Empathy and Intersubjectivity

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Abstract: Empathy is intersubjective in that it connects us mentally with others. Some theorists believe that by blurring the distinction between self and other empathy can provide a radical form of altruism that grounds all of morality and even a kind of immortality. Others are more pessimistic and maintain that in distorting the distinction between self and other empathy precludes genuine altruism. Even if these positions exaggerate self-other merging, empathy's intersubjectivity can perhaps ground ordinary altruism and the rational recognition that one shouldn't arbitrarily privilege oneself over others.

Key words: compassion, altruism, egocentricity, immortality, impartiality

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1. Introduction

Watching my daughter erupt in joy while celebrating an accomplishment, I empathize and am similarly filled with joy at her success. In this way, empathy involves sharing similar mental states of another, whether positive or negative. Contrast this with sympathy or concern, which are likewise other-oriented but seem to predominantly involve only negative feelings and one's that needn't match those of the person with whom one sympathizes. For example, I may sympathize with a woman giving birth, even though I don't take myself to be feeling similar pain or anguish. There are many characterizations of *empathy*, but let's work with a rough conception of it as the ability to take on the perspective of another and as a result have similar feelings (and perhaps thoughts).

Intersubjectivity concerns how one is mentally connected with and distinguished from others. Undoubtedly, various conceptions of empathy are intimately related to this. Empathizing may even conceptually blur or eliminate the normal distinction one has between oneself and another. Seeing a parent wallow upon learning her child has been kidnapped, I might vividly imagine what it's like and feel anguish myself, as though I had my own child taken from me.

The idea that empathy and intersubjectivity are connected is an old one. Consider, for example, how Adam Smith characterizes the process he calls "sympathy" in 1759:

> By the imagination we place ourselves in [another's] 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. (Smith 1759/2004: 12)

How is this supposed fusion or merging best construed? Do we literally perceive ourselves as becoming one with the other? Or do we merely share in another's psychological states vicariously, experiencing a similar emotion or thought while representing the other as an entirely distinct person?

The answers have great philosophical import. Like technology, magical powers, and celebrity, empathy can be used for good or evil. We see the positive side when a stranger feels compassion for another in need and is motivated to help. The dark side of empathy is on display when a sadist uses it to figure out other people's concerns in order to harm and manipulate them. By itself empathy is arguably a morally neutral aspect of the mind (compare Prinz 2011). The relation between empathy and intersubjectivity, however, is one area in which the rubber hits the road, connecting directly to core issues in moral philosophy. In fact, when empathy meets intersubjectivity, we encounter some of the most exciting questions about our social lives, such as altruism, compassion, self-interest, immortality, and the connection between morality and rationality.

2. Altruism and Compassion

Taking self-other merging seriously can have different philosophical implications. Arguably the most common view about empathy and intersubjectivity is that empathizing with another has positive effects. Empathy is typically tied to compassion, for example, since it allows one to become vividly aware of another's situation, often another's plight (Nussbaum 2001: ch. 6.3). Our attention is not just focused on another's circumstances; empathy seems to at least typically come with an altruistic concern for others, at least when they are perceived to be suffering or in need.

This concern may arise because empathy leads to feeling another's pain or joy to some degree as if it were one's own. In other words, the kind of intersubjectivity so common in empathy involves a kind of self-other fusion that seems to motivate altruism. In a different context (defending a particular moral theory), Peter Railton alludes to this point vividly:

> When one studies relationships of deep commitment… it becomes artificial to impose a dichotomy between what is done for the self and what is done for the other. We cannot decompose such relationships into a vector of self-concern and a vector of other-concern, even though concern for the self and the other are both present. The other has come to figure in the self in a fundamental way…. If it is part of one's identity to be the parent of Jill or the husband of Linda, then the self has reference points beyond the ego, and that which affects these reference points may affect the self in an unmediated way. (1984: 166-7)

Similar thoughts arise in Schopenhauer's work on ethics (Nussbaum 2001: 327 n46). He writes that acting from compassion for another "requires that I am in some way *identified*

with him" such that the "entire *difference* between me and everyone else, which is the very basis of my egoism, is eliminated, to a certain extent at least... the difference between him and me is now no longer absolute" (1840/1999: 143-4). For these reasons, Schopenhauer believes compassion is the cement of the moral universe (see also Slote 2010).

