that are not conducive to the goal of becoming an academic philosopher and routinizing the desired behaviours. To do this, she must set habits in roughly the same way as we set exercise habits: carving out time each day to read/write, having a writing/accountability partner, and setting up a system for taking and retaining notes. And just like with the physical fitness case, some scholarly skills are difficult to acquire without good scholarly habits. Thus, to improve as an academic philosopher, she must improve both her skills and habits, often in tandem.

With these lessons in hand, now we can turn to the main question: can we improve empathy, and if so, how? Note that improving empathy does not mean increasing empathy. For decades, psychologists have studied the variables that increase empathy. They have found that reading fiction (Bal and Veltkamp 2013), acting in theatre (Lewandowska and Węziak-Białowolska 2020), having siblings (Hoffman 2001; Lam, Solmeyer, and McHale 2012), and caring for pets (Daly and Morton 2009) are all behaviours that increase individuals’ empathy. That is, these activities make people more empathetic in more circumstances. However, improving empathy is not the same as increasing empathy. Sometimes empathy is easily exhausted in the absence of other psychological changes. Intervening simply to increase empathy without addressing the other psychological impediments does not improve empathy. In fact, it might make us less likely to empathize in the longer term. Moreover, the way we typically use empathy is counterproductive in cases of conflict because we tend to empathize exclusively with our side, which further entrenches the division. Thus, we need to figure out whether and how we can improve empathy, not increase it. I will argue that to improve empathy, we must focus on improving both our empathic skills and our empathic habits.[[5]](#endnote-5) In particular, we ought to aim to improve our perspective taking abilities (skill), our inclination to think about others’ perspectives and emotions (habit), and grasping out-group perspectives and emotions (both skill and habit). In the next section, I will review empirical evidence for improving empathy in these ways.

# 4. Empirical Evidence for Improving Empathy

Emerging empirical studies suggest that we can improve empathy by shifting the motivations that drive us to pursue or avoid empathizing (Zaki and Cikara 2015). For example, one hurdle to using empathy effectively in intergroup conflict is that we refrain from empathizing with individuals from the out-group or even take pleasure in their suffering. One promising strategy for extending empathy to out-group members is to emphasize an out-group member’s shared values and goals (Levine et al. 2005).

Here is an example to illustrate. Parents who choose to vaccinate their children and parents who refuse vaccinations for their children can seem very different to each other. They each regard their own choices as the right and best choices for protecting their children from unnecessary suffering, and they regard the other’s choices as uninformed, risky, and morally wrong. Cutting through misinformation about vaccines and health is extremely difficult, especially in the context of online anti-vax echo chambers. However, getting people to understand the perspective, goals, and emotions of someone from the other side is achievable. Consider Sandy, who vaccinates her children, and Linda who does not. The first step is to get Sandy and Linda to set aside misconceptions about each other. Sandy might be surprised to learn that most anti-vax parents are not uneducated. In fact, on average they have higher levels of education than the general public (Biasio 2017). Then you get them to humanize someone from the other side. You show Sandy that Linda is a devoted, loving, and protective parent. She insists on her children wearing bicycle helmets, worries about what social media will do to their self-esteem, hopes her children will be kind to the shy kids at school, celebrates their straight-A report cards, and sits quietly with them as they mourn their first friendship breakup. Linda has many of the same values, goals, and behaviours as Sandy. Recognizing this common ground makes it possible for them to imagine experiencing the other’s worry, fear, and potential guilt of trying to protect their children but harming them instead. Getting Sandy and Linda to imagine the worry and fear the other feels helps them to humanize each other, to see that both parents are motivated by love for their own children and are trying to raise their children in a complicated and sometimes scary world in the best way they know how.[[6]](#endnote-6)