Ample experimental evidence now confirms what common experience and reflection suggest. An *empathy-helping relationship* exists in humans whereby increased feelings of empathy for someone perceived to be in need makes one more likely to help that person. We might explain this relationship in terms of egoism or altruism, however. The *empathy-altruism hypothesis*, most prominently championed since the 1980s by social psychologist Dan Batson, states that empathy for those in need induces altruistic motivation to help (Batson 2011). That is, empathy generates a desire to help the other for her own sake—an ultimate, non-instrumental, or intrinsic motive. Of course, in such contexts, the relevant kind of empathy seems to involve or lead to compassion more specifically (Nussbaum 2001: 339). Batson's official term is "empathic concern," which is so inclusive that we might just be talking about sympathy here. But it's at least not implausible that empathy is doing the work.

Alternative egoistic explanations of the empathy-helping relationship have been proposed and tested experimentally. Several decades of evidence, however, has produced a powerful case for the empathy-altruism hypothesis (Batson 2011). For example, empathic concern continues to increase rates of helping even when empathizers can easily leave and avoid the other in need. So increased helping doesn't appear to be explained by an egoistic desire to reduce one's aversive reaction to the shared pain or anxiety. Similarly, helping rates remain higher among participants experiencing high empathy, even if they can receive a boost in mood prior to being presented with the opportunity to help or if they decline to help. These are just two of the various egoistic alternatives that have failed to match the consistent predictions of the empathy-altruism hypothesis.

3. From Radical Altruism to Immortality

So it seems we have powerful evidence that empathy typically leads to altruistic concern for others who are perceived to be in need. But how far can this go? Ordinarily we don't, say, feel another's pain literally, at least not to the same degree. My best friend's severe depression might make me feel down too, but I don't feel exactly the same, despite empathizing with him.

People with *mirror-touch synesthesia*, however, commonly report a kind of "hyper-empathy," in which they seem to experience the very same bodily sensations they perceive in others, even in the same locations. Fiona Torrance (2011), for example, reports feeling "as if my body was being beaten" when watching an unexpected torture scene in a film. Mirror-touch synesthesia thus comes with the burden of vividly experiencing the plight of others. However, the condition does have some positive effects on how one relates to others. Torrance's experience is reminiscent of the commonly posited link between empathy and compassion: "I'm hugely considerate of other people—after all, I know exactly what it feels like to be them."

Some neuroscientific evidence suggests that the hyper-empathy characteristic of mirror-touch synesthesia is connected to, not just empathy, but intersubjectivity specifically. One study, for example, compared grey matter in people with mirror-touch synesthesia to controls. In synesthetes' brains, there was less gray matter in an area that includes the right temporal parietal junction, which is associated with empathy, understanding the minds of others, and the distinction between self from other. The researchers note the possibility that the hyper-empathy patients experience may be "a consequence of faulty self-other monitoring" (Holle et al 2013: 1049).

Perhaps this represents something like the moral ideal. Some philosophers have argued that we ought to weaken the distinction between self and other. Derek Parfit (1984), for example, famously argues that we must develop impersonal principles of morality, reminiscent of utilitarianism, that do not rely so heavily on what he sees as a dubious separateness of persons (see also Schopenhauer 1840/1999). This picture of personhood and its moral implications is similar to the Buddhist notion of no-self (*anātman* or *anattā*), according to which our concept of an individual person—designated by "I"—is merely a useful fiction (Siderits 1997).

Drawing on these traditions, Mark Johnston (2010) perhaps takes such considerations to their limits. He urges us to embrace *agape* "or radical altruism" (49) based on a merging of self and other:

> The conception of goodness that I have in mind is one shared by the best forms of Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism. The good person is one who has undergone a kind of *death of the self*; as a result he or she lives a transformed life driven by *entering imaginatively into the lives of others, anticipating their needs and true interests, and responding to these as far as is reasonable*. The good person is thus a caretaker of humanity, in himself just as in others. By living this way, the good person encounters himself objectively, as just another, but one with respect to which he has a special trust." (14, emphasis added).

Moreover, Johnston strikingly argues that by being "really good" one can "survive death," without appeal to a supernatural afterlife. If we were to follow "the command of agape," we "would survive wherever and whenever interests are to be found," living on "in the onward rush of humankind" (296).

These are no doubt lofty claims, connecting personal identity to morality. But there is increasing empirical evidence suggesting that this isn't far from how we conceive of ourselves across time (Strohminger & Nichols 2014). While continuity of memory accounts for much of how we identify individuals, changes to one's moral opinions and behavior are apparently the greatest perceived threat to loss of one's identity. Such research suggests there may be something to the way Johnston connects moral character to individuality.

However, while this research helps to support one aspect of Johnston's theory, it puts pressure on the claim that extreme empathic altruism amounts to *survival*. Very few of us are so altruistic. If I were to care about others the way I care about myself (extending beyond my close friends and family), then I might have already failed to survive as the same person. Suppose, say, that through meditation a previously callous and crass grandmother is able to undergo a "death of the self" and become one with

everyone. She is suddenly kind and considerate, for she loves all just as much as she loves herself. If truly radical enough, this may make us think she is no longer really with us, similar to the effects of severe dementia.

4. Egoism and Nonaltruism

Thus far we have seen that many theorists connect the intersubjectivity in empathy to positive ideals, such as altruism, beneficence, impartial concern, and even immortality. This has long been the dominant view among philosophers, who have rarely taken seriously the theory that we are all ultimately self-interested (*psychological egoism*). However, given that experimental research connects helping behavior with empathy, self-other merging raises a worry about whether such concern is ultimately egoistic.

The problem is that empathy blurs the distinction between self and other such that one may in some sense be concerned with oneself. Consider the great love we have for family and friends and the personal sacrifices we make for them. The thought that this may in fact be egoistic goes back to at least Francis Hutcheson who considered (but ultimately rejected) the challenge: "Children are not only made of our bodies, but resemble us in body and mind; they are rational agents as we are, and we only love our own likeness in them" (1725: 162). Similar worries briefly arise in Nussbaum: "if it is to be for *another*, and not for oneself, that one feels compassion, one must be aware of both the bad lot of the sufferer and of the fact that it is, right now, not one's own" (2001: 327).

In fact, some psychologists have argued that it is not empathy that increases helping behavior but rather only self-other merging or "oneness," which sometimes co-occurs with empathic arousal. Robert Cialdini and colleagues, for example, write: "close attachments may elevate benevolence not because individuals feel more empathic concern for the close other but because they feel more at one with the other—that is, because they perceive more of themselves in the other" (1997: 483). This at least provides a "nonaltruistic" alternative to the empathy-altruism hypothesis, although on common accounts of the egoism-altruism distinction, it counts as egoistic (May 2011a).

In a series of experiments, Cialdini and his collaborators (1997) apparently provide some evidence in favor of their oneness hypothesis. They had participants imagine various people in need and report their level of empathy, personal distress, and oneness. Crucially, oneness was measured using two items. One asked participants to indicate "the extent to which they would use the term *we* to describe their relationship" with the person imagined to be in need (484). The other item involved pairs of increasingly overlapping circles that represent self versus other, and participants "selected the pair of circles that they believed best characterized their relationship" with the other (484). Across several experiments, high measures of oneness, not empathy, predicted increased helping.

There are several issues with these experiments. First, they did not, as Batson typically does, get participants to believe that someone is actually in need, providing what they perceive to be a genuine opportunity to help. Instead, participants were asked to *predict* what they would do in an imagined situation, which might not be a reliable means of measuring helping behavior. Second, the measure of oneness is rather

metaphorical and ambiguous (Batson et al 1997: 497; see also Badhwar 1993: §2). For example, use of the pronoun "we" is hardly indicative of mentally representing oneself as merging with another. It is interesting that oneness apparently predicted increased predictions of helping. But oneness and empathy cannot so easily be separated with such measures, as some participants may report increased oneness as a way of indicating greater compassion or closeness. Third, Batson and colleagues (1997) conducted a series of experiments attempting to avoid these problems and found no support for the oneness account. (To better measure only oneness, the researchers compared participants' ratings of themselves, and a person believed to be in need, on various personality traits.)