In emphasizing the shared goals and values, the intervention shifts the group boundaries. Sandy and Linda are not all that different from each other. Linda has many false beliefs about vaccines, of course, but Sandy and Linda can see that they are both experience the same parenting fears. Shifting the group boundaries does a couple useful things. In terms of motivations, it mitigates the competition motivation that drives us to avoid empathy with the other person, and it enhances the affiliation motivation that drives us to empathize. Additionally, it opens the door for more productive dialogue and more thoughtful interventions. When Sandy and Linda feel understood by each other and empathize (at least to some extent) with the other’s experiences, they are more willing to acknowledge their own doubts and discuss their fundamental concerns. Of course, a full intervention will involve extracting Linda from the echo chamber of misinformation about vaccines. But we cannot even start that process without her first recognizing the possibility that someone who sees things differently is worth taking seriously, and one proven effective way to shift that perspective is through empathy. Interventions that teach individuals how to identify meaningful shared goals and values with an out-group member improve perspective taking abilities, and with enough repetition, make empathy with an out-group much less effortful than it otherwise is.

A related strategy for extending empathy to an out-group member in the context of conflict is to have members of both groups collaboratively work together toward a shared goal. Hannah Read (2021) describes real-life examples of “antagonistic moral opponents” who come to empathize with each other by finding meaningful common ground in collaborative tasks. Through these collaborative tasks, antagonistic moral opponents form a new in-group together. Read describes the well-known collaboration between Ann Atwater, a Black civil rights leader in Durham, NC, and C.P. Ellis, head of the KKK in Durham. In 1971, Atwater and Ellis were tasked with co-chairing 10 days of talks on desegregating Durham public schools. They both had the sincere goal of improving Durham public schools for their own children, and it turned out that their experiences and feelings as parents had some important similarities despite how differently situated they were in life. Sharing in each other’s affective experience created a sense of trust between the Ellis and Atwater that was not possible before. The interaction was life-changing for both, but especially for Ellis who destroyed his KKK card on the last night of the talks. The two became lifelong friends who shared a deep empathy for each other.

The Ellis/Atwater case is dramatic and famous because it seems so unusual. However, the theoretical foundation for this kind of intervention is well established. It dates back to the 1950s with the publication of Gordon Allport’s (1954) *The Nature of Prejudice*. Allport argued that to decrease prejudice, you must bring antagonistic groups together and give them equal status in the intervention, make the interaction personal, focus on their shared personal goals, and engineer institutions around them to support cooperation. Decades of subsequent research supports the basic idea that we can come to empathize with antagonistic moral opponents through such personalized, collaborative projects (Pettigrew and Tropp 2005). This kind of intervention works by interrupting the habitual response to empathize with one’s in-group and creating space for opponents to create a meaningful new in-group, thereby diminishing the competition motivation that drives us to avoid empathy with the other person and enhancing the affiliation motivation that drives us to empathize.

For some antagonistic moral opponents, creating the space for finding common ground is not sufficient. This is especially true for antagonistic moral opponents who have status or power differentials. In these kinds of cases, identifying and working toward shared goals does not overcome the differences in perspective that are baked into dominant/subordinate social relations. There is an undeniable asymmetry that shapes the perspectives of each party and giving the individuals equal status in the intervention ignores the lived experiences outside the intervention that make their perspectives so different. Especially for the subordinate social group, this asymmetry generates a disposition to distrust the dominant social group. However, there are promising interventions even for these challenging relations. Emile Bruneau and Rebecca Saxe (2012) recruited individuals from dominant and subordinate groups to participate in online face-to-face exchanges where members of a historically disempowered/subordinate group engage in perspective giving to an individual from an empowered/dominant group. In one study, Palestinian participants described the personal difficulties of living in a dangerous occupied territory, and Israeli participants were instructed to accurately summarize their counterpart’s statement. In another study, Mexican immigrants engaged in perspective giving and White Americans living in Arizona engaged in perspective taking. In both studies, the intervention resulted in significant positive attitude change for both the subordinate and dominant groups and significantly more empathy for the other side. Allowing the subordinate to express her experiences and feelings and be understood by the dominant defuses the competition element for both participants and leads to greater empathy for the subordinate and dominant. This kind of intervention helps members of dominant social groups inhibit their habitual response to talk rather than listen. Practicing summarizing the perspective they have heard develops better perspective taking abilities and it communicates to the other person that they are empathizing, which is important for mitigating conflict (Yeomans et al. 2020).