These issues raise serious problems for the experimental support of the oneness account. The problem, however, may be even more fundamental, for the account faces conceptual difficulties.

5. Dividing Self from Other

So far we have taken rather seriously the idea that empathy can involve a merging of self and other. A common view puts a *positive* spin on this: merging leads to altruism, impartial concern for others, and perhaps even immortality. Taken quite literally, however, the fusion of self and other seems to lead to a *negative* (or at least neutral) upshot: the intersubjectivity in empathy actually motivates egoism or makes the egoism-altruism divide inapt.

Some philosophers, however, are more skeptical and resist taking self-other merging literally (e.g. Deigh 1995; Nussbaum 2001; May 2011b). Many scientists likewise explicitly characterize empathy as involving separateness from others or "no confusion between self and other" (Decety & Jackson 2004: 75). On this view, as Nussbaum puts it, at least typically empathy is like "the mental preparation of a skilled (Method) actor: it involves a participatory enactment of the situation of the [e.g.] sufferer, but is always combined with the awareness that one is not oneself the sufferer" (2001: 327).

There are numerous skeptics about the extent of self-other fusion. But are there any powerful arguments in favor of a skeptical position? One is primarily conceptual and applies even if we had solid experimental evidence that oneness predicts increased helping behavior, not compassionate empathizing (developed in May 2011b). The precise problem, however, depends on how we interpret the idea of self-other merging.

The most straight-forward and literal interpretation of merging is that one mentally represents oneself as strictly (quantitatively or numerically) identical with "another." Compare someone, say Kanye, who believes he is Jesus Christ—not just similar to this historical individual but literally him. This interpretation of self-other merging has the implausible implication that feeling empathy for someone in need tends to induce what would normally be classified as delusional beliefs (May 2011b; compare Nussbaum 2001: 328). Of course, we have seen that some prominent philosophers and traditions have denied there's a sharp distinction between self and other. But they recognize that this isn't typically part of ordinary people's thinking, even when empathizing (especially clear on this is Parfit 1984). Compare even the so-called "hyper-

empathy" in mirror-touch synesthesia: patients don't appear to perceive themselves in the other's shoes. Rather, a feeling is generated in themselves, which is presumably represented as occurring in their own body. The other person's experience merely triggers a similar feeling in oneself.

Some proponents of merging, however, seem to explicitly reject this interpretation. Cialdini and his collaborators, for example, write: "We are not suggesting that individuals with overlapping identities confuse their physical beings or situations with those of the other" (1997: 482). They speak only of "blurring" the distinction between self and other, in which the self is "dynamic" and "malleable."

However, it is difficult to see how this can appropriately explain people's helping behavior, for this seems to require a sharp division between self and other. Suppose John looks across the room and sees a man with a spider in his hair. If he mentally represents that individual "de se" or *as himself* (say he believes he's looking in a mirror), then this will normally motivate vigorous patting of his own head. If, on the other hand, John represents the individual *as another* (as distinct from himself), then this will typically motivate rather different behavior, such as calling out to notify the other of the spider. In predicting and explaining behavior, then, it is normally crucial whether the actor conceives of an individual first-personally or third-personally. As John Perry (1979) famously points out, this is similar to indexical expressions—like "I," "here," and "now"—which have irreducible egocentric reference, e.g. to the speaker or to the speaker's location in space or time (for some dissent, see Cappelen & Dever 2013). Of course, such egocentricity is a mere reference point and is distinct from egoism.

Emotions are also often egocentric, possessing an essential connection to the self that impacts action. For example, there may be a sense in which I fear for a soldier as she charges into battle, but normally fear is for a predicament one conceives *as one's own* (compare Williams 1970; Nussbaum 2001: 30-1). Similarly, I would not feel guilt unless I distinguished what I did from what someone else has done. I might in a loose sense feel "guilty" for what my child has done, but arguably this is really a feeling of guilt for not teaching her better or taking some other action myself that relates to her mistake. Even if egocentricity isn't an essential component for the emotion, when this element conjoins with emotion its character and effects on action are again distinctive. I may empathize with my coworker's financial windfall and share in the excitement, but the feeling of excitement would be different if I were to win the lottery *myself* (and will certainly motivate different actions).

Return now to empathy-induced helping behavior. If we suppose that empathically aroused individuals mentally blur the distinction between themselves and the other, then we would expect rather different behavior. Perhaps they would be unsure how to act, who to help, which pronouns to use (not just "we" but "me" versus "her"), and so on. Mentally blurring the self-other distinction would normally have dramatic and distinctive effects on behavior. Yet participants in studies offer to help another individual without any confusion or evidence of self-other blurring. This makes it plausible to attribute to them a third-personal representation of the other as distinct from themselves (May 2011b).

There is certainly a sense in which empathy causes us to experience the world from another's perspective. People with mirror-touch synesthesia often describe their experience as if they are living another person's experience. Torrance (2011) writes: "When I watch a film, I feel as if I'm in starring in it." Compare ordinary reactions of flinching when witnessing someone about to incur bodily damage. However, such descriptions are compatible with representing the threatening force and its subsequent effects as occurring in another's body. Presumably, when empathizing with someone in physical danger at a distance, one doesn't jump out of the way as if representing oneself as literally in the other's shoes. Instead, we cringe, flinch, or avert our eyes—actions that presume a representation of oneself as distinct from the other. Indeed, common descriptions patently represent another as distinct from oneself—e.g. "I was constantly crying—not because something had happened to me, but because I had seen someone else crying or felt someone else's pain" (Torrance 2011).

Finally, one might weaken the merging proposal to simply say that empathy tends to make us locate, not our identities, but shared properties or qualities in others. We do not represent ourselves as strictly identical but rather as similar to the other. The empirical evidence does suggest that we empathize more strongly with others who are similar to ourselves—e.g. in race or gender. (Batson 2011). But this of course is entirely compatible with the skeptical view, which denies that empathy leads us to think of ourselves as another (May 2011b).

It is thus difficult to take literally the idea that empathizing with another in need tends to make us collapse or blur the self-other distinction. The intersubjectivity in empathy is most easily captured by positing a strong mental divide between oneself and another. So it doesn't seem that we can appeal to merging to ground an egoistic, or even "nonaltruistic," account.

The foregoing problems also threaten to make radical altruism (and the immortality it may promise) impossible for humans, because it may not be a psychological or conceptual possibility. Psychologically, it may require pathology to achieve (compare mirror-touch synesthesia), which comes with great burdens. Conceptually, radical altruism (or *agape*) may prevent anyone from appropriately interacting with the world. How, after all, could John get the spider out of his own hair (or another's) if he mentally blurs or abandon's the distinction between self and other? The *Upanishads* are certainly right: "Who sees all beings in his own self and his own self in all beings, loses all fear" (Isha Upanishad 6). But an egocentric element in fear is important for navigating one's own environment. Radical altruism may, paradoxically, yield a failure to effectively help anyone, including oneself.

At this point, one might ask how we can explain the effects of empathy without positing at least some substantial self-other blurring, especially given that one empathizes better with those similar to oneself. Otherwise, why should empathy make us more concerned for others if we don't somehow merge ourselves with them? The answer may lie in the simple idea that empathy for another's plight draws our attention to them, connecting them to ourselves (compare Hume 1739: 2.2.7). We needn't conceive of this in egoistic terms. Empathy may simply induce *relational desires*, which concern both self and other. I might, for example, desire to *be the one* to help Nathan or desire to have a *mutually* enjoyable game of tennis with Mr. Robinson. Arguably, such desires aren't

egoistic, since they represent another person as an essential beneficiary, not an individual who is merely essential to one's own benefit (May 2011a). On this picture, empathy can increase altruism, not so much because we merge self and other, but rather because empathy involves focusing one's attention on the other and vividly representing their plight.