The interventions to improve empathy I have discussed so far focus on dyadic interactions. However, sometimes the impediment to empathy is personal rather than interpersonal. Individuals who are excessively self-focused, depressed, have low self-esteem, or poor emotional regulation skills find it challenging to empathize with others, especially for negative emotions. For these kinds of cases, intervening simply to increase empathy will be ineffective or even counterproductive. Interventions to improve empathy for these cases must focus on the personal psychological obstacles to empathy. For instance, higher levels of self-esteem are correlated with better perspective taking and higher levels of empathy (Galinsky and Ku 2004). This suggests a possible intervention that focuses first on raising participants’ self-esteem. Doing this may make others’ alternative perspectives seem less threatening in terms of competition and values. Coaching individuals to improve emotional regulation skills – that is, to get better at monitoring, evaluating, and modifying their emotional reactions – also improves their capacity to empathize with others (Zaki 2014, 1613-1614). Empathy is not an exhausting psychological feat when you have good emotional regulation skills because empathizing with negative emotions is not as likely to generate personal distress (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987; Eisenberg et al. 1994). Finally, we can improve empathy by targeting norms from one’s in-group (Grant and Hofmann 2011; Grant 2008) or aspects of one’s identity (Klein and Hodges 2001) that support empathy. For example, emphasizing one’s religious identity or their goals and ideals as, say, a teacher encourages people to reframe their role in the interaction and in doing so nudges them to extend empathy further. In various ways, these personal interventions make empathy less risky and more conducive to achieving one’s goals and fostering affiliation. These personal interventions target both our mental habits (negative thinking, self-focused narratives, reflection on personal ideals and values) and skills (emotional regulation).

This section reviews some of the empirical data on how we can improve empathy. In particular, these studies show how we can improve our perspective taking and affect sharing skills, make empathy with out-groups easier, make empathy with in-groups less habitual in cases of conflict, and make empathy generally less threatening and burdensome. When we make these changes, and importantly when the target of our empathy sees our efforts to understand and empathize better, the effects can be powerful. These changes make space to build a narrow slice of trust between individuals who would otherwise regard each other with apathy, disdain, or distrust. These interventions indicate that we can overcome some of the critiques of empathy, such as that it leads to burnout, exacerbates conflict, and can lead to frustration and misunderstanding when our empathic efforts go awry. Improved empathy involves skilfully imagining the perspective of others, even different and distant others, knowing when empathy is called for, and knowing who the right target of empathy is in cases of conflict. This kind of improved empathy can make communication and collaboration on shared projects easier (Madva 2020, 244). It can resolve conflict due to misunderstanding and allow us to have deeper discussions, deliberations and more enlightenment about the experiences and needs of other people (Hannon 2020, 605).

# 5. Is Empathy a Virtue?

Above I sketched a view of empathy according to which, with practice and thoughtful structuring of our social environments, we can improve both our empathic skills and habits. That is, we can learn to empathize in a way that does not deplete us emotionally and psychologically, empathize with opponents in cases of conflict when that is appropriate, and more accurately empathize with others who differ from us. If this view is on target, it seems that we can improve empathy to reap many of the well-established benefits of empathy without incurring the negative effects that can follow from how empathy is typically used in challenging situations. Doing this requires that we avoid empathizing too much (vicariousness) or too little (callousness), knowing which situations call for empathy, and knowing the appropriate targets of empathy.

An interesting possibility arises out of these reflections on improving empathy. Is empathy a virtue? That is, is improved empathy, or proper empathy as we may call it, a virtue? Virtues come in two varieties: intellectual and moral. Intellectual virtues constitutively aim at epistemic goods, such as truth, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, and moral virtues aim at living a flourishing life. Heather Battaly (2011) considers the possibility that empathy is an intellectual virtue. She argues that empathy is either a skill or a capacity, but either way it cannot be a virtue. If empathy is a skill, it is exercised voluntarily (like a virtue) but it can be used for the wrong reasons (unlike a virtue).[[7]](#endnote-7) For example, one could deliberately make mistakes when empathizing and thereby not aim at understanding, truth, etc. If empathy is a capacity, then it is activated involuntarily (unlike a virtue) and is therefore not praiseworthy.

Though this is a provocative argument, we have several reasons to doubt its soundness. First, I think we should reject the skill/capacity dilemma. I have argued here that empathy is neither purely a skill nor purely a capacity. Empathy involves both skills and habits. Moreover, empathy is more fruitfully analyzed as a transient state than a stable trait or involuntary capacity. Second, I find the idea that we deliberately make mistakes in empathizing puzzling. The example Battaly offers as evidence of this possibility is of two adult sisters who know each other quite well, and one of them deliberatively decides to engage in substandard imagining of her sister’s emotions knowing that it will result in false beliefs about her emotions. To put it simply, I do not think this ever happens. Perhaps a lot hangs on what counts as deliberatively. But on any reasonable understanding of that word, I do not think that people try to make mistakes in empathizing. Why even bother empathizing under those circumstances? But even if they did, it would not count as empathy. As I noted above, though there need not be a perfect match between the subject and target, empathy requires some degree of correspondence and matching between the subject and the target. And in this case of deliberate error, there is wide gap between the subject and target. The mental exercise in this example is simply imagination, not empathy. Thus, I do not regard this as a compelling argument against empathy as an intellectual virtue.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Rejecting a negative argument is not the same as offering a positive argument, though. Is there positive reason to think that empathy is an intellectual or moral virtue? Many of the elements of virtue are in place for empathy. There is a clear mean between excessive and deficient empathy. Hitting the mean requires wisdom and practical rationality to determine the appropriate targets of empathy and situations in which empathy is called for. The open question concerns the aim of empathy. If empathy is an intellectual virtue, it ought to aim at understanding, truth, knowledge, and the like. If empathy is a moral virtue, it ought to aim at living a good or flourishing life.

On the conception of empathy I have adopted here, empathy – even improved empathy – need not aim at living a flourishing life. There are two reasons for this. First, I distinguish empathy from caring, sympathy, and compassion. On my view, empathy has two individually necessary and jointly sufficient elements: perspective taking and affect sharing. (And there are some success conditions on these elements.) Moral emotions such as caring or compassion may be a product of empathy, but they need not be. Thus, empathy does not have these moral emotions as a constitutive part or even necessary consequence. As a result, there is not a tight connection between empathy and aiming at the good or flourishing. Second, and relatedly, on the motivated view of empathy I adopt, there are numerous reasons we pursue and avoid empathy, many of which do not concern living a good and flourishing life. The motivations that drive us to pursue or avoid empathy concern social affiliation and social desirability, experiencing positive or negative affect, and avoiding negative effects on competition and material or financial possessions. Now, I argue that we can improve our empathy habits and skills, but we may do this with various goals in mind. For example, we may want to empathize to collaborate better with a hostile colleague and, as a result, get a raise or promotion. Thus, it seems safe to say that on the account of empathy I adopt that empathy does not count as a moral virtue.[[9]](#endnote-9)

I think there is a good case for empathy being an intellectual virtue, though. Empathy always aims at understanding a target’s thoughts and feelings. We may have various motivations for wanting such understanding. Perhaps we want satisfy curiosity about what it’s like to be someone very different from ourselves, or to develop a stronger relationship with them, gain an upper hand in competitive negotiations, or seem like a good person. Whatever the motivation, one of the aims of empathy always is truth, knowledge, insight, or understanding. Thus, I think we can safely conclude that empathy is an intellectual virtue.

# 6. Conclusion

Reflection on the positive prosocial effects of empathy and negative aspects of empathy in the wild invites the question at the heart of this paper: can we improve empathy? That is, can we retain the social connectedness, cooperation, and altruism while avoiding the us vs. them mentality and empathic burnout? I argue that we can. Considering how we can improve empathy raises many questions about empathy. These include whether we should think of empathy as more trait-like or state-like, what are the skills and habits that underlie improved empathy, and whether empathy is a virtue. I have argued that empathy is most fruitfully conceived of as a state of a person in a situation rather than relatively immutable personality trait. I have argued that we can improve empathy by improving our perspective taking and affect sharing skills, our habitual inclination to think about others’ perspectives, and our ability and inclination to grasp out-group perspectives and emotions. Doing so creates space for trust in the context of interpersonal and intergroup conflict. With this picture in hand, I argued that empathy likely is an intellectual virtue but not a moral virtue.