6. Intersubjectivity without Merging

We have seen various reasons for being skeptical about empathy blurring the divide between self and other. A more modest level of intersubjectivity, however, is still important for various projects in ethics. Obviously, for theories that ground morality in sentiments, empathy can serve as a crucial element in moral knowledge and virtue (Hume 1739; Slote 2010). Perhaps more surprisingly, modest forms of intersubjectivity are even important for theorists who ground morality ultimately in reason.

Many ethical theories invoke the notion of impartiality, which is intimately related to the distinction between self and other. Appeals to impartiality are especially common among moral *rationalists*, who maintain that the truth and appropriateness of moral judgments are chiefly grounded in reason as opposed to sentiment. Consider just two varieties of rationalism: Kantian and utilitarian (or, more broadly, consequentialist).

Utilitarian rationalists tend to hold that moral facts are simply facts about what maximizes overall happiness. No individual's happiness matters more than anyone else's; each person's happiness counts equally in the calculation. Many utilitarians believe this basic moral truth can be known by reason alone. In fact, they are typically wary of appeals to emotion in ethics and have few, if any, commitments to common sense morality (Greene 2013). However, utilitarians tend to recommend empathizing with others as a way of overcoming our partiality toward our friends and family (compare the views of Parfit and Johnston in §3). For example, Peter Singer (1981/2011) famously refers to expanding one's circle of concern beyond the usual default, which is narrowly focused on those with whom we share personal relationships. Importantly, Singer treats this process as one of empathizing and being grounded in the rational insight that there is no intrinsic moral difference between oneself and others. Empathy may then be a source of great moral progress, as it vividly informs us of how various actions and policies affect others.

There are several issues with appealing to empathy to support utilitarian rationalism. One well-known limitation is in empathy itself: it's notoriously partial and myopic. We feel it more strongly toward those we happen to already care most about, like friends and family, but also those who happen to be similar to oneself, even just in ethnicity (for review, see Prinz 2011). Related to this, empathy appears to be easily manipulated by arbitrary factors, like how vivid another's plight is represented, as when we feel more compassion for fewer identifiable victims than for large groups of "statistical victims" (e.g. Jenni & Loewenstein 1997). As John Rawls points out, the utilitarian "conception of justice is threatened with instability unless sympathy and benevolence can be widely and intensely cultivated" (1971: 155). Empirical evidence seems to confirm that the requisite level of impartiality and inclusiveness may be impossible to achieve with empathy.

The situation might not be so dire. Some evidence does suggest that we can expand compassion toward large groups when we're not focused on the costs of empathizing (Cameron & Payne 2011). And some theorists conceive empathy more narrowly as an imaginative process in which one maintains such a sharp distinction between self and other that one does not illicitly import one's own perspective and biases (e.g. Coplan 2011; Batson 2011). This specific kind of empathizing, which is associated with distinct brain circuits, may make it more suitable for extreme impartiality and inclusivity. Nevertheless, such forms of empathizing remain rare and taxing for most of us.

Another issue concerns the ability to understand what others are thinking and feeling ("theory of mind"). This capacity, intimately related to empathy, seems to be intact in some individuals, such as psychopaths, who are nevertheless typically depraved. What seems to aid moral knowledge in an empathic response is the compassionate concern that typically comes with it, not the rational recognition that everyone's happiness matters equally. Moreover, autism seems to involve an impairment in social understanding, not sentiment, but a moral deficit doesn't apparently follow (Nichols 2004). Some Kantians have argued that psychopaths have cognitive deficits in their capacity to reason appropriately (e.g. Maibom 2005). But, if psychopaths can recognize what others think and feel, what other cognitive element could be missing that is part of the *utilitarian* appeal to empathy?

Kantian rationalists tend to hold that morality is chiefly grounded in reason, particularly in reasoning about what to do or the appreciation of others as free and rational beings, like oneself. Not all Kantians draw on empathy (e.g. Rawls 1971), but it can become relevant to the recognition of the interests and autonomy of others. Thomas Nagel (1970), for example, grounds morality in reason by a comparison to prudence. Why should I act for the benefit of my future self (e.g. save for retirement)? Nagel's answer is, roughly, that my current self is merely one among many across time and it would be irrational to arbitrarily privilege my *current* self over later incarnations. Similarly, Nagel argues that morality arises out of the recognition that one is merely one among many distinct people and that it would be irrational to arbitrarily privilege *me* over *them*.