The analysis of empathy and interventions discussed here focus on individuals’ exercise of empathy. I do not intend this to imply that we can dismantle interpersonal and intergroup conflict simply through individual efforts. Tackling intergroup conflict especially requires group-level, structural, and institutional interventions. What this reflection on individual interventions on empathy reveals is which kinds of large-scale interventions are likely to help and which are not. For instance, we can conclude from the findings canvassed above that implementing mandatory empathy trainings or informational sessions is likely to be a waste of time and money for organizations because making them mandatory is not a good way to motivate people to be more empathetic.

In contrast, consider group-level interventions that selectively sort people into experientially diverse cohorts. These diverse cohorts may be small groups of incoming college students who take all their classes together, or a team working on collaborative projects, or mentoring groups. In each of these cases, the individuals are already going to be part of the organization, so the interventions do not require subjects to commit extra time and effort to tasks above and beyond those that are expected of the role. Instead, the interventions capitalize on the fact that individuals are already going to be in small to medium sized groups, and they use this to thoughtfully sort the individuals with an eye toward creating meaningful common ground and collaboration on shared goals. The research on individual interventions indicates that these group-level interventions are likely to be much more successful in encouraging empathy with individuals from different backgrounds.

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1. Worryingly, across many diverse populations social scientists are finding a decline in empathic behaviour and an increase in narcissistic behaviour (Konrath, O'Brien, and Hsing 2011, Neumann et al. 2011, Nunes et al. 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I am focused on the critiques of empathy related to conflict. There are other critiques of empathy, as well. For example, Bloom and Prinz argue that empathy is too focused on individuals, which makes it a poor tool for addressing moral problems like climate change or advocating for sensible social policies. A proponent of empathy, like me, would likely reply that empathy is not the right tool for *every* problem. We should be pluralists about which tools are a good fit for the various social, moral, and political problems we have. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Some of these critiques of empathy are fair. Empathy can be exhausting, and it can exacerbate conflict. However, it is important to understand that many of these problems with empathy are problems for all proposed solutions to entrenched conflict. We tend to be more compassionate, care about, empathize with, and feel righteous anger on behalf of our own side in a conflict. This is the tribal nature of human groups. Thus, while I will go on to suggest some ways to mitigate the problems associated with empathy, these problems are in no way unique to empathy. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Interestingly, if empathy is more trait-like and there is not much we can do to change it, then the empathy critics’ suggestion that we avoid empathy turns out to be useless advice. On the trait view of empathy, that would be like telling introverted people to be more extraverted. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. I should clarify that empathy, even improved empathy, is not *always* an appropriate response to interpersonal and intergroup conflict. Empathizing with an antagonistic moral opponent may mask important differences between people. And when we attempt to empathize but fail to find common ground for that empathy, that could harden our perspectives and make conflict even more intractable. See Read (2021, forthcoming) for a nuanced analysis of some of the risks and rewards of empathizing with political opponents. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. I am describing an interactive version of this intervention where Sandy and Linda get to know each other. An interactive intervention, especially one where each side explicitly indicates their recognition of common ground, is likely to be especially effective (Yeomans et al. 2020). However, this intervention could be one-sided, as well. In that version, the subject gets to know about a target but not vice versa. On the one hand, this intervention may be less effective because it misses out on the possibility of mutual understanding, but on the other hand it scales up more easily. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Stichter (2021) for an argument that virtues are skills. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For a different sort of argument that empathy is an intellectual virtue, see Kotsonis and Dunne (2022). Kotsonis and Dunne have a different account of empathy than the one that I offer here. Their account of empathy primarily involves perspective taking, and there is not much discussion of affect sharing. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. On my view, there may be a virtue with respect to empathy. That is, there may be morally virtuous ways to exercise empathy. The moral virtue in that case would likely be something like caring. Other accounts do not so clearly distinguish empathy from caring and compassion and sympathy, and so empathy may count as a moral virtue on those accounts. For those accounts, the dialectic between critics and boosters of empathy gets complicated as the empathy boosters build in many of the elements that critics argue empathy in the wild seems to lack. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)