Nagel explicitly denies that sympathy is the relevant mechanism here (1970: 80), but this is only because he conceives of sympathy as opposed to reason. Presumably, though, even if empathy has an affective component, it can serve as an epistemic aid by drawing one's attention to morally relevant facts. Empathizing with others (or one's future self) might, for example, generate an appreciation for their personhood and the irrationality of treating them unfairly. Moreover, it may be precisely empathy's intersubjectivity that allows it to play this role in the Kantian project, for one must recognize others' interests but also that they are distinct autonomous persons (Deigh 1995).

Empathy does seem to increase the tendency to impute agency. Sharing the pain or joy of others provides vivid reminders that they too are individuals with their own concerns, relationships, and values. This may explain why empathizing with fictional characters and animals amplifies anthropomorphism. Consider the negative reactions to videos in which engineers at Google kicked a dog-like robot to test its ability to remain

upright while moving. Some viewers expressed concern for Spot, describing the treatment as cruel and rude, despite knowing full well that the machine is a mindless automaton.

Kantian theories also needn't rely on empathy to generate purely impartial concern for all. Such theories can more easily accept that empathy motivates greater concern for select individuals, such as family, friends, and members of one's in-group. Kantians simply prescribe impartiality in the form of treating all persons fairly, respecting their capacity for choosing their own path through life autonomously (Rawls 1971). Empathy needn't make people act in ways that eschew special obligations to kith and kin; it must only aid in the recognition of others as deserving of a minimal level of respect (compare Deigh 1995).

But don't psychopaths understand what others think and feel but simply don't care? The missing element seems to be a sentiment or feeling, not a rational recognition. Perhaps; but the Kantian appeal to empathy may involve more cognitive elements than theory of mind. One might appeal in particular to a recognition of intersubjectivity—e.g. that others are distinct persons with concerns relevantly similar to one's own (compare Deigh 1995). For example, there is some evidence that psychopaths have shorter attention spans and do not respond well to certain kinds of learning by negative reinforcement (Maibom 2005). Such deficits impair reasoning about what to do, including universalizing one's reasons for action or appreciating that it is irrational to arbitrarily privilege one's own interests over the like interests of others. It's no wonder that egocentricity (grandiose sense of self-worth) is a diagnostic element of the psychopathy checklist.

Autism is a different matter, but some Kantians contend that their deficits in social understanding do indeed lead to some impairment in moral reasoning, even if nowhere near as severe as the psychopath's (Kennett 2002). Those with severe autism do often struggle to navigate the social world, failing to fully appreciate common moral norms that are grounded in what other people think and feel. This is a more superficial deficit than in psychopathy, because autism only limits understanding of what others care about, not the recognition that their concerns, whatever they may be, are no less important just because they aren't one's *own*.

The Kantian project may ultimately do no better than the utilitarian one. The point for our purposes is simply that empathy has the potential to do important work for various ethical theories, even in the absence of a literal merging between self and other. As empathy tends to militate against egocentricity, it provides a level of intersubjectivity that can still do heavy lifting in ethics.

7. Conclusion

Empathy and intersubjectivity are certainly related, but the connection can seem to point in multiple directions. Optimists believe empathy puts us in touch with others in a way that generates a compassionate concern that forms the foundation of morality and even immortality. Pessimists argue that empathy merely blurs the distinction between oneself and others, yielding self-interested motivation or at least precluding genuine altruism. The truth may lie somewhere in between, for both of these camps may oversell the idea

that empathy leads to self-other merging. Still, while maintaining a sharp distinction between self and other, empathy's intersubjectivity can inform debates about the very foundations of morality. Even if empathy makes one neither a self-interested snake nor a selfless saint on a path to immortality, it can perhaps ground altruistic concern for others and an appreciation of oneself as merely one among many moral beings in the universe.

